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# Quitting Church? Yes, No, and Maybe

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Julia Duin, religion editor for *The Washington Times*, has written a book intended to shake up the church and to sound an alarm — people are leaving churches.

In *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful are Fleeing and What to Do about It*, Duin argues that “many, many evangelical Christians are slipping out or barely hanging on to their churches.” Those words are sure to gain attention.

Duin backs up her argument with a solid mass of statistics. Church attendance figures are misleading and bloated when supplied by churches themselves. Statistics often cited to comfort church leaders are based on overly optimistic and dated reports. The more current and research-based numbers are scary. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago estimates that church attendance has fallen from 41 percent of the population in 1971 to 31 percent in 2001. At those rates of decline, no one will be attending church in 2031.

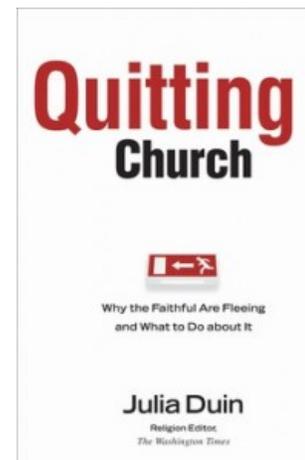
Of course, statistics are of real but often limited value. Duin then goes on to offer reports laced generously with reflections on her own experience. That blending of the personal and the professional is what makes the book interesting — and what makes it perplexing.

Just about any evangelical reader will find much here that seems real and sufficiently scary. Most will nod in agreement when Duin points to certain trends and practices as contributing to the decline in church membership and attendance. Critics of the mega-churches will find criticism here, as will critics of the seeker-sensitive movement, Reformed theology, and just about everything else. Duin laments the lack of strong biblical preaching and teaching, but she also argues that many of the “teaching” churches lack a real connection with the problems of people in the pews. She laments the mainstreaming of the Charismatic movement and relates her own very diverse background in basically unsatisfactory church experiences. She is especially outraged that women are overlooked, under-appreciated, and often taken for granted. Double that for unmarried women and single mothers. She seems to oppose complementarianism but never actually declares herself. This much is clear - she is not happy (and that goes for many of her friends and family members as well).

She wants churches to think “out of the box” and to engage the real needs of their own members. She wants churches and church leaders to know that single people need help getting married. She wants less fluff and more substance, But, honest to goodness, I have no idea what the church she is seeking would look like.

Should church leaders read the book? Yes. *Quitting Church* will force pastors and church leaders to ask some very basic questions about the church — and about their churches. There is a lot to think about here. She speaks of people who “need sermons on unanswered prayer” who instead are confronted with “PowerPoint presentations on attaining breakthroughs.” She offers anecdotes sure to arrest your attention.

Just be aware of the participant/observer tension found throughout this book, and read it as if you are in a conversation with a religion editor for a major national newspaper. Listen, think, and take notes.



An excerpt:

*My research suggested that people are simply not being pastored. Often ministers are out of touch with what's happening on the ground, as they are surrounded by a wall of secretaries and voice mail. Congregants have to wait up to a month for an appointment, if they can get in at all. Once-a-week home Bible study groups lack depth and theological know-how for help with the serious problems many of us face. Many churches refer people to professional counseling that costs at least seventy-five dollars an hour. Those lucky enough to have a health plan that pays for counseling usually find the only counselors on approved HMO lists have no concept of a Christian worldview.*

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