

Christian Perspectives: Why even regular churchgoers don't go to church

By Rev. Stephanie Pellow

A clergy friend put me on to work done by Carey Nieuwhof, Pastor of the Connexus congregation north of Toronto and a coach to church leaders.

He asked the question, "Why do people who would call themselves church members not attend as regularly as they did in the past?"

After surveying and looking at statistics, he came up with the 10 Reasons why regular churchgoers attend less frequently than they did in the past. Time and space will not allow me to deal with all ten reasons here, but here are some that may or may not surprise you.

The number one reason is affluence. This does not mean people who are filthy rich, but in general it does mean middle class North Americans who have enough means to do things like spend the winter in a warm climate, take at least one cruise or extended holiday per year, own a cottage or (this is reason two) place a heavy emphasis on the sports activities of their children, which are often scheduled on Sunday mornings.

Sports and activities for children used to be for entertainment and enrichment. They are still that, but have become so much more. This is big business! Clever business people a few years back saw the possibility of tapping into the market of childhood entertainment and have capitalized on it to the max.

As children are required to attend school Monday to Friday and not be out too late on weeknights, Saturday, and more recently Sunday are the best times to market to the youth of our population. Hence families, especially those with a little more disposable income, are more often at a sports venue or child-centred entertainment facility than at church on a Sunday.

Reason Three is similar to the above. People are travelling more often. Some of this is for pleasure as cited above but also some is of necessity as extended families seldom live in the same town any more. Hence, grandparents who want to have a relationship with their grandchildren have to travel to the place where their children are making their homes. No one would deny that it is important for a family to strengthen ties. Also, the children who have relocated may have attended church in their youth, but often do not reconnect in a different community.

Reason Four for non-attendance takes us away from the idea of affluence. Many families are single-parent families where life is complicated by parents moving their children about on weekends to accommodate custody arrangements. Single-parent families and indeed less well-off families may also have transportation problems when it comes to getting to church. If the car is at work with one parent, the other lacks means to get around.

Generous churchgoers might want to help, but few may have cars equipped with the necessary child safety seats.

I have only outlined four reasons suggested by Pastor Nieuwhof, but at this point I would like to turn to the outcomes of this problem to faith communities.

When church supporters consider one or two Sundays a month as regular attendance, in many instances, those supporters are only offering half as much support as they might.

This has a direct impact on the ability of any faith organization to pay the bills, which in proportion are much higher than they were fifty years ago. A far greater impact, though, is on the teaching and faith enrichment programs that the church is able to offer.

Ministry to children used to be based on a continuum of stories and teachings, much like day school learning. Now faith

communities must offer every lesson as a stand along event to children they may see only every so often.

Such fragmentation is less able to provide a solid base, not necessarily to indoctrinate, but from which children may make informed choices about their faith path in the future.

Similarly, intermittent attendance on the part of adults stands in the way of engagement with the church community and involvement in the service work in which it is involved. Such absence of understanding of the goals, both spiritual and physical, of the faith group does little to draw them into the vision of the community's faith calling. They are more apt to drift farther away.

Communities of Faith have always faced challenges, even some truly horrific persecution throughout history. The challenges of this age and our society are different but sadly, they have the same potential to scatter, weaken and possibly cause the demise of single congregations and possibly whole denominations.

Outright persecution was obvious but our society hardly notices these new assaults for they are f