

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the church at Large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the podcast, and Hunter is joining me this morning. Hunter, we've already had a conversation before the conversation here this morning.

Hunter: We made a vow not to do wardrobe updates again because we just figured it probably irritates our listeners. And then you went and wore a Def Leppard's sweatshirt into our podcast recording. How am I supposed to hold off on that? It's like going on a diet, and then someone brings over a big tub of ice cream.

Autumn: And you just have to exercise and discipline.

Hunter: I have no discipline. You got that hysteria.

Autumn: Yes, I am wearing—for our listeners' sake—I am wearing a Def Leppard's sweatshirt.

Hunter: Okay, and you feel it. Do you believe it?

Autumn: Now Hunter is quoting lines from Def Leppard songs. So, to everyone listening, this is how our pre-conversation went.

Hunter: When you get that feeling, better start believing.

Autumn: Yep. Well, the shirt that I'm wearing has a leopard on it, and it's from their album *High and Dry*, which was released in 1981. And that happens to be the same year I was born. So, there you go—tidbit.

Hunter: So, you were listening to Def Leppard from the womb. Is that the lesson here?

Autumn: I wasn't. I didn't know about Def Leppard until I was a little older.

Hunter: I think the album after that, they kind of made a little bit more of a poppy turn, like a glam-metal turn. And that's where I got into them.

Autumn: Yeah, they became more widely known, more popular. Jesse, who is the holder of all such information, says that they, what was it, Jesse?

Jesse: Well, they sold out.

Autumn: They sold out.

Hunter: They sold out. They sold out, say the purists. They signed on to a new-

Jesse: -they hired Mutt Lange as their producer. They went pop, and made millions and millions and millions of dollars.

Autumn: There we go. So, yeah, I was wearing this t-shirt, or this sweatshirt, rather, one day in the grocery store in Trader Joe's with Aspen, my 16-year-old, and a gentleman who, I don't know, somewhat older than me, stopped me and

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

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gave me all his thoughts about Def Leppard, including how he believed they had actually sold out. So, after listening to his diatribe for a few minutes, he said, "Well, have a good day," and walked away, and Aspen said, "wow."

Hunter: And when they sold, I was buying. When they sold out, I was a buyer. I have the same opinion about the band Train. I was a hype man for Train in their first album. Like, I would literally bring tons of people to their shows. And then they just took a poppy, hooky direction. I was like, yeah, I'm off this train. Everyone that knows Train knows them for their stupid poppy songs.

Autumn: Which makes you sad.

Hunter: Makes me sad.

Autumn: That's how that man felt about Def Leppard. Alright, well, to the subject at hand, maybe next week we will not discuss my wardrobe.

Hunter: Well, just wear a normal pink sweater like you always do, and then I'll refrain.

Autumn: Alright, great. It's a plan. Today, we are discussing an article that is called "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Quit Going to Church." Just rolls off the tongue. A short title. But it was written by Jake Meador, and was published in *The Atlantic* in July of this year. And it is addressing what the title gives indication to, a trend in America in terms of church participation.

Hunter: There was a book published earlier this year called *The Great Dechurching*, by Jim Davis and Michael Graham. And Jake Meador is interacting with the findings of that book. It's a research project, statistically-normed research project that examines why Americans have quit going to church. And I think Jake resonated with it. It explains his experience, and so he's interacting with it. He begins article like this, "Nearly everyone I grew up with in my childhood church in Lincoln, Nebraska is no longer a Christian. That's not unusual. 40 million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. That's something like 12% of the population, and it represents the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history." I think he got that stat from this book, *The Great Dechurching*. That's at least implicit in the article. 40 million Americans have stopped attending church in the last 25 years. And he is wrestling with what they found, the reasons were why so many people have stopped attending church and why there's been such a large shift culturally in the habits of Americans.

Autumn: The title of the article says the misunderstood reason that millions of Americans stopped going to church. So, he's promising to reveal something to us in this article that may not seem obvious. Something you're not thinking about.

Hunter: Right.

Autumn: What are the obvious reasons or maybe the reasons we typically think of or that get airtime? And then what is he leading us into as far as this misunderstood reason?

Hunter: The obvious reasons are the pressures of secular beliefs have caused people not to believe in Christianity anymore. That's sometimes called "deconstruction." And you think of the typical story of, someone goes to college, they get exposed to ideas and people that they hadn't gotten exposed to at home, and then they just don't believe in

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



Christianity anymore. That's one I think very well-known explanation. A second very well-known explanation, today especially, and it's been really a focus of in the news media for the last few years, rightly so, is the prevalence of moral corruption and abuse in organized religious context. That's everything from sex abuse scandals to just bullying kind of leadership and just lack of integrity where people don't trust institutions. And this report, *The Great Dechurching*, finds that both of these factors are contributing to "the great dechurching," but they're not the major factor that's contributing to it. So, there is another reason that Jake Meador is saying is the misunderstood reason. It's actually the majority reason, or it's the most significant reason people are de-churching, but it's not the one that is typically reported on or getting a lot of prominence in our media landscape.

Autumn: How does he define, or how would you define that reason? The one that's less obvious or doesn't get as much attention, isn't talked about as much in the media?

Hunter: Here's how he describes it. He says:

The great dechurching finds that religious abuse and more general moral corruption in churches have driven people away. This is of course an indictment of the failures of many leaders who did not address abuse in their church. But Davis and Graham also find that a much larger share of those who have left church have done so for more banal reasons. The book suggests that the defining problem driving out most people who leave is just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn't set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it's designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don't contribute to one's own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one's children.

So, the less obvious reason, but it's actually the majority reason, is the way life is structured in the culture that we live in just squeezes church out. And he goes on to describe how many people just don't really actually consciously decide not to be part of a church anymore, rather they just slowly drift into habits that life kind of squeezes them into that causes them to one day realize, I'm not very involved anymore, even if maybe I still think of myself as a member of a church, I'm just not that involved anymore. And he's actually saying that's the most significant reason for this 40 million people dechurching. And it's probably the one that we're not talking about and recognizing nearly as much.

Autumn: In the context of the article, Jake Meador provided a couple of examples of what it is that you're describing that I found really helpful. Should we take a look at those?

Hunter: Yeah, he says that the book offers some composite characters and researchers will sometimes do this. They will create a character who represents several different trends that are significant in their research, and it kind of helps us to get their minds around them. So, he writes this:

Consider one of the composite characters that Graham and Davis used in the book to describe a typical evangelical dechurcher, a 30-something woman who grew up in a suburban mega church, was heavily invested in a campus ministry while in college, then, after graduating, moved into a full-time job and began attending a young-adult group in a local church. In her 20s, she meets a guy who is less religiously engaged. They get married, and at some point early in their marriage, after their first or second child is born, they stop going to

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

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church. Maybe the baby isn't sleeping well, and when Sunday morning comes around, it is simply easier to stay home and catch whatever sleep is available as the baby finally falls asleep.

Autumn: I found that example, the one you read, there's another he offers, but these examples in the article particularly helpful because they do just that. They help me envision what it is that the researchers and then Jake Meador are talking about in the term dechurching and how the pressures of culture, the cares of life just sort of get bound up into our lives and can cause a kind of slow drift that isn't intentional, necessarily—isn't a decision, a point of decision for many people, but just kind of occurs over time and then you find yourself having formed new patterns. And I'm curious as I look at the composite characters in this article, what are ways you've seen this happen in real life in the context of ministry in Denver?

Hunter: Well, let's just stick with the example he gave because I actually recognize this character over and over again. This is someone who had grown up in church and was a pretty committed follower of Jesus in college it sounds like, and then the transition from college to young adulthood put some pressure on her that eventually, not immediately, but eventually led to her dechurching. That's a pretty common factor in and of itself. Often, the people who dechurch have grown up in church and had a pretty significant experience of commitment and following Christ as part of a thick community in college or maybe even right after college, but the pressures of young adulthood—and you think about all you have to navigate in young adulthood, for many people, they're not married when they leave college, so, they move to a city, they have a job, they're trying to make friends in this city, and they're trying to find a church—and just the whole transition from, I had a really thick community, Christian community in college, to post college, I don't have quite as thick a community, I'm meeting a lot of people, that in of itself is a hard season of life to navigate. I can remember that season of life and how hard it was for me to navigate that season. It puts a lot of pressure on. Then I've talked to a number of single people who are really frustrated with the dating scene. And it's kind of counter-intuitive in one sense because the prevalence of online dating apps means that we are sent a lot of options. If you choose to participate in online dating, not all do, but if you choose to participate, you have a lot of options for people to meet and to go out with. And yet the people who are even doing that, I'll talk to some people who are going on a date a week after they get up to speed on these dating apps, they're literally meeting a new person every week. And yet they're increasingly just not happy with the quality, you could say, of the prospects they're meeting. And often if they are a Christian and they're part of our church, often one of their hangups is this person checked Christian on the app. But we match on that, but our faith is just not as significant. It's not as significant to them as it is to me. Or they've examined their beliefs a lot less intentionally and clearly than I have or their life intentionally than I have. And that's a pretty common theme. We both identify as Christian, but it doesn't quite mean the same thing to us. And then a lot of them, though, end up eventually settling into a relationship where that's part of the dynamic of the relationship. We're just not quite on the same page with what following Jesus means and how significant it is to us, even if we both check the box. And often, especially if that becomes a serious relationship or a marriage relationship, the habits of the less interested party kind of won out over the habits and preferences of the one who's more committed to his or her faith.

So, he describes that right here. In her 20s, she meets a guy who is less religiously engaged. And what I'm kind of adding here is, but if you met him on the app, he might have checked the box Christian and he might have some loose church attendance habit. They get married, and probably, we see this happen a lot, probably they get married and initially her inclination toward being involved in church kind of wins. And so, they come and get involved until they have their first child. And then that puts another layer of pressure. I mean, by pressure, we mean like lack of sleep, schedule

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



complications, that puts another layer of pressure on their relationship. And it's at that point that they drop out of church. And we see that happen. I see that happen in the life of our church.

So, if one big transition point is kind of that just out of college, early adulthood, I'm dating, developing my professional career phase of life, another one is getting married and having kids, and that often puts pressure on. And what he's noting here is just that's just the way life unfolds for many people in the modern world. We can't necessarily do anything about it. We can be aware of that and try to work against it, which he's going to provide some examples and some thoughts on how to do that. But for many people, going to college, moving to a city, trying to meet people, dating, doing professional life, getting involved in a church, maybe getting married, having a kid, that's just going to be a normal course of life. They're not going to be doing that in Lincoln, Nebraska, where they grew up. And it just puts a lot of pressure on them; there's a lot they have to navigate and ask how their faith gets integrated. And they often don't.

Autumn: That's interesting that you offer up this insight, Hunter, into maybe what someone who's single has moved to Denver in their 20s might experience. There's another sketch in the article, and I'll read it and then I have a thought as to how I've seen this unfold from a family perspective.

Hunter: Yeah, one thing I would add here, he mentions in her 20s. In Denver, this plays out for people in their 30s quite a bit as well. The online dating scene for people in their 30s and even maybe in their 40s is also pretty similar. And they face the same pressures, maybe with even a little bit more urgency, because now I'm in my 30s and I feel even more urgency to kind of settle down. So, I would just add that little nuance to what he's describing here.

Autumn: That is a good note. And we definitely see that in the city. This other sketch that I referenced says, in other cases, a person might be entering mid-career working a high stress job requiring a 60 or 70 hour work week. We can also imagine this, these people add to that 15 hours of commute time and suddenly something like two thirds of their waking hours in the week or already accounted for. And so, when a friend invites them to a Sunday morning brunch, they probably want to go to church, but they also want to see that friend because they haven't been able to see them for months. The friend wins out. And I've heard a version of this, this is specific again to maybe someone who's a professional, whether married or not, but works a high-pressure job that requires many hours. This maybe is not quite as prevalent in Denver, but I've heard a version of this, what it brought to mind was that I hear a version of this from families too, who have been a part of Fellowship. And that is, our lives are just really full. Probably both parents work, kids have activities, our lives are full, our days are full. And so, when the weekend comes, we really have to protect our family time, and Sundays become family time. And families enjoy that, maybe go to the mountains on the weekend. And on the one hand, that's good. It's good to invest time in your family. And on the other hand, it really does create this pattern of slow drift away. And families have prioritized that family time, but it competes with time set aside to go to a service on Sunday. And so, over time, they simply fall out of the pattern of going to church and have replaced it with something else and something else that even seems good. And that's the kind of picture that they're giving to us as far as this pressures of culture and of life, and American life in particular.

Hunter: Yeah, and the unmarried version of that is, I have a big group of friends in the city or a good social network I've developed. And some of them are involved in church, and some of them are not. And on the weekends, everyone is going to the mountains to play. That's the Denver version of that. He describes everyone's working really hard version of that. And that's people in our city work hard, but they also play hard. And they especially play hard on Friday and

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



Saturday and Sunday. And I think single people feel that pressure more of, my social life and the friends I want to hang out with, they are going and doing things on the weekends. And I want to go be part, I want to say yes to being part of that. But the de facto choice I'm making then is I'm saying "no" to being a regular participant in the worship of the local church on Sunday. And this doesn't come out in the article, but it comes out in my mind as a pastor. We just intuitively assume that's a great trade to make every time. And I think we should question that assumption.

Autumn: The first part of the article examines this misunderstood reason as Jake Meador calls it. And as we've just discussed. And in the second part of the article, he shifts into asking, "So, what do we-," we being the Church, "-what do we do about it?"

Hunter: And right here he's I think offering his own commentary based on the reflection of the article. And he just defines the problem like this: "The underlying challenge for many is that their lives are stretched like a rubber band about to snap." And it could be kids, it could be friends going to play in the mountains on the weekend, it could be work is really busy, it could be the friend that wants to go to brunch, could be any of those reasons. "The underlying challenge for me is that their lives are stretched like a rubber band about to snap, and church attendance ends up feeling like an item on a checklist that's already too long." Now, the instinctive answer of many church leaders I think is, try to make church fit into people's busy lives. So, figure out a way that we can make it fit; make sure the services aren't too long, make sure you offer a lot of different options, make sure you don't ask too much of people. If you can only, you know, give a day a month, that's okay, you know, just make it fit. He actually is saying, maybe we should consider asking more of people. And he says it like this:

What can churches do in such a context? In theory, the Christian church could be the anecdote to all of that." Meaning the anecdote to loneliness and lack of meaning and restlessness. What is more needed in our time than a community marked by sincere love, sharing what they have from each according to their ability and to each according to their need, eating together regularly, generously serving neighbors and living lives, a quiet virtue and prayer? A healthy church can be a safety net in the harsh American economy by offering its members material assistance in times of need, meals after a baby is born, money for rent after a layoff, perhaps more important, and reminds people that their identity is not in their job or how much money they make. They are children of God loved and protected and infinitely valuable.

So, he's casting vision. This is what a church can do and how it can offer so much that cures the ails of modern life. And then he pivots and says, but that kind of vibrant, life-giving church requires more, not less time and energy from its members. We have to actually ask people to prioritize one another, to prioritize worship, to prioritize fellowship and community. If nobody is prioritizing these things, we can't create the thick community that the church is actually capable of being.

Autumn: He is casting vision there, and it does go against this impulse that says, well, I need to make church—if we as church leaders are examining this problem and these tendencies in American life, and you said our impulse, Hunter, might be to say, well, let's make it easy—let's make it accessible and easy. But it's almost like Jake Meador is pointing out that Jesus called people into and up to something. And when they chose to follow Him, it required repentance, which is a turning away and a turning towards. And Jesus said in no uncertain terms that it required a certain kind of sacrifice and commitment and decision to follow Him and to continue following Him. That's why we say this term sometimes that it

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



requires taking up your cross because that's the image that Jesus actually gave to His followers in giving them a sense of what life following Him would be like. He led in that, He took up his cross literally, and there is a metaphorical sense in which that's the life, the image that He is calling His followers into. And so, if the Church is following in that pattern, then we also are calling people into something that we believe will offer the kind of life that is being painted for us in this article and in the book, one that is the antidote to loneliness and purposelessness and which does give us greater meaning and fulfillment. But the promise of Jesus in what it would look like came first. And then the Church follows after that. And then the result is the kind of community that he's describing.

Hunter: And I feel this anxiousness as a church leader when you see people leaving because church just can't fit into their life. You start to get angsty and go, well, if we ask so much of them, we're just gonna cause more people to leave. And so, you shrink back from putting in front of people the fullness of what Jesus calls us to and invites us to. Meador describes the problem like this:

If people are already leaving, especially if they are leaving because they feel too busy and burned out to attend church regularly, why would they want to be part of a church that asks so much of them? Although understandable, that isn't the right question. The problem in front of us is not that we have a healthy, sustainable society that doesn't have room for church. That's not the problem.

And I like that he said that because many people, when they're in this stage of slowly drifting away or their habits are slowly changing, what they think is, I have a full, healthy life. And they actually don't have a full, healthy life. They have a full, getting-unhealthier life.

The problem in front of us is not that we have a healthy, sustainable society that doesn't have room for church. The problem is that many Americans have adopted a way of life that has left us lonely, anxious, and uncertain of how to live in a community with other people.

Often we will rationalize drifting away from church out of the kind of the self-care mindset. It's the family you mentioned. 'Well, Sunday is our family time, so this is going to be good. We're going to invest in our togetherness in our community as a family.' And so, the story we tell ourselves is, this is healthy, this is just a healthy decision I'm making so that life is sustainable and I'm not worn out. And we as a family never spend any time together. But if that decision causes you to withdraw from the larger community, the body of Christ, that's actually going to leave you more isolated, more anxious, and more uncertain of how to navigate life. It's going to work against the very health that you think you're cultivating. I love that he identified the problem that way. And then he kind of comments, "The tragedy is that many American churches have been so caught up in this world." The Church is so enmeshed in the busyness of the world, and I think he means here "the Church" as a corporate entity. The Church is so enmeshed in that, and they so cater to that and they so try to fit into that like any other organization or business trying to fit into people's busy lives that they don't call people to more. And because they don't call people to more, they don't really have actually a thick kind of community that they can offer life to suffering people. So, they should be salt, to use Jesus's image, they should be salt, but they lose their saltiness.

Autumn: I love the vision that Meador is holding out to us here, that we've just discussed the type of community that is possible when people commit to and respond to this call into the life of a church, which is life with Jesus. When they accept that they're added to his family by way of accepting His sacrifice on their behalf and live that way, the way He calls

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



them to, then you experience the benefit of that. And that does stand in contrast to so many trends in American culture, so many statistics that we see about people feeling disconnected and lonely and unsure of how to connect with community, any kind of community, and that they're longing for that for some sort of direction and deeper purpose. He doesn't offer though many practical steps for churches or church leaders. So, I wonder if you have any thoughts for a local church context as to how we pursue this and recognize the reason that the researchers and Meador are holding out to us here, the slow drift, the pressures of culture and of life. That is the majority reason for this trend in church attendance and participation in America. And then let's bring it down to, but what do we as a local church body do about this in recognition of this reality?

Hunter: And I'm processing this through the lens of a pastor, which is asking, how do I lead a church in this context and call us to more? And the first thing I would say is, I so appreciate people who are thoughtful about these dynamics and have intentionally prioritized the life of the local church. And I know many people like that in our church. In fact, one of our stories—we're 17 years old as a church—one of our stories is we've developed a more solid core of people who are highly committed to the life of this body of Christ over the years than we had, you know, in our first decade. Let's say we've developed a stronger core in our second decade than we did in our first decade. So, when I'm looking at that as a leader, I go, first thing I want to do is I want to encourage those people and thank those people who really are living out this call of the body of Christ because, because they're making it possible for us to offer this gift to other people. And so, I think a leadership technique that- technique is the wrong word, but let's just go with that, for church leaders that might be listening, I think a leadership technique is that you need to lean into encouragement and "thank you" and celebration of the people who are doing that. I think a second leadership skill that we need to cultivate and a rhythm we need to have in our life as a local church is, we need to have space and time where we are calling people to intentional, thoughtful decisions. And we, we do this with a number of things. We might do this with following Jesus, the decision to come to faith, to put your trust in Jesus. Sometimes churches do it with financial commitment. Sometimes churches do it with membership. We need intentional spaces where we're actually asking people to prayerfully, thoughtfully make a decision rather than just drifting into whatever they've drifted into.

Autumn: One aspect of church participation is corporate space or gathered space. And another is just sort of weekly day-to-day decisions to be a part of the life of the body. By the way you interact maybe with small groups or the people in your church community, other families around you. So, let's take that first one, though, the aspect of participation in gathered spaces. What would be an example of you doing, as a church leader, what you just described? So, how would you challenge someone to think about their church participation within this aspect of the life of the church, our gathered spaces?

Hunter: We created years ago a covenant membership process that we didn't have when we began the church. And we could see that we did not have a space in which we call people to process the question, do I want to be a contributing, functioning part of this local body? And if not this local body, I need to be do that in a local body. We didn't have a space where we call people to consider that question, do I want to be part of this local body and contribute to it? And what would that mean? What would that ask of me to do? And so, we created a class—we now call it DNA group—where we put both the vision of the local church and we just talk about how the local church functions and kind of the nitty gritty details. We put that in front of people because you need that information in order to make a decision. We're not going to call you to make a decision in a vacuum. We want to explain things and give you vision and help you imagine what the church can be and talk about what we do to lead and how it can be healthy. But then we do have a decision point there

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



where we ask people to evaluate, do you want to be a contributing member of this church? And we use the term member not in the sense of joining a club, but in the New Testament sense of a body part, a member of the body of Christ. And the image there is a member, like a hand is a member and a foot is a member. And those are literally members of your body. If you cut your hand off, that's called dismembering your body. And Paul in particular uses that image of a physical body to say, this is what the church is. We're not all exactly the same. And yet we each have a part to play and we are interdependent because a hand really has no existence apart from the rest of the body, and the rest of the body needs the hand. And so, we call people to process that and to ask what would it look like for me to play a contributing part of this church? And that's one example of something we're doing. Now, I can give you examples of something we're not doing that maybe we, you know, we should, but that's an example.

Autumn: Give us an example of that.

Hunter: Okay. One thing we do not do that reading this article creates a burden for me is, we haven't created any way we've called people to reflect on what might just be called their worship attendance, their Sunday worship attendance. And I don't love the term attendance because it suggests that you're just showing up and attending, you know, and it's just kind of a passivity. And I think people can quickly form an impression that the pastors just want you to come to church and listen to them preach. So, I might rephrase that as "Sunday worship participation." That'd be a much better way to say it. And it's full. It is singing. It is all the small conversations that you have with people. It is your children. If you have children experiencing that is connecting with other members of the body of Christ. It is sitting under the Word of God and listening. I, on the Sundays I'm not preaching, I usually go sit on the front row. And I go sit on the front row because it's actually easier to concentrate there than anywhere else. And I love the experience of being under the Word of God and getting to just sit there and take notes and process what God's Word means for me. And honestly, I can do that pretty well regardless of how skillful the sermon is. If the sermon is faithful to the text, the Holy Spirit has something for me there. And worshiping with God's people, that's participation. And I don't think right now we have any way in our life, our church, that we ask people to consider what their participation should look like. And so, I think a lot of people's participation is probably accidental or it's just whatever the rhythms of their life allows. And the mindset that they perhaps unintentionally adopted is, I'll go on the Sundays that I'm in town. And if we probably should add an and to that—and there's not some significant reason that would keep me from going.

Autumn: Brunch with a friend who I haven't seen in a long time.

Hunter: Well, I intentionally left that vague "significant reason" because I think different people would define significant differently. So, my baby's not sleeping could be significant to one person. And there's another couple who is like, no dad-gummit, we need to go to church. We're going to take that baby and we're going to let them be fussy through church. And they just have two different mindsets of what significant is, you know. One's like, if we're sick, we won't go to church. And the other's like, if we're almost dead, we won't go to church. But if we're just a little sniffing, we'll go to church.

Autumn: If I'm interpreting what you're saying as a participant, then you're saying what we haven't done, from a church leadership level, is to give people a framework for thinking through this question very directly, maybe with a rubric or some challenging questions to ask. But if I'm thinking through this as a church participant, which I'm on staff, but my family is a part of Fellowship. And so, we encounter this question in our own lives, then it's a question of how to

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



prioritize our participation in our corporate gatherings. So, those are primarily on Sundays, Sunday mornings. So, how are we going to arrange our lives such that our Sunday morning church participation can take a place of importance in our weekly family rhythms? And the way we do that is that there are only a few reasons that would be reasons that we would set aside our attendance on a Sunday morning, our participation in the worship service in order to justify needing to miss a church on a Sunday. And it happens occasionally. And there are definitely reasons. We have sick kids do sometimes. And so, sometimes that requires staying home. Sometimes we have travel to see family, and that requires missing a Sunday. But we have given some thought to why we might miss, need to miss a church service. And those always sit in a lesser order of importance. If we are able to arrange our lives such that we can be present, we will.

Hunter: I've, like you, I've given some thought to that. And of course, my role as a pastor informs how I think of that. But I've asked, how many Sundays is it okay for me to miss as a pastor? And I don't mean that in terms of how many Sundays is okay for me not to be working. Rather, I mean, even on the Sundays that I don't have an official pastoral responsibility, I'm not preaching, that's my typical pastoral responsibility, or I'm not giving the announcements, you know, I still just need to be in church. And I think I settled on the number six. And I settled on six by thinking through what are the good priorities that I want to have room for. And it primarily revolves around my family, my extended family, and time that I want to spend with them. And it involves a little bit around vacation. And it involves a little bit around outside ministry opportunities that the Lord gives me. And six is a good- was a good number for me to shoot for that allowed several weeks. There's probably half of that time is weekends that I'm with my family. There's room in there for one Razorback football game a year. And that's really about all a person needs to have to endure.

Autumn: One Arkansas game?

Hunter: Yeah, and there's a couple of Sundays in there for being out doing other ministry work. And it doesn't have to be hard and fast. If a ministry opportunity is available on a Sunday and I'm not obligated at Fellowship Denver, and that means it's a seventh Sunday, I don't have tremendous qualms about doing that. But that number six is good. It forces me to prioritize being here. And on the Sundays that I'm not preaching, I literally just show up as a regular Fellowship Denver attendee. Now, I recognize there're some uniquenesses to my role as a pastor. And so, I call it my Walmart-greater Sundays; I stand in the gallery and just talk to people and everybody, people treat me as a pastor, regardless of how- I can't put a sign on that says, "I'm just a normal person today. I'm not working. Don't ask me questions." But I don't have an official responsibility, and I still think it's important to be with the body.

Autumn: And really wonderful.

Hunter: And I love it actually. I love it. I don't just like, well, I have to do it. I love it.

Autumn: Yes. One way that we call people into church participation is through our membership process. A way that we're saying we need to think through more is to challenge people to think about their participation in our corporate gatherings. Another way that I can think of that we have implemented this in our kids ministry is through our elementary team, the way we structure their service. We ask people who are going through our membership process to consider where and how they can serve in a capacity on Sundays in our corporate gatherings. And one of those ways is through serving in kids ministry. Our elementary teachers who teach our kindergarten and older classes serve more frequently to provide consistency and consistent presence in our kids classes. So, they already have responded to the call by saying, yes, we'll give even more of our time than many of our Sunday rolls require. And so, they're already giving in this way.

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



And we ask them also to prioritize the Sundays in which they're scheduled. So, they commit to a particular schedule. They're serving more than one Sunday a month, typically two or three Sundays a month. And I ask them as much as possible to hold to those Sundays and to utilize other Sundays in ways we just described, that their perspective on those other Sundays should be that they attend as much as they can. And if they have something like this, travel, a family gathering, an occasional fun weekend in the mountains with their friends or Fellowship Group, that to the greatest extent possible, they prioritize their Sunday serving. And to their credit, they do. And we see so much fruit in our kids classes because of that, because they have taken on that commitment and have adopted that model.

Hunter: So, that's another way that this can look. I love it. And I would guess some of our listeners hear that and they think, well, I couldn't commit that much. It would just require too much change. And yet, the thing I notice about the people that are serving in that way is they are not suffering because of their service to the church. Now, they may have hard things in their lives. They are not suffering because of their prioritization of the body of Christ. I think you do a great job of caring for them and making sure that ministry is sustainable for them. And we are concerned about that. We don't want to burn people out. They're flourishing. And I- they're flourishing and our church flourishes because of their gift.

Autumn: These are ways that we call people to our corporate- our gathered spaces. I think there's a question that this article raises as well in the creation of what Meador calls this "thick" sort of community. The kind of community he's painting a picture of, giving us vision for. And that requires participation in the life of the body on a weekly basis as well. So, not only in corporate gathered spaces, but then also maybe in some of our smaller environments like Fellowship Groups. And I think there are some habits we can develop in that area as well. So, what are ways that we can encourage that both as church leadership and then cultivate that as church participants?

Hunter: I think the first thing is to see the value of both the large corporate gathering and the smaller gatherings together. And there are quite a few people who prioritize one or the other. And so, there are people who really prioritize worshiping with the church on Sunday and aren't much involved outside of Sunday in a smaller community. And there're, on the other hand, there're people who would really stay connected to their Fellowship Group. But because of some of the dynamics we're talking about Sunday attendance or participation, Sunday participation—we'll strike the word attendance—Sunday participation, it wanes. And I think the first thing is just to see the value in both. Different things happen in those spaces. Sunday participation is more about corporate worship, being under God's Word, and kind of broad community, small talk conversations. And the smaller communities are more about intentionally being known and knowing what's going on in each other's lives. We can pray more together in that kind of space. We can share more personally. Here's what God is doing. Here's where I need help in those kinds of communities. So, for doing those communities, I think some of the same dynamics we talk about apply commit to be part of one and actually think through what would be an appropriate level of commitment to this group? How many times in a normal course of a semester or six months would it be okay not to be there and to still be part of the community? Think through that. Our week, our weekday lives have different rhythms just like our weekend lives do. So, so people have to think through that according to their own rhythms. But think through that and then show up intentionally. And I think "show up intentionally" shows up with both a giving and receiving mindset. And first, the receiving mindset, I can receive something from this community and the people in this community. And I would particularly challenge those of us who have been walking with Jesus for a little longer or maybe a little bit more knowledgeable, it can be very easy to subtly slide into a mindset of, I'm just a giver here—I'm not a receiver. I'm here to do ministry, not receive ministry. I speak as one who sits in a doing ministry job, right? And it's very easy for me to slide into, all my role here is to do ministry, not

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans

Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



receive ministry. And I can listen to sermons, and I can easily slide into, I know far more about this passage than the person preaching does, and therefore, he doesn't teach me. Well, God has something to teach me through His Word and through this other pastor's faithful exposition of that Word that is far more than knowledge. And so, it's not about who knows more. And I have to check that mindset over and over again. Just because so and so is not as skilled of a preacher or doesn't know as much, doesn't mean I can't receive from their exposition of God's word and that God doesn't have something He wants to do for me.

The same applies to Christian community. I can receive gifts of community from many kinds of people, not just those who are super spiritual, extra mature, you know, are ahead of me. They're not my mentors. I can receive. I have one friend in my kind of broader community who just does a great job of bringing people together for fun activities. And one of the things that the Lord has given me through her ability is just the gift of getting to know people, getting to know other people, right? That's a gift I can receive. So, show up with a receiving mindset. And then I would say, show up with a contributing mindset and a contributing mindset. Just ask what has God given me. And it could just be something He's done in my life, and I can tell people about it. I can give testimony and experience.

Autumn: I also think one way that we can cultivate this kind of community that we want to be a part of, that we long for and that is depicted for us in the New Testament images of the Church and the way in which they did do exactly what you said. They had this mindset of giving and receiving. And that is both, we see passages in the New Testament in the epistles that exhort them to exist together in that way and images of churches who did exist in that way and the "thick" community, the life together that they were able to experience. And that was countercultural then too, and is now, when churches commit to each other and to living in that way. I think one way that we can begin to cultivate that is to be attentive to the people around you who are a part of your church and your community. And this can happen in either space in our corporate gatherings and in our smaller, perhaps Fellowship Group, perhaps it's just getting together with people, but who are a part of our church community. But it can happen in any of those contexts. So, I think asking and being attentive to the needs of the people around you and what they're experiencing, what they're going through in their life, both celebrations, so both things that are going well for them and maybe seasons of suffering or difficulty. So, some questions to actually just develop and ask are, who is in a season of suffering or grief? Who is experiencing life with God in a way that is to be celebrated and that acts as an encouragement to the people around them? Who's new to our church family or someone I haven't met before? And then, is the Spirit calling to mind someone who needs encouragement or exhortation? And actually being attentive to those needs, praying about that and going in with that mindset creates the kind of community that this article is talking about and that we hope to continue to develop at Fellowship and to see be the ethos of other local churches.

Hunter: Is there a Def Leppard lyric that would summarize all of this?

Autumn: You know, I don't know that they were known for their spiritually-intense lyrics. Nothing comes to mind.

Hunter: I wish we could put a bow on this conversation with Def Leppard lyrics like we started, but I think you, apart from that, I think you summarized that really, really well.

Autumn: Well, Hunter, thanks for being on the podcast with me today. I do want to mention that so often the people in our Fellowship Denver church family just stop and encourage me about listening to the podcast and I appreciate that so much. So, to those of you who listen regularly, thanks for telling us that the conversations are meaningful. We love

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 148 | VFL Reads: The Misunderstood Reason Millions Of Americans
Stopped Going To Church

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



hearing from you, not only encouragement, but if you have questions, we really want to know what those questions are and to see if we can weave them into our podcast conversations. So, if you have suggestions about what you'd like to hear us discuss on the podcast in the future or questions for us, send all of those anytime to podcast at fellowshipdenver.org. Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam England for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell who provides transcription for these episodes.