

**Closing the Back Door:
Worship Decline and what to do about it.
Executive Summary
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Many people are silently slipping out the back door of the General Church today. This can be clearly seen in declining worship attendance statistics reported by our congregations around the world. While some of that loss is beyond our control, many people are leaving church because they have concluded that the dysfunctions in the organized church are detrimental to the health of their faith and the spirituality of their family members.

Unfortunately, these people often have high potential to be tapped as the future 'pillars' of our congregations and could be numbered among those who are most able to help the church thrive. Since this exit is caused by organizational factors that are within our control, the trend can be reversed. The future of the General Church (the human organization), depends on our willingness to honestly and humbly address these issues with an openness toward change and being more flexible in our approach in a new century. While change is difficult and tests everyone, I believe that these changes will allow our organization to become more focused on the true faith that is advocated in the Heavenly Doctrines and communicate it to those whom the Lord leads our way.

General Church Worship Attendance is Declining

Attendance figures reported by our congregations to the General Church central office are showing decline. The returns from annual report forms submitted to the Secretary of the General Church suggest that worship attendance in our organization has declined in the US by at more than 15% between the years 2010 and 2017 (measuring 7 congregations that provided complete data sets and had resident pastors). Attendance in General Church congregations outside of North America has also declined in somewhat similar fashion but there is not enough data to give an accurate picture of this.

Four Reasons People are “Done” with Church

Other organizations have struggled with decline in worship attendance. They have also taken corrective action which can provide the General Church with information that can help. One particularly helpful book addressing the problem with the ‘Dones’ is titled: “Church Refugees: Sociologists reveal why people are DONE with their church but not their faith” by Josh Packard, PHD and Ashley Hope.

In this book, Packard and Hope categorize the various reasons “the Dones” are currently leaving church into four basic groupings. I find the book helpful because it offers simple characterizations that help explain the upset people have been reporting to me in the General Church for the last ten years. “The Dones” are: **1:** People who come to the church looking for **community** and left when instead they experienced others judging them. **2:** The “Dones are also people come wanting **participating** and making a **difference** in their congregation and instead get tangled and frustrated in bureaucracy. **3:** “The Dones” leave when they desire to enter into **conversation** about faith and their desire to interact is met instead with dogmatic explanations. **4:** “The Dones” are people who wanted to **engage in serving** the greater community and instead experienced the organization’s sense of moral superiority.

To summarize, the church must change to better meet the expectation today that lay people will be meaningfully involved the life of the organization. Congregations that do not do this will decline and likely die.

Of course no congregation is going to have perfect interactive dynamics. But resolving these issues can have dramatic effects on retaining the members of the congregation. Congregations can think about what they can shift to allow members to participate in **meaningful community** and minimizing 'Us' verses 'Them' judgment. Congregations can structure the life the congregations in ways the increase the voice of the members allowing more meaningful participation in the direction that the life of the congregation takes. The leadership can provide more interactive forums for the exploration of faith with meaningful lay conversation about how the teachings of the New Church can be used in our differing life situations. The church can develop and engage in service opportunities so that members can contribute to the health of their surrounding communities.

Humility

Each of these issues above is inter-related through the deeper issue of humility. Consider the teaching that "all worship must contain humility, and if separated from it no adoration and so no worship at all is present"(AC 2327 [2]). We know that humility at its most basic level is a willingness to follow the Lord's leading. As such, humility is a core attribute of any effective efforts we make to be a church. Is the General Church known by others for being humble? Do we do enough as a clergy to promote and model humility as a core value in our church? What would look different if we were better at this?

Transformation and Change

Tackling these four causes of decline in our church requires substantive change. The General Church is based on the theology that everyone is to repent and be regenerated. Everyone changes. With that model for transformation at the core of who we are, following the Lord's path toward becoming healthy growing congregations will also invite everyone to be transformed.