

## Brave Church/Hard Topics, 5/3/2023: The Rise of the Nones and the Future of the Church

This is the chat log of the discussion. Names and identifiable information have been removed for privacy.

References to slides for this session can be found in the *BC-HT Rise of the Nones – 05-03-23.pdf* document linked [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#).

Additional information added after the discussion are identified with “NOTE:”

### Who are the “Nones”? (slides 1-4)

**Emphasis:** “Nones” refers to “None of the Above” in surveys asking people about their religious affiliation. The group include atheists, agnostics, and skeptics, as well as people who don’t identify with a particular religion but believe in some form of a higher power or force. There are also people who might identify as Christian but (for any number of reasons) don’t currently attend church. They may be disillusioned, feel betrayed by the church, no longer believe in the faith of their childhood, or “Love Jesus but not the church.” We will not speak ill of seekers, wanderers, agnostics, skeptics, “nones” today. Rather, we will try to understand what’s behind the trends.

### Discussion: Where are they? (slide 5)

**Brainstorm:** Where do you think these folks who aren’t in church may be finding community, spirituality, ways of serving/helping others somewhere else?

A lot of people don't feel a need to spend much time thinking about religion/spiritual matters.

One daughter was hurt by the church and gets her community with her friends. She married someone who fell away from the Catholic church. She doesn't see a need for God.

People find community online with others who have common interests. They are content with life as it is.

A lot of people take it as an extra day off. For people with weekday jobs, that extra half day is a quarter of their free time. Motivation in a busy world.

**NOTE:** Some people don’t get weekends off and may end up having to work on Sundays.

Some people are service-minded. There are so many community organizations to plug in and help. From environmental to volunteering at museums to helping at homeless shelters. Many places to plug in.

My sense is that college students or people of that age tend to enjoy discussing these things in groups in informal settings or places where they feel comfortable. They are very interested in discussing spirituality even though they don't attend church.

I recall a few attempts at attending church when I was in college. The first one I went to must have been in the middle of a stewardship campaign (a concept that was alien to me at the time) because all they seemed to talk about was how the congregation could give more in offerings. Other mainline churches gave me the impression that they weren’t exactly eager to get to know transient college students. The church organizations that focused on students tended to be conservative evangelical and viewed non-conservatives as “projects to convert.” I felt more comfortable sitting in a bar and talking on faith, spirituality, and a whole host of topics with friends in a less formal, less judgmental setting.

College students may be interested in discussing spirituality, but many are very much anti-institutional (e.g., they don’t want to be involved with institutions such as churches).

The emphasis on globalization can cause younger people to move away from traditional beliefs of the family. They make decisions for themselves and ask a lot of questions. [Some] Young people are analytically

minded. They want community, they want to volunteer, they are seeking and finding commonalities through other organizations, from boy scouts to people who engage through Meet-Ups (even like our Help the Homeless efforts) to sporting events.

Some don't understand the concept of a higher being or question the existence of higher being. Although they may be unwilling to hear about it, being able to convey the idea of a higher power is part of what the church can bring to the table.

It is easy to find places to volunteer that are not part of a church.

Some people get their fulfillment from work.

A lot of peers my age find strong sense of community and some transcendence through yoga classes, running groups, gym communities.

I'm not sure people are really finding community elsewhere to the extent that we think they are. There's an epidemic of loneliness right now and lack of community is one aspect of that.

Social media is a spurious form of community. They don't have the same source of direct communication.

Some groups and most schools require service projects for young people. It is getting some involved in a different way.

### **Trends in American Religion (Slides 6-7)**

**Emphasis: It's not just church membership & attendance. Fewer people pray, consider religion very important.**

There is a diverse band of people both in and outside of church.

What happened during the pandemic? Did it accelerate the decline of those not attending church?

### **Something New Coming out of Major Transformations (Slides 8-9)**

**What are Gen Z and Millennials looking for? (Slide 10)**

**Discussion (Slide 11):**

**What is your reaction to the priorities of millennials and Gen Zers? How does that compare to your priorities?**

**These younger generations are looking for more "authenticity" in their faith and life. What does that look like in the church?**

Q: What do people mean when they say authenticity?

A: What seems real to them.

Authenticity means members of these generations are less likely to do something just because it is the way we do it or the right thing to do. They have to feel what they're doing means something, then they'll buy into it. But going to committee meetings, other aspects of programs – they don't see it from a heart level.

If you are just going through the motions, it looks to them like it is an empty structure that they cannot buy into.

Looking at that list [Slide 10]: it looks like what we call social justice. Depending on what verses you look at the Bible, those are the things Jesus is calling us to do. Maybe that's what we all should be doing. Maybe they're getting away from churches because the churches don't seem to be concerned about these justice values. We're so caught up in maintaining our structures, buildings, etc, that we're getting away from the things we were created to do— our priorities have shifted.

Thinking back on graphs [slide 7]: As the far-right wing has become more prominent, it also touts itself as being "more Christian." Is this leaning toward a general turnoff toward Christianity by young people?

With respect to social justice, it is easy for some churches to look at this and say 'they should love us' but it's not getting communicated. However, the issues are deeper than a PR challenge.

Most of the generations see all of these things as important but they do not see them in the church. the church in this generation is no longer our parents' church, our grandparents' church, etc.

It is puzzling--we need more of a message on the theological side.

There is a real public affairs challenge that the church faces. Those who haven't been to church in a long time see the larger church, not individual denominations – they hear the exclusiveness on the news, their music, people who have had bad experiences from the church and are automatically applying these negative values to the church carte blanche. After I left church, I tried to find a church that was authentic to me, couldn't find it until I came to Grace (30 year gap). Hard for each individual church to share the values that church holds to others w/o proselytizing to those who haven't been to church before. There's a thought process in media that paints a lot of negativity.

Maybe we should take a look at what the megachurches are offering and compare it to the institutional churches.

## **12 The Church's response**

**Emphasis:** This may make those of us who are part of church today feel uncomfortable: The institutional church today is perceived by many outside of it as being disinterested in the things we just talked about. We lack imagination, initiative to stand up to injustices, a reluctance to get messy with the real problems around us.

## **13 Discussion**

**Do you agree with this description of the church's failure?**

**If so, what should we do differently?**

**If not, how do we show those outside the church that we are living out our faith in the world?**

While people on the outside are viewing the church as one thing, they also see great divisiveness among Christians. None of the churches seem to agree with each other. So why try to understand?

What they see is the politics, dominantly far-right claims on Christianity and it is not how some of us know it to be. There's a great dislocation.

The quote [slide 12]: Taking risks means being different, having a willingness to approach things a different way. The older generation dominates a lot of committees. We're so stuck on doing things the way we grew up, to look at it in a new way is difficult. Layer on top of that, why would they even bother?

What is our own willingness to look at things differently?

Our denomination has taken positions that are very different from the Christian right. We're not getting that message out there.

Maybe our building looks old-fashioned. We have a steeple. New churches look more like auditoriums. They are expandable and versatile.

The advertisements that came out during the Super Bowl grabbed my attention. What was the outcome? Got to some important topics, grabbed attention. Messaging that was effective.

Those were the "He Gets Us" ads.

Each morning WTOP played a message from a minister each morning giving you something to think about to be a better person that day. Those type of messaging grabs people. Didn't hit on really hot topics. – "Not a sermon, just a thought"

Many people see hypocrisy of churches. The fraud, sex abuse, infidelity of church leadership, history of polygamy....the church has received a lot of negative press, with good reason. Turn offs, for many.

The megachurches turn me off because they are impersonal. Community, interaction is important.

There is a huge market for the right wing churches and those megachurches are like that.

We are oversimplifying if we think it is all about politics. We can do better. There are many other ways.

### **Different approaches to doing church: Missional vs Membership focus; Formative vs Performative [Slides 14-15]**

**Emphasis:** The first one, written from a PC(USA) perspective, describes the more traditional way of recruiting members – whether through confirmation, new member classes, or some evangelism effort – that focuses on bringing in people to support the church's budget, building maintenance, and existing programs. In other words, supporting the church institution. It contrasts this with a missional focus: our role as the body of Christ is to send people out to do the work of the Spirit, to follow where God is already at work. We are an outpost to equip and nurture people in following the work of Jesus in the world, to follow Jesus' practices with his own disciples.

The second article performative vs formative ministry. In a performative ministry, we have clearly defined leaders (pastors, elders) who lead the congregation, whose role is to donate, support programs, and support the institution of the church. Their focus is more passive – watching and following the leaders. In a formative approach, the leaders equip people to engage in meaningful practices of prayer, service, advocacy, spiritual development. This focus is more active, engaging, building authentic relationships.

### **Discussion Qs [Slide 16]**

**Don't think of these as binary, you're either mission or membership, formative or performative. There's more of a continuum between the poles.**

**Where does Grace fall in these categories?**

**What would shifting to a more missional, or formative, approach look like at Grace?**

**What would change? Where would the challenges be?**

One thing to keep in mind: If we want to invite younger people, people who have different views of church, people who come from different ethnicities and backgrounds to join us at Grace, then we can't expect things to stay the same. We have to be willing to open up, bring in broader visions, perspectives, ways of being. Part of this question is how willing are we (or you) willing to change?

We need to look beyond what *The Neighborhood Church* calls the ABCs of church management – Attendance, Building maintenance, and Cash flow. That's going to turn people away more than draw them in.

Yes, but the building is important and must be maintained. The budget is important.

New members under performative – sounds negative. They're willing to join us, but for different reasons. Why are they eager to join Grace? May lead us to some things. Loneliness is a big issue in older generations as well as younger generations as well.

Looking at formative ministry – part of the obstacle is me. I'm quiet about my faith. Not sure I'm comfortable apostatizing.

You need to have a building, but if we're only worried about maintaining it and not using it, why bother? A better way is to use it, invite others in. Open church to other groups.

The most outreach thing I've seen has been the Women's Tea – a lot of extra people there (included inviting friends). Maybe inviting people in is one way to go. Personal invitation. You can get trained in evangelizing, but too structured, rote. More like being a door-to-door salesman. What do you do once they're there? Have to invite people in a way that they can belong.

Our website does not look like we are open to all kinds of people. We have mission programs and we need to make sure that people outside the church are aware of them. And finally, our church is open to groups that support and mission and our beliefs.

Our pastors make sure we know that "all" are welcome to Christ's table each time we serve communion.

Hard to talk about faith, invite people in. In the gospel of John, there's a sense of "come and see!" **What type of community or space or event are the kinds of things that would make each of us want to invite people to come and see what we're doing?**

Grace falls in the middle, more toward the right side. We have a lot of mission programs, including people from community. There are more people from community at backpack build than members from the church.

How do we reach out to the community we live in? We need to take a look at our web site. Do not see diversity.

Two come-and-see moments pop to mind: (1) my first encounter with Grace was an invitation from a friend (who would later become my wife) to join Grace's Christmas in April home repair project. I had a jaded view of institutional church but the folks working on this home repair project were putting their faith into action and they welcomed me in. I had to re-evaluate my whole concept of church after that and it led me to becoming part of that community. (2) An old friend of mine was invited by another person at Grace to 'come and see' what we were doing in Honduras. He took several trips to Honduras with Grace. The next thing I know, he called me to say that not only had he joined his local Presbyterian Church (he had not been a church goer before that) but he had become an elder. Invitations make a difference!

## Closing Prayer

### **An Invitation to Hope... [Slide 17]**

This takes us back to the passage from Acts. When the early church gathered, the Spirit was there. They didn't know where the Spirit would lead them, but they grew, thrived, and spread through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who has written a lot about changing perspectives on religiosity and faith, was asked about her view of the future of the church. This was her response.

The question for us is whether we are willing to trust the Holy Spirit with what's next for us at Grace.