Virtually Alone?

by
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Occasionally I have the privilege of surveying church congregations to find out how to improve ministry. In surveying the women of a PCA church recently, I felt the most intriguing response was the answer to this question:

*Please describe the setting in which you feel you best grow spiritually—rank your top 3,with **1** being **the best**:*

_____ *Adult Sunday school*

_____ *Church service — worship/prayer/music*

_____ *Church service — sermon*

_____ *Small group fellowship*

_____ *Small group Bible study*

_____ *At home alone in study or prayer*

_____ *Special 2-hour events for women such as speakers, holiday celebrations*

_____ *Retreats*

_____ *With a close friend*

_____ *Serving others*

Other: _____

The number one answer to this question was "At home alone in study or prayer." This answer was given consistently across age groups, not concentrated in any one generation.

Second was the worship/prayer/music of the service, and the sermon was third highest. This was a church that is considered to have good preaching. Some women added that "alone" also meant reading online or even using social media—a kind of virtual communion in virtual solitude.

When I spoke to the pastor of that church, he was alarmed that women felt they grew best at home alone. (A 2009 Barna survey of pastors found that 15% measured spiritual maturity of their flock in terms of church involvement. http://www.christianpost.com/news/many-churchgoers-pastors-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity-38567/. I would say it's a higher percentage than that.)

It's true that we need fellowship, corporate worship experiences, and service in the church. The book of Hebrews warns us not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the habit of some." But we also need to be aware that the culture is changing, and that individuals are spending their time in very different ways than they did twenty and even ten years ago. This includes mature Christians, and women as much or more than men.

16% of those who don't attend church at all consider themselves to have "a committed relationship to Christ" http://religionnews.com/2014/10/24/secularism-is-on-the-rise-as-more-u-s-christians-turn-churchless/. A Barna survey of Christian Millennials found that 66% of them read the Bible online, and that 55% ranked reading the Bible as more important than church attendance.

Women spend more time spent online than men https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/the-digital-gender-divide-women-are-more-likely-than-men-to-have-a-blog-and-a-facebook-profile/256466/ and Google searches by middle-aged women have increased more than that of any demographic https://yourstory.com/2016/03/google-women-search-trends/.

We can draw comfort from 3 facts:

1. American Christians may well be consuming much more preaching and Biblical commentary than they did several years ago. In my church, some of our most active members read or listen to sermons by other pastors online as well as attending our services. New sites and blogs (like mine) from a Christian worldview are appearing every day. Church "prayer chains" by telephone are becoming less common as social media and texting are carrying prayer requests more efficiently. So we shouldn't be surprised that people really are growing, at home alone. Thank God that they are; it would be surprising if God's Word returned void. If growing "at home alone in study and prayer" does not mean using media, but refers to meditating on Scripture in the natural beauty of their own back yards, or confessing and praising in their prayer closets, so much the better—after all, "media" means a middle or mediating force, and if people can cultivate an *im*mediate relationship with Christ, that relationship will bless them in ways even their churches may not.

2. The questionnaire asked how people *grow spiritually*, not how they make friends or serve best. Those survey categories are still robust with positive answers. It's not hard to imagine great missionaries, Puritan leaders, and wise souls like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or John the Evangelist, saying they flourished spiritually in their prayer closet or library. If people grow best in quiet solitude, that can be fine as long as they then step out to share what they've learned, to serve others, and to be accountable for obeying the Word.

3. The second and third highest-ranked answers referred to church services. Any church leader should ponder whether it isn't preferable to have people in the pews who have a rich interior life than ones who spend their free time shopping or watching sports. And shepherds should be glad that when their lay people do study or pray, they grow.

But how to minister to such independent people?

Our pastor's instinct was exactly right when he wrote a daily devotional for Advent. Our members still talk about how much they appreciated having something written just for us that we could take home and make part of our devotions. Another pastor or women's group leader might write a blog, send out a weekly email blast with recap of last week's sermon or a key verse from the upcoming Bible passage, or maintain an active Facebook or Twitter presence that includes Scriptures or prayer prompts. A shepherd would do well to ask his flock about what teaching they are reading and hearing outside of church, and about their personal prayer life. If this can be done with friendliness and humility, it will be a blessing for both parties.

Finally, pastors and women's leaders can coach their churches on how to grow in their individual devotions and disciplines. For example, they will endear themselves to the congregation when they share about the ups and downs of their solitary times of intercession and worship. Members will appreciate practical tips about things like fasting, how to discern good doctrine, or how to study the Bible for oneself. When the pastor or other leader models and equips others for a personal devotional life, he or she is seen as adding value to life as it's really lived. And that's not virtual.

To get a copy of the survey mentioned above or a similar one, contact Leah Farish at leahfarish@gmail.com