

FOREWORD BY THOM RAINER

the
BIG
shift

WAYS TO ENGAGE A LESS-ENGAGED CHURCH GOER



Generis

FOREWORD



This brief book may be one of the most important books you will read.

I mean it. Don't put it down.

Read it. Consume it. Devour it. Act on it.



You see, the folks at Generis get it. They understand fully one of the biggest changes in congregational life today. That's why they named the book, *The Big Shift*. That shift, you will read shortly, is about declining patterns of attendance even among the most faithful churchgoers. I agree with them. This issue may be one of the top issues facing church leaders in decades.

But what is powerful about this book is that it is both descriptive and prescriptive. You will be introduced to the realities and the trends churches are facing. Even better, you will read about possible alternatives and solutions. This book is not a book long on theory and short on practice. It is both. It is powerfully both.

The leaders of Generis have been working with and helping churches for many years. It is only natural they would delve into an issue of such importance. They have demonstrated love and concern for congregations through the resources they offer; this book is an extension of their desire to help churches.

May I be a bit presumptuous of you readers? May I ask you to consider not only the information offered in this book, but the solutions as well? Generis knows churches. If you read and listen carefully to the pathways they propose, your church will benefit. Yes, your church will be blessed.

I am honored to have a ministry partnership with Generis. I am likewise honored to share these few words with you in this foreword. It is my prayer that the descriptions and prescriptions of *The Big Shift* will be used to take your church to greater levels of health.

Such is the potential impact of this book. Such is my prayer for you and your church.

T H O M R A I N E R

CEO & President

LifeWay Christian Resources

1

Understand the Shift in Church Attendance **Among the Faithful**



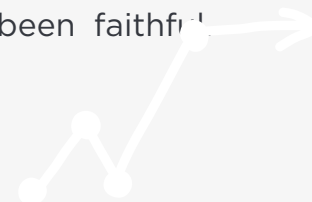
You don't have to be a sociology expert to know that 10 to 15 years is a small blip in time. That's no time at all. But that's how long it's taken for us to see a significant shift in church attendance. This change comes within the people of the church who are the most faithful – that is, people who are active in their church and regard it as important in their lives.

These people are attending church less frequently than they did 10 or 15 years ago, or right around the turn of the century. The research indicates that faithful churchgoers who did attend three or four times per month back then now attend less than two times per month.

So in this small blip of time, we actually see a very significant change. And most church leaders say they don't expect these types of changes to slow down anytime soon.

But why is this shift happening in the first place?

There are many reasons. Some may be theological. People may be failing to have a high view of the importance of church in their lives. But that doesn't explain the whole story since we are specifically talking about those who have traditionally been faithful.



We think it's more about all the things that occur on **Sunday mornings** other than church.



Decades ago, church was one of the only things that was even happening on Sunday morning. In our current culture, however, family events, club ball and other time consuming sports, second homes to visit, vacations to go on, and other recreational activities abound on Sundays. In short, life is just busy – probably busier for many people than it was 10 or 15 years ago. That busyness can make it next to impossible to get to church on Sunday morning.

While that inability to get to church is partly the fault of attendees, it is also partly the fault of the church.

So far, many churches have failed to adapt to this new, busier lifestyle by adding new times for services when more people can or want to attend. This could mean a 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. service on Sunday option. For a family who has been away for the weekend but is back in town in preparation for Monday, that time may be ideal.

This may all sound like just a theory, but let's illustrate (on the next page) what's happening mathematically to show the numbers behind it all. Take a church with 1,000 attendees and go back 15 years. (That's scenario # 1). Over 80% of churchgoers have to attend three or four times a month for the average attendance to land above three times a month. With the same 1,000 people week in and week out, the average weekly worship attendance would be 775.

Now take those same 1,000 people and move to 2018. (That's scenario # 2.) The only thing we change is the attendance pattern, so people are now attending church less than two times per month. That means we have to move 75% down into the two or one time a month category. With the exact same 1,000 people - remember, the church has not grown or shrunk - the attendance pattern has just shifted, and now the average weekly attendance is 488.

in this example, the math indicates that you've lost 37% of your people. But, in reality, you still have 1,000 people. It's that change in attendance pattern that shifts everything. It shifts your numbers for comparison purposes, and means that you can actually have stable or a slightly growing church while your average worship attendance can look like it's declining.

**Illustration
on next page**

ACTIVE ATTENDEE ILLUSTRATION

SCENARIO # 1

Total Number of Active Attendees = 1,000	
% ATTENDEES	ATTENDANCE / MONTH
40%	4
40%	3
10%	2
10%	1
AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE TOTAL = 775 AVERAGE MONTHLY ATTENDANCE / MONTH = 3.1	

SCENARIO # 2

Total Number of Active Attendees = 1,000	
% ATTENDEES	ATTENDANCE / MONTH
10%	4
15%	3
35%	2
40%	1
AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE TOTAL = 488 AVERAGE MONTHLY ATTENDANCE / MONTH = 1.95	

% CHANGE IN AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE = -37%

What this means is that your numbers may not be telling you the complete story. When we show pastors this type of information, their mouths drop. They have no idea this shift has taken place, and they don't understand the full implications for their leadership, discipleship, giving and everything else related to the church.

And they certainly don't know what to do about it, which is what we will discuss here.

2

Adapt to Changes in Church Attendance



Sports, vacations, recreation. So many things are filling people's lives these days, and unfortunately, it just doesn't always leave room to attend church on Sunday morning. While other reasons may exist, this is one of the main factors we see in why church attendance among the faithful has shifted so dramatically in the past 10 or 15 years.

The numbers we have to show churches how this shift is taking place is often staggering to pastors. In their perspective, it looks like the number of people in their church is getting smaller, when actually the church may be growing. It's just this shift in attendance that changes everything.

When pastors come to understand this, they usually don't waste any time in going back to their staff and sharing the news and coming up with ideas of what they can do about it. While we have seen some church leadership try to lay the blame of decreased attendance all on attendees, wise church leaders know that's only part of the problem.

Churches can't continue to only offer services at 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning. Those are still viable times, but they shouldn't necessarily be the only times.

For example, if a family is traveling for club ball, and they don't get home until 4:00 p.m. on Sunday afternoon, they've had little control over that ball schedule. If their church doesn't have a late Sunday afternoon service, then the fact that they don't attend church that day is partly their fault and partly the church's fault.

Such a significant shift has implications for everything, including service days and times, leadership development, discipleship, volunteering and serving, and how to develop generosity among these people who only go to church once or twice a month.

Here are some things for churches to consider when it comes to adapting to the shift in church attendance:



Take full advantage of every minute.

When pastors do have church attendees in front of them, they need to leverage every moment. Your time in the worship service becomes even more precious if you really only have them once or twice each month.



Consider flexibility in worship times

that you've never thought of before. There are many other good options besides Sunday morning, such as Saturday services or Sunday afternoon services. Late on Sunday is an ideal time for families who are away for the weekend but back in time to attend late in the afternoon, as mentioned above.



Make the sermons easily accessible.

Your preaching should be more available than ever, and not just on your website. Leverage various social media channels and email. Maybe send out an "in case you missed it" weekly email or newsletter.



Put more emphasis on those who serve. If the people who are volunteering and serving are only attending church one or two times a month, that means you have to develop a bigger serve team than you've ever had before.



Develop consistency in small groups. With the shift in attendance on worship, we're not seeing the same shift in attendance of small groups. Small groups are still a very effective way to help people dive deep and keep them attached to the church. Even those who are not in church every single Sunday will still be active and faithful in the life of the church.



Employ all giving options. Make sure you've developed the full spectrum of giving options, especially electronic versions, such as online giving, giving through ACH, and mobile devices. Just because someone can't visit on Sunday morning doesn't mean they can't go on their mobile device and make a gift. Make sure those options are available so generosity doesn't suffer.



Teach a proper view of church and Sabbath. Teach your church what it means to actually be there, and make sure they know why it's so important to worship with other believers on a regular basis. Remind them that Sabbath can include Saturday and Sunday.

It will be interesting to see how church attendance changes over the next 10 or 15 years.

This trend will likely continue, which is why it's so important for churches to get a true view of what's happening now so they can prepare and evolve as church members do the same.

3

Meet People Where They Are: **Small Groups**

We know that people are attending church less often than they used to with today's average attendance being about twice a month or less. In light of this, we have to figure out how to adapt to the changes. We can't just let people go, allowing them to think we don't care about their attendance anymore.

How do we reach a less-engaged generation and get them to attend church more frequently?

This is the question when it comes to the big shift we're seeing.

The overarching answer is discipleship. If we make this the priority, we can deal with any issue out there. But it's not necessarily simple to execute. Discipleship is hard enough when attendance is consistent. It becomes much more difficult when attendees are only coming to church once a month or so.

With these changing times, pastors and churches must also change their strategies in order to be effective, and that starts with the environment in which people ARE engaging. But where is this actually happening?

The answer is in small groups. Placing more importance on small groups is one big way churches can adapt to changes in church attendance.

We consider engagement to be the sum of attendance, serving, being in a small group, and leading, if that's your gift. Because the shift to attending church less regularly has not translated to people attending their small groups less frequently, this is a huge opportunity, and attending a small group potentially could be as important as being in church on Sunday.

Let's be clear, though. Attending a small group is not a substitute for going to church. That will always be important. But if people are going to attend less because of busy lifestyles, it raises the bar on how important it is to be connected to a group and to be there on a regular basis. As a church, we have to meet people where they are.

It really doesn't take attending a large church to feel like you're not in touch with a lot of people. This can happen even in a smaller church for people who are not engaged in a small group, because the real key to having a vibrant, life-changing experience is being involved in a smaller group of people. This is the environment where you find friends, where you get to know people who are similar to you, where people are struggling with life, succeeding at life AND trying to do it all in a way that connects to their faith. This is where discipleship happens. And it has to all connect together in order to work.

While we learn on Sunday morning - about the Bible, about what pastors are teaching - we get to grow in groups. This is where we apply what we've learned to our lives. When you see this happening, it often makes you want to learn more, which in turn, can encourage people to attend church more, which is what we're after.

So, churches: If your score card only includes attendance and giving, consider that those might not be the most important factors anymore. What if you used engagement to determine how active someone is in the life of the church and especially look at small group participation? With the shift of many people attending less often, the group environment is paramount to moving forward.

4 Recognize That Your Mobile Giving **Is Not Enough**

When we talk to pastors about mobile giving for their churches, we often have them excitedly tell us that they have 13% or 14% of their giving coming in from mobile devices and perhaps 25-35% from all electronic giving options.

While we hate to disappoint them, we hit them with the truth, which is that it's not nearly enough. If you do not have 60% or more of your giving coming in from outside the traditional offering plate on Sunday morning, it's not enough. Without success in this area and systems that really work, you will be out of step with what is a sociological trend we're seeing. Because people are attending church much less frequently, that obviously means they are not there as much on Sunday mornings to place their check in the offering.

But that doesn't mean they don't want to make a gift. It raises the priority on electronic and mobile giving platforms. People should be able to give any time, any day, anywhere, whether they are at home, at the ball field, at the lake, at the beach, or any other place their busy lives take them.

It's important even for those people **who ARE in church on Sunday morning.**

If someone walks in with a mobile device in their hand, they should be able to easily make a gift within 90 seconds. If they cannot do that, there's something missing in your giving system.




This component of giving is so important because the whole world is heading toward mobile computing. Churches need to be prepared for that, and getting people to use a mobile giving platform is crucial.

There are so many platforms available, and some of them are very user friendly. If yours is not, you should find one that is. People should love to use it in order for it to really work and make an impact. This could look like giving through text, giving through an app, or giving on your website. There are options to fit in with whatever you prefer and whatever you think will work best for your church. While five years ago churches could have found plenty of excuses not to adapt to mobile giving, that is simply not the case anymore.

A note to pastors:

We know that a lot of times mobile giving platforms are chosen on the basis of what works best for your staff in the financial or accounting back office. That is not an unimportant consideration, as it should work logistically and be feasible to implement. But the most important factor is truly user friendliness. If you have something the accounting department loves but only five people are using it, that doesn't do any good. If you have something that causes the accounting office to do a little bit of extra work to make it fit into their system, but it drives a half a million extra dollars, that's obviously a better solution. Again, the key is that people should actually like to use it.



Because many people are attending church less often, it raises the priority on having good, effective electronic giving systems. Make sure you have systems that really work, and it will help you reach this less-engaged generation.

5

Think **Beyond 9 and 11** on Sunday Morning

Traditional worship culture is pretty simple. Basically, people attend church every Sunday morning at either 9:00 a.m. or 11:00 a.m. Even the 9 o'clock hour could be a full service, traditionally speaking. These used to be the times when people wanted to attend church.

But this is changing, and it's all a part of the big shift. In today's busy world where people have extremely full schedules, especially on the weekends, that is not how worship culture should look anymore. Those times on Sunday are no longer convenient for many. Churches have to be willing to think about worship days and times that may not have been considered previously.

There are many options to explore. We have clients who have thought about having Friday night church. It could be a great option because as the week ends, families can gather together at church, then wake up early on Saturday morning to play ball, head to the lake, or go wherever else their schedule takes them. Saturday evening services are another good option, as are Sunday evening services. For families who have been busy or away most of the weekend, this could work for them after they've gotten back into town. Church at 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. on Sunday could be a great chance to stop, rest, and prepare for the week ahead.

It's all about **meeting busy people** where they are.



If you do this, people are much more likely to attend church more often. For pastors and church leaders who feel resistant to this concept, stop and think about why you are trying to hold onto keeping things as they have always been with worship culture. Our agenda should only be driven by the great commission, which is to reach people for Christ. That should mean we're willing to consider other times of the day or the weekend, even those that may not be the most convenient times for church volunteers and staff.

And this is a key point. Absolutely, some of these new days and times to consider may not be as convenient for you, but they might be better for attenders. We know that 5:00 p.m. on Sunday is probably not a great time for church volunteers and staff. But if you have a lot of young families who usually miss church on Sunday morning but say they would come later in the day, it will very possibly be worth it.

The significant decrease in consistent church attendance is admittedly hard to accept, and it's even harder to adapt to. But if we expand our thinking and make environments, systems, and culture a priority, we can solve this. This generation may only become less engaged, and we have to figure out how to meet people where they are.

6

Develop a New Scorecard for Churches

We have accepted the fact that there has been a big shift in church attendance with average monthly attendance significantly decreasing. We also accept that if we leave everything to its own devices, we're heading in a much less engaged direction.

Of course, we want people to come to church more often. We're not dropping that idea or that goal. But in our current cultural environment, there's more to it than just that. We know small groups, really good mobile giving options, and offering non-traditional service times are part of the solution.

In order to measure all of this, we need a scorecard, which has typically been just about attendance and giving. But now it needs to be more about engagement, which might be some combination of attendance and giving, but more importantly, participation in small groups, serving in ministries of the church, volunteering at church, and leading

It might be easier to look at this with a hypothetical churchgoer.



Let's call him John. John used to come to church three or four times a month, but right now he's in a twice a month attendance pattern. Regardless, he's a steady giver, giving \$1,000 every month, so \$12,000 a year. John leads his small group once or twice a month, and he serves once a month at the local, church sponsored food pantry. He's also in the regular rotation for parking lot ministry.

So John doesn't attend church quite as often right now, but he's giving regularly and very involved in attending small group, volunteering, and leading. Does this mean that John is more or less engaged than when he attended church every week?

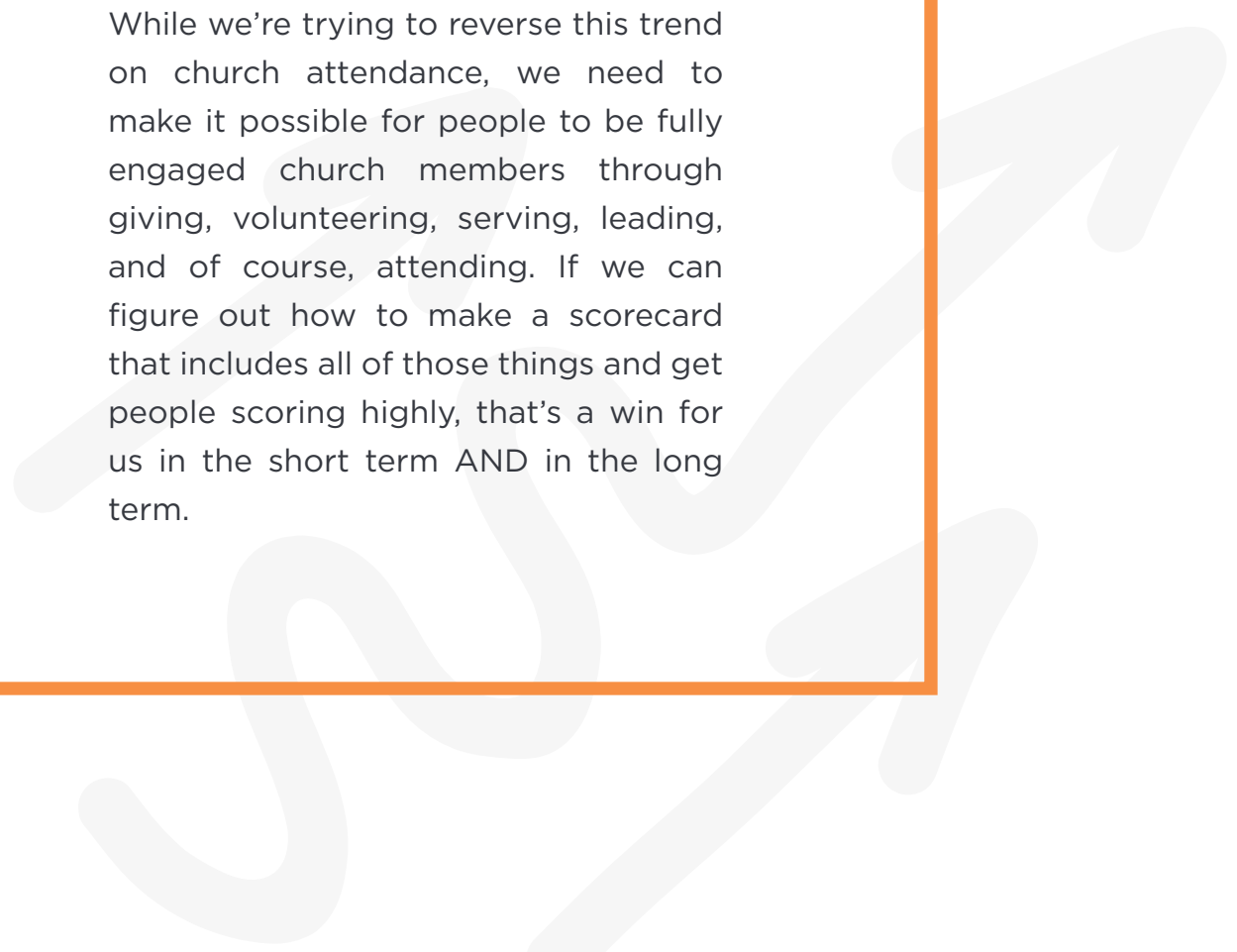
In his current attendance pattern of twice a month, he is actually more engaged. His overall involvement and discipleship looks like what we hope for.



We have to remember that John is a busy man. He has kids with club ball and other activities, he has aging parents he needs to care for, and there are other life events that take him away from home many weekends. This means he just can't always get to church. If you stopped right there, his scorecard might not look too good, but when you dig down and look below the surface, you discover all the ways John is engaged.

We should also look at his entire family. John's wife, Nancy, is very involved at church as well. Their oldest daughter is not just in the high school ministry, she's leading a small group of underclass girls. Their younger daughter is a part of the junior high ministry, and she volunteers twice a month at the local assisted living home for seniors. If you look at the whole family profile, they are a very engaged family.





If we change the scorecard to take those things into account, things actually look a lot better for John. It's much better to measure how engaged people are rather than how often they attend church. How often they attend church is a factor, but not the only factor in figuring out if a person is really engaged in the life of the church.

While we're trying to reverse this trend on church attendance, we need to make it possible for people to be fully engaged church members through giving, volunteering, serving, leading, and of course, attending. If we can figure out how to make a scorecard that includes all of those things and get people scoring highly, that's a win for us in the short term AND in the long term.

7

Understand that Engagement Wins



Throughout this resource, we have tried to examine why The Big Shift is happening and what we can do about it. We introduced the idea of a new scorecard, which is the idea that churches should look at some combination of not only attendance and giving, but also serving, volunteering, and leading in the life of the church. It's truly all about engagement.

If a churchgoer is engaged, it's a win in the short term and in the long term. When people are more engaged, they will likely stay that way in the near future and the extended future because it is so fulfilling. People come to realize how much they need that engagement of leading, serving, and volunteering. It is similar to coming home from a mission trip completely changed. Even though people are serving others to bless them, in doing so, they get a huge blessing themselves. Their hearts, their heads, and their theology of how to serve changes.

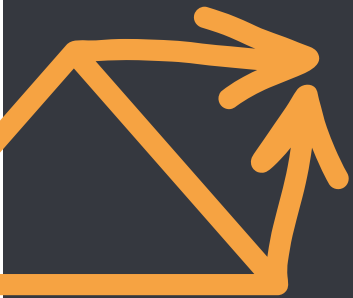
But we are not all programmed to automatically know how to lead, serve, or volunteer.

One ingredient to getting people engaged is equipping them to be involved on a deeper level. We can't expect everyone who walks in the door to know what to do. We need to equip them to be fully devoted disciples in these areas. The church should be a resource center, and it requires a big commitment to develop people to this level of engagement.

Another thing churches should do is be comfortable having **high expectations, and clarify those on the front end.**

It's okay for a church to tell members or potential members what they expect, and to say that if people are looking for something different, it's okay to find a better fit. If your DNA as a church is that you are servers and leaders and you want to equip people to do that, you should make that clear. You may even present very specific expectations, such as wanting people to be involved in one or more ministries after one year of membership. Someone who isn't comfortable with those expectations may not be a good fit.

Churches should strive for their people to be engaged and deployed as effective disciples where they live, work, and play. We have to counter the forces of current culture, the culture that tells us not to be engaged. But in the church, we depend on engagement to fulfill the great commission and the great commandment. This is why engagement is such a big part of the answer to the big shift in church attendance.





THE BIG SHIFT: WAYS TO ENGAGE A LESS-ENGAGED CHURCH GOER

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