



The Essential Library



SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World

by Douglas Estes. Zondervan, 2009. 256 pages. \$16.99

Simchurch is the first book I've read on the virtual church that makes theological sense.

Most people in the West have trouble swallowing the fact that virtual churches can provide the same depth of community as do non-virtual churches. When Westerners think of "church," we subconsciously think of a place, rather than a gathering of Christians.

When we can think of the church, not as place, but as a gathering of Christians for the task of building the Kingdom, then presence and community are understood in a different light and the virtual church becomes a possibility. A church is more about "who," "what," and "why" the people have gathered. "Where" a church gathers has never been important theologically. Thus when a group of Christians gather in one place to worship under the Lordship of Jesus they are the church in community – even if the place is in virtual space.

Since the issue "Can a virtual church provide real community?" is at the heart of most people's objections to the virtual church, the author gives us three different examples of the virtual church. The author suggests that watching a streaming worship service on a computer doesn't provide community since you are watching the service alone. Many churches provide such a service but it isn't the kind of worship

that provides the possibility of community or presence. You are an observer and nothing more.

Then he gives two examples of virtual churches where participation, community, and presence are possible on different levels because you are not alone and you can actually participate in the experience. Lifechurch.tv provides a minimal level of participation, but not much community because you can shout in the lobby but you can't actually disrupt the worship service. It's more than mere observation because you are not alone and you can interact on a minimal level, but it's short of real community. But at the Anglican Cathedral in Second Life you could actually disrupt the worship service and you could be asked to leave, because you are really present, and others are really present, and the pastor is really present (avatars of course). Thus, participation, community and presence are possible.

If we can agree that some form of authentic community and presence is possible in the virtual church, the real question becomes "Are we ready for the day when we can walk into virtual space without our Avatars?" I guess it boils down to this: Is virtual space a fad or a trend? And if a trend what are the implications for Christian ministry?



Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It

by Ken Ham and Britt Beemer with Todd Hillard. New Leaf Publishing, 2009. 176 pages. \$12.99

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For decades we've known that many of our children will eventually leave our church homes, but most of us have thought that occurs when they move off to college. And we've lived with the dream our children will return once they have children. Indeed, many of the studies of Baby Boomers showed that to be the case.

But we're no longer talking about Boomers when we consider the exodus of today's children. Indeed, we're talking about an entirely new chapter in the history of the Protestant Church in North America, one in which our young adults are telling us they will likely never return to congregational life. Starting with a few statistics and photos of the fate of Christianity in Europe, the authors demonstrate how the demise of the Church in Europe has crossed the Atlantic and is moving through Canada and the United States. The authors move beyond the research of Barna to reflect on a study conducted by Britt Beemer and the Americas Research Group who made 20,000 phone calls to find 1,000 young adults between the ages of twenty and thirty who attended evangelical or conservative churches regularly as children but who no longer attend on a regular basis.

Now before you stop reading – or, worse yet, eschew this work – because you are neither conservative nor evangelical, please wait and follow with me for a few more sentences. First, Beemer's research comprises a wide range of young adults from East to West Coast who attended a variety of denominational congregations, including some Mainline ones. Secondly, more conservative youth tend to remain active in congregational life longer than Mainline youth; as such, Mainliners will relate to most of what these young people have to say about their reasons for no longer attending church on a regular basis.

Because this book is so important for pastors, Christian Educators and administrators, Sunday School teachers, and parents; I am not going to give away much about the findings in *Already Gone*. I will, however, note that – as the title states – although your children may be in church with you this weekend, there is about a two-thirds chance they will not be in a few short years. Indeed, one of the most startling statistics I found in this short, easy read is that far fewer than previously thought of our young people will remain congregationally engaged once they get to high school. To put it another way, the exodus is already en masse once our young people hit ninth grade.

Already Gone is not another diatribe about the state of the church or our youth, rather it is a tool for helping congregations and their leaders consider what can be done now to turn around the exodus of our children.

Do yourself a favor and order multiple copies of this informative, potentially break-through book. If you're a pastor, share them with your Christian Ed folks. If you're a Christian educator, share them with your team and pastor/s. If you're a parent, share it with your pastor/s and congregation's administrators ... and demand more for the sake of your children. Whatever you do, buy it, read it, share it, and make a commitment to be part of the move to keep our children in Church ... to make your congregation relevant ... to provide opportunities for our young people to develop, live into, and take opportunities to live out their relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Got Style? Personality-Based Evangelism.
by Jeffrey A. Johnson. Judson Press, 2009.
168 pages. \$15.00



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When I first started reading *Got Style*, I was convinced it was a mainline retelling of *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Hybels and Mittelberg. Although there are plenty of similarities, I have to admit I was pleasantly mistaken. There's lots more to this book than just a basic training guide evangelism, although it is also that.

The premise of the book is that there are a number of different ways to evangelism, but not every method suits every person. So Johnson includes an evangelistic personality inventory (heavily adapted from the *Contagious Christian* inventories) and helps the reader identify which of the six styles of evangelism they are likely to be comfortable with. Although the inventory is found in Chapter 8, the reader is encouraged to take the inventory before reading the book, ostensibly so they don't get discouraged or angst ridden as they read about styles that are definitely beyond their comfort zone.

Each style gets its own chapter complete with biblical and contemporary example and anecdotes of the style in action, a thoughtful evaluation of the pros and cons of using the style as an evangelistic tool, the potential benefits of the style, and even gentle warnings about over-reliance on the style.

The book is not a difficult read, but neither is it in the "easy read" category – there's too much excellent research and thought put into the book for it to be called simple. We recommend this book for personal and small group use.

