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**Announcer:** The Art of Leadership Network.

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**Carey Nieuwhof:** The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's Carey here, and we are at Episode 600. Nice milestone. Thank you so much for listening today. We are going to talk about A Great Dechurching, some fascinating research, sitting down with Jim Davis, and Episode 600 man, that's pretty cool. Today's episode is brought to you by The Art of Generosity Course, my new course that is going to help you build a generous congregation. Check it out at [theartofgenerositycourse.com](http://theartofgenerositycourse.com) and TENX10. Do you know that they are on a mission to connect Gen Z to a church community that really wants to see them grow in faith? Go check out [1010.org](http://1010.org) to learn more.

Well, hey, as we celebrate Episode 600, I want to thank all of you who have left ratings and reviews who have helped us reach well beyond 30 million downloads, who continue to share this with your friends, and shout out to Justin Wester. He left a review recently. He said Carey, I've listened for a while. Never left a review as a podcaster myself - Congrats on that Justin - I know what a gift reviews can be keep up the great work. These interviews in the content you and your team create and blessed more people than, you know. Justin, thank you so much for your review. I so appreciate it and we love helping you guys. I want to take you backstage to some of the most important conversations we can have in church leadership, we bring the best of the business world to the church world. The best with the church world to the business world, but we really are focused on reversing the decline in the church, and helping you really identify, and break your next growth period. That's what this podcast is about. Jim Davis is going to help us with that today. We are going to talk about the great deed. Churching the fastest and largest church attendance exit in US history, the future of small medium and mega churches, and the \$24 billion in giving that left the church.

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Speaking of which, do you wish you could have a financially flourishing congregation? Well, last week I launched my brand new program called The Art of Building a Generous Congregation, and that will help you build a financially flourishing church. Imagine having margin in your budget and margin also in the lives of the people that you lead. From learning better ways to teach and talk about money, right down to every single email that your church needs to send about money and generosity each year, pre-written for you, ready to copy and paste.

You're going to learn how to create a culture of generosity from the ground up or from right wherever you are. If you join before the end of the day, this is time sensitive, September 29th, 2023. That would be tomorrow for those of you, the many of you listening today on release day.

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We are going to run a live work-through of the course with me and other leaders in the program. So you can join today at the art of generosity course.com or click the link in the description of this episode where ever you're listening and of course this goes way beyond it, but if you get in by September 29th, hey good, things are coming your way. Also, we're facing a crisis. We talk about this all the time on this podcast, and it's a crisis in the faith of the next generation. More than 1 million young people annually stray from the life that Jesus offers them. And if this trend continues, then by the year 2034 the church will lose more than 10 million young people. So TENX10, is on a mission to reconnect Gen Z to a church community and to help them grow in their faith. The way Christ intended. TENX10 is a national initiative that has risen to the charge as the church faces a tipping point regarding the faith of gen Z. I am involved with this work and love what they're doing and I want you to go check it out.

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They're having an official launch for TENX10 on October 10th, you can go to 1010.org to learn more about the mission and how you can be part of the solution. Well, Jim Davis is with us today, he is the teaching pastor at Orlando, Grace Church, which is an Acts 29 church.

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The host of the, As in Heaven, podcast with his co-author, Michael Graham, he wrote The Great Dechurching; who's leaving, why are they going, and what will it take to bring them back? And this is what we're talking about on the podcast today.

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It is fascinating. There is fantastic research. They did some great research with Ryan Burge. We're gonna dive into it. So sharpen your pencils, get your notebooks ready. Remember, we do have transcripts for this. I know some of you are gonna wanna go back. So let's dive into my conversation with Jim Davis.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Jim, it's good to have you on the podcast.

**JIM DAVIS:** Good to be here, man. Thanks.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You're welcome. So let us start here. How bad is the situation in the American church?

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**JIM DAVIS:** It's not great. So we set out, we knew anecdotally from living in Orlando that the majority of the people who we interacted with who didn't go to church used to go to church.

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And we commissioned social scientist, Dr Ryan Burge, doctor Paul Djupe to do the most comprehensive study of dechurching, ever done in the U.S. because this data didn't exist. And I think there are some reasons it didn't exist but we set out to prove or disprove this thesis. We are currently in the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country. And we proved it, their study proved 40 million American adults have left the church, and largely in the past, 25 to 30 years. It's probably helpful to define dechurched for our study, this is somebody who used to attend church at least monthly and now attends less than once a year.

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So to put this in perspective on a percentage scale, the previous largest shift that we have had was the 25 years post-Civil War. And, you know, people are either returning to church or going for the very first time immigrating, whatever. Our last 25 years, the shift is one 1.25 times greater just going the opposite direction. In terms of numbers, our shift is larger than the first Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and all the Billy Graham crusades combined, just go in the opposite direction.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow, yeah, I mean let that sink in for just a minute and I do really appreciate the research approach. I mean so much of what we read these days, it's just an anecdote or I think, or its theory, or I read a stat, and therefore, here's my book.

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Ryan Burge has a great substack. I discovered it earlier this year. His substack is like incredible. This guy just lives in data. Like it's amazing.

**JIM DAVIS:** He's amazing. And if he were here right now, he would ask, are you subscribed? Because you get even more if you're subscribed.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. You know what? I need to subscribe and I need to get him on the show at some point because I really have...

**JIM DAVIS:** He's a gift.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. Yeah. And just really, really good material. So just to amplify that a little bit, the dechurching we're seeing now, the reverse shift, the shift away from church is bigger than the Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Everybody Saved in Billy Graham's Crusades combined.

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**JIM DAVIS:** That's 40 million, adult Americans.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** And that's in how many years?

**JIM DAVIS:** Largely in the past, 25, or 30 years because the 1990s is when this really started going, and there's some specific reasons as to, why.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So, literally the time I got into ministry, this is really good to know, you know, really makes you feel. It's all my fault, I guess. You know. Holy cow, that's insane. That you know the other thing that is interesting too, and you mentioned this in the book, I don't want to spend a lot of time there. But there's this belief, I wanted to call it a myth, but believe that the Founding Fathers of the United States were Christian and that we're a Christian nation. You talk about that as well in your research, right? What did you discover it?

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**JIM DAVIS:** I don't think it'd be too harsh to call it a myth, not to say Christian values weren't there, but I had to go back to the research. But during the colonial times, I think it was something like, 17 percent of people were churchgoers in the colonies and that, you know, there have been David French and others who have made a very compelling case that the US Constitution was the Watershed document into secularization in the West. Because when you compare it with the documents with the Constitutions of the colonies, like Connecticut clearly talks about Jesus and it uses very Christian terms that our constitution clearly avoided now, I'm Pro US Constitution. But it is, it is kind of a myth. I mean, the the high-watermark for Christianity in the United States was definitely the 20th century.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, so really what we're saying or what the research is showing is that 83% of Americans did not attend church at the time that the United States was founded. And I mean, Jefferson was very famous for the Jeffersonian Bible, cutting out the passages literally, like with an exacto knife, scissors, passages

he didn't like. He would have called himself a Deist at best. And a lot of the founding fathers were Deists, meaning they believed in some higher power, but it was the height of the Enlightenment. They didn't really, you know, what my understanding of a Christian faith would be, would not be their understanding of a Christian faith. And America was largely unchurched when, which is interesting, you know, I know this is not a historical book, but you read the stories of the Puritans. And I mean, on my wife's side, we've got French Huguenots who came over to America. You do too, French Huguenots?

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You even pronounce it right.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Oh yeah, yeah, but they were Calvinists right in France and they fled persecution in France because it was a Roman Catholic country, they settled in New England and then they were loyal to the British crown. So they came over in 1783 with the United Empire loyalists into Upper Canada which became Ontario but you know it's interesting because all these myths about the Mayflower and pilgrims and the Puritans and the Protestant work ethic, 83% of America didn't go to church.

**JIM DAVIS:** That's right.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow. Wow. And where are we now, approximately, in that landscape according to your data? Like what percentage, so your definition again is that you're attending church once a year or less, to be dechurched or unchurched, right? Which is fair, not including weddings, funerals, Etc. But, I went to a service of worship once a year or less. What percentage of people now would fit that category?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, so this is this is where Ryan Burge is just gold, but he does a lot of research on this. We have. I think it was 2020 for the first time we dropped below 50% in this country and so we've, of course, the rise of the Nones and that's Ryan's book, The Nones, that is those with no specific religious affiliation.

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This is interesting because that group only increased. I mean by like two points, if I remember correctly from the 70s to the 90s and then they started increasing by like one or two points a year starting in the 1990s.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow. Yeah. And now it's kind of like an exponential.

**JIM DAVIS:** It's because they're having children who are not going to church. Right?

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. And you know, Gen-X kids and Boomer kids and even millennial kids are dropping out as well, although there is, you know, there's hope and there's a little pockets of hope, but okay, I want to break this down.

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Another interesting stat, and again, this is not a major theme in your research or your work, but that really hit me because we have this debate every, you know, I hear from people who are against mega-churches all the time, right? This is fun because I don't mind mega-churches. They don't bother me. I led a moderately large church for Canada, for my country, I'm friends with a lot of people who lead mega churches. We've had a lot of guests on who lead large churches, but one small stat in your research that caught my eyes, the majority of churches in America are small. However, 70 % of people who attend church attend larger churches. In other words, you drive through America all over its small church, small church, small church, but they're largely empty or emptying, and 70% of the people who still go to church now go to larger churches. So, what's happening there?

**JIM DAVIS:** Well, I think it's good. How you started this out? I think the gold standard, when you're talking about church sizes is Tim Keller's Church Size Leadership Dynamics, and the point he makes off right at the beginning is we can't moralize a size of church. Everywhere is different, they're going to do different things and we need different kinds of churches. It's also, what wasn't in the book, is the median size of churches in America is actually 75. So, that's not the mean, that's a very big difference, the median.

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Um and you know, so I wouldn't also not vilify megachurches. I think there's strengths and weaknesses with larger churches. But sociologically, actually it's funny Ryan and I were talking about this yesterday. I mean there is a sociological thing where we observe crowds draw crowds, you know, people like shiny things. There's an economy of scale as well that we can get into the economics drive, a lot of it but those churches with more people, as they draw more crowds or able to offer more programs, more production, more lights, and that in turn, draws more people. So, there definitely is a sociological piece to what we observe happening.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So, let's talk about that. Crowds draw crowds and that philosophy, you know, the way I've written about it and the way I think about it is, you know, and this is not church language, Christian language, but just human language, I see it as consolidation. If you look at what happened to the book industry, right? All these independent bookshops, Barnes and Noble, Borders comes along, and then Amazon comes and cannibalizes that. And now there's the resurgence of the independent bookstore a little bit, which is super encouraging, but the same thing happened with coffee shops. Coffee got disrupted, right? So it was all these little places selling .10 .25 cent cups of coffee. Then the chain showed up, Dunkin' and Starbucks. And now there's the rise of the, you know, the independent coffee shop again. Do you see a similar thing with Market consolidation? That just the people who are still going to church are going, I'm just going to go to a better church, what they would say, quote, a better church.

**JIM DAVIS:** I do think you're onto something. I really like the coffee shop analogy. This is where I think we're going to see economics play into it though, too. Because, you know, Ryan would say the middle-sized churches will be hollowed out in the next 10-20 years because at least in cities and then maybe some rural places and smaller towns, this wouldn't be as true but in cities to have a church and when I say medium, I'll just say, one, two, three hundred do know you're going to want to have a full-time pastor who's been trained, maybe with some experience. You need a place to meet, well that costs more money than the average group of 100 to 300 can now provide unless you plant in some sort of affluent area.

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So just based on economies, I think you're going to see fewer and fewer mid-range churches. I think there are actually big implications in church planting. Church planting is something that we want to be a part of. So I think because of this and let me also say, it seems like it will be harder for church plants to be using certain public facilities that we have enjoyed the cheap rent space from.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** For example?

**JIM DAVIS:** Public Schools would be the first one that comes to mind. Now we have not experienced that here, but I know that's been that's been a real concern in other parts of the country. So in addition to all that church planting isn't as easy as it used to be, I mean, church planting in the early 2000s and this is a world, you know, a lot

about, there was a lot of success because of Christians leaving their traditional church because there's contemporary music, there's maybe expository preaching that they'd never heard of before. Well, that's not new and different anymore. So in many ways, church planting is returning to the hard work that it always has been of evangelism and discipleship. So you combine those two things together and I think the church as a whole is going to really have to think about how we support our church plants for longer periods of time.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. So let's drill down on that a little bit. I want to start with the small and mid-sized churches. What is the future for small and mid-sized churches? And it's interesting that Ryan would point to the mid-sized church as most vulnerable. There was back in the day when I started out in the 90s, I used to read a lot of Lyle Schaller and anybody under 50 wouldn't remember who he is, but he had a lot of great things to say. And he said, small churches are like cats. They have nine lives and you can't kill them. And there's a certain level of truth to that. If you can get a part-time, Pastor 50, people have just enough money to keep the lights on and the insurance paid up. You know, that's pretty hard to kill. So what are your thoughts, or your co-authors thoughts on the future of the small Church in the mid-size church?

**JIM DAVIS:** I think the small church will be, will do better than the mid-size Church, you know, while the home church movement isn't doesn't have the momentum that it used to. Like you said, it's hard to kill. You can meet almost anywhere. There's not a lot of overhead. The downsides are that they tend to be very homogenous, and that is a downside. And actually years ago, I was talking to, I got to be careful in how I say this, a pastor of a very large church in a downtown area.

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And there was a new kind of young Church Plant in the downtown area. It was in the small category at the time and a lot of college people and young professionals were going and the Pastor said that's great, they will serve them well until they have kids and then they're going to come here. Because we have childcare we have programs, we have camps, they don't.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Was he right?

**JIM DAVIS:** He was right. I don't think, actually that particular church is no longer around anymore, the smaller one, but they weren't trying to stay in the small realm.



I mean they grew to a certain capacity and then where in the world are you going to meet in downtown Orlando? You know. Oops I gave my town away.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You want us to take that out?

**JIM DAVIS:** No, nobody will know who I'm talking about.

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Yeah, if you plant in an area that you can't ultimately afford to stay in, that's going to mean that you move into the suburbs. And if you're moving away from a good portion of the people who are used to driving.

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So I think Ryan's winning me over. I think small churches will continue to exist and thrive in phases. They'll look different and they'll change, but I think they'll be around forever. I think large churches in the foreseeable future will also do very well in terms of –

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So roughly 500 or more in attendance?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, I think the threshold is somewhere between 400 and 500 to be out of that medium realm, to be able to financially afford to do what the church has historically in America tried to do, the way that we've done things.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, church-planting. You know it's interesting you should mention church planting getting harder. I mean it wasn't sexy back in the day. Now it is a thing that young leaders want to get into but I think you're right that whole market consolidation. What, you touched on very briefly, I want to go back to like you know, when I was starting a church it still was like the majority of churches were stuck in a model from somewhere between the 19th century, in the middle of the 20th century. You come along with a band and relevant teaching. And yeah, I mean half of our growth did come from unchurched people. Legit, I'll stand behind that. But yeah, you get a lot of Christians who are like, oh, it's a new kid in town, right? And so you had that and one of the secrets of a lot of church growth is that it is a lot of people just moving in from other churches.

**JIM DAVIS:** People who financially support what we're doing because they come in knowing that's what they should do.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. So tell me more about why you think the ground is getting harder for church-planters?

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Well, I don't think we see. Okay, again, I'm Pro-church planting, I think that the studies show that we're actually doing a lot here to try and be a better church planting Church, the study showed that a huge number of conversions that happened come from those types of churches. So we need them in our community, but it's getting harder because what they're doing isn't noticeably different than what's going on in a lot of other churches in the cities. It's not novel anymore for people to, for Christians, to join that and be disciple-makers, and invest their time and their money, they need to have the vision of church planting and we need to free up that leadership to be doing evangelism and discipleship. And that just means that the church plants. I think that we support we need to do. So we need to from the outset plan on doing this for a longer period of time than we've been used to

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay. So, this is really good. I want to dive into some of the data as well. And let's start with the broad category of deconversion. What reasons are, again, this is not your reasons, you've actually done the research and you've got copious data in this huge study. What are the reasons for people deconverting?

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**JIM DAVIS:** So, I would put deconversion and de-churching in different categories. And I think this is a lot of the—there's overlap between the two. But I think this is the reason that these kind of studies haven't been done, as a guess, because we just assumed that everybody who's leaving church, if you're going to read what you generally see on the New York Times and social media and other places, that everybody leaving church is kind of the Josh Harris story or somebody who began to struggle with their identity and sexuality and decided they were going to leave the faith altogether.

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While there are those people, over 75% of, we're talking about, we're about 30 million of the 40 million, that's not them. And in many cases, we've seen that there are certain groups that we've identified. They're still Christians. They are there

Orthodox. They are Christians. They have no pain point in terms of their Church experience and they are 100%, in their words, willing to come back to church.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So why did they stop going?

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**JIM DAVIS:** We break this, at a very high level, into what we call the casually dechurched and the dechurched casualties.

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So the dechurched casualties, about 10 million people, they have real pain points, abuse, political syncretism, it could be a variety, we've identified four or five different reasons but they did leave the church because of that. Now whether their faith is intact, we got to get more granular

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** But a quarter, about 10 out of 40 million, right?

**JIM DAVIS:** About a quarter of people, that's what they did. But then you have the casually dechurched, and largely, they didn't leave because they were disgruntled. Do you know what the number one reason for detaching in America was?

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Go ahead.

**JIM DAVIS:** I moved.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** All right.

**JIM DAVIS:** That's the number one reason so this is casually, they moved. They got into new rhythms, they didn't connect, they were busy, of course, Covid. What you know was got a lot of people out of the habit of going between 3 and 18 months depending on what state you lived in. And a lot of people decided they like their new rhythms.

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And as a dad of four kids, 8 to 15, I really identify with kids getting busy, travel sports, and travel sports I used to be really harsh on it and be like, just don't, why don't you do it? Well, I use my daughter as an example now who's into volleyball. I have no illusions that she'll do it in college and be professional, but if she doesn't do that, she gets left out of her friend group because they get to a place where they can play and she can't.

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So I'm very sympathetic to that, but a lot of families have decided one day they'll go back to church, but it's just not working right now because our culture does not protect Sundays and that's when a lot of the travel sports happens.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So little editorial comment here, you know, I'm a former lead Pastor, founding Pastor now, which means I don't do anything but I'm still part of our church and still behind it. I was at a donor event last night, like, I'm, we're behind it 1000% my successor, Jeff. Brody, doing an incredible job. But during Covid, we had a pretty tight lockdown here.

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I was not deemed an essential person, right? So, unless I was teaching the guy with the microphone, there was no, I had no helpful skills to be there. And at first, I'm like, what do I do? Do this the first time in 30 years? Like I haven't gone to church on a Sunday morning, well 50, really. Honestly, if I go back to my childhood, so I'm like, well, I better watch both live streams and then I'm like, well, I guess I don't have to go twice, so it was down to one livestream. Then it was a live stream while I was still brushing my teeth, then it was a live stream on the back deck.

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I'm like, holy cow and you know what? Like when that's over after 45 minutes or an hour, we started with shorter services. I'm like you have the whole day in front of you and I used to be like you like condemned travel sports and all that stuff or just you know, I wouldn't condemn it but I just kind of roll my eyes. It's like you're not you're not devoted enough for people who would tell me because we had a lot of unchurched people, man, that's my only day off in the week where I get to do what I want and then finally during Covid I'm like, oh this is what they were talking about, and this is actually really awesome like if his fantastic like to get a day where you don't have anything else and so, you know, we went back when the church opened but it was like pulling a kid to church for a little while and now I'm back in the groove and the habits re-established and, you know, all that. But I went through that psychological journey of like, oh, I finally get it. I really understand what's going on now. So the number one was I moved. What were some of the other reasons? Like, do you see that psychology in, because it's not like my faith was dying, my faith was fine. And I love our church. And now I'm there in person every Sunday. I can't remember the last time I watched online.

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If I'm in town, I'm at church.

**JIM DAVIS:** I had the same experience because when we were only live streaming, I was recording on Thursday, and my family was doing things that we don't. We like to hunt and fish. And we'd leave town and do what people do on the weekends. And I would be the first to say this was, it's really nice. And I get it, so I'm sympathetic. But other reasons, so again, the de-churched profile is not monolithic. That's one of the main things we want people to take away. So it depends on what kind of de-churched person you are as to why you left. But if we stay in the casually de-churched realm.

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You have the, the two groups. Well, that's not even the easiest way to do it. Some there's some groups that it's all, it's all about convenience, they moved, there was a life transition, divorce is a real issue, actually, that tends to impact the lower class and the lower middle class more, or if you have a baby outside of marriage, that is another thing we can come back to. I mean, we really have learned that dechurching is a lower and middle-lower class phenomenon.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay, I want to put a pin in that because I read some other research that says, I don't know. This is Ryan's or someone else's, but that the most people likely to be the people most likely to attend church are college-educated, more affluent people.

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**JIM DAVIS:** This is a big deal, I mean, because we have this Boogeyman in our culture of higher secular education, taking your children away. But only three percent of Christians with master's degrees have dechurched.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Whoa. Only three percent of Christians with master's degrees have dechurched. Yes, I guess that's why I went back. I don't know. What do you make of that?

**JIM DAVIS:** Oh man, Ryan and Mike and I have talked about this, if you do have Ryan, this would be a fascinating, this is his wheelhouse right here, you know, he has some theories on the type of person who goes to college and get educated and their values of community as being different. There are some theories because again this is why, we're guessing, doing the best we can. But there's some people who would

say the person who is going to go to college and get his master's degree is a good thinker, not easily duped. And as a pastor, I would argue there's a lot of good, true, there's a reason behind our faith. We're not just doing something to believe it. And I do think that there's something to that. But again, I would yield to Ryan because he has done so much work on this specifically.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** No, that's really interesting. Any thoughts though that you would have as to why if you have a lower level of education or family instability that that would lead to it? Because yeah, there is that idea that the unintelligent still go to church and the intelligent have unplugged or all become progressive. And that's not actually the case. So what's going on?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Well, I think there's an institutional issue. I think U.S. institutions, and the church is an institution, tend to work less for certain types of people.

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Um and so I, you know, you go back to the low-income person who has to work long hours or unusual hours that could take them out of Sunday morning, or maybe that kind of work. They don't have the flexibility that you and I have in our schedule or if they get divorced, they can get thrown into that and they weren't used to doing that. They have to share custody which might change their rhythms completely. Or if you have a baby outside of marriage, you don't have the family net to take care of you. I mean, it all these life transitions and again, life transition is the number one reason. They tend to hit the lower income brackets harder than the middle class, the upper middle, and upper.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You know, that's really that's really a helpful analysis because it's sort of triggers, the Pastoral Instinct. I think a lot of us have it's like, oh, you're not mad at us. You're just going through a really difficult time. And, you know, I'm married to a former divorce attorney and she'll tell you, like a couple's finances get turned upside down when families split up too. So there's sort of that shame and my really included.

**JIM DAVIS:** One hundred thousand dollars on divorce Attorneys, you go into debt, I mean, it's hard. I mean it creates real issues.

[00:31:47.400]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Well let's start breaking down. Oh, there's one quote I want to get to before I start breaking down and this is I'm going to read this at some length. But Jake Meader.

[00:31:58.600]

**JIM DAVIS:** I had breakfast with him this morning.

[00:32:00.500]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Oh, there you go. So you're talking to Ryan yesterday, having breakfast with Jake.

[00:32:03.900]

**JIM DAVIS:** You're bringing up all the people I happened to talk to in the past 24 hours.

[00:32:06.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Bring up all your friends. He wrote in the Atlantic and he wrote about your book and he quotes Stanley Howe, someone I studied back at seminary, who said that pastoral care, this is a quote, pastoral care has become obsessed with the personal wounds of people in advanced industrial societies who have discovered that their lives lack meaning. And then Meader goes on to say, the difficulty is that many of the wounds and aches provoked by our current order aren't of a sort that can be managed or life-hacked away. They are resolved only by changing one's life by become a radically different sort of person belonging to a radically different sort of community. Thought that was really interesting because to me, that was a comment on preaching some of which I've done, which, you know, Keller would say was moral therapeutic, what did he call it?

**JIM DAVIS:** Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. I think Christian Smith is the one who coined that term but yeah

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** There it is. Okay Moralistic Therapeutic Deism which is basically, like some kind of God who cares about your little personal wounds, and that kind of thing. Comment on whether that has contributed to the problem that we're looking at right now.

**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, I think this can take us to one of two extremes. So on one hand you have, I didn't coin this term, I don't know who did, but you have church is Coldplay and a TED Talk.

[00:33:30.500]

And, you know, and so in there is a lot of even you see, a lot of pop psychology with little to no gospel. And I do think that in those churches, where what you win them with is what you win them to, and if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not at the core of what we're doing, if discipleship is not the mission, then putting people in seats is. And we call people to give money in that context, but not a lot else, maybe serve on Sunday, but in terms of life change, we call them to too little and we don't give them enough. I know I'm painting in broad strokes but we can go to the other extreme too, and say you know the Bible gives us all we need. We have no need of any mental health professionals in our midst, you know, biblical counseling only and I'm not trying to get too controversial here but I do think there are, I know, there are real mental health issues in the church and in the de-churched.

[00:34:31.700]

Actually, we have some, we cite some studies on the mental health of the de-churched and how we can see that it's different than those who regularly worship.

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But I think churches really need to be focusing on the discipleship and spiritual formation of the whole person, and that includes the emotional and psychological, not just getting them facts. So basically, I'm setting up these two extremes. So as a church, we want to absolutely have the gospel and the teachings of the Bible as the center of what we do while acknowledging that God has given us gifts, scientifically, that we can use to minister to our people more fully.

[00:35:13.300]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, that's that's that's a helpful thought. So if it's not Coldplay and a TED Talk and it's not just ignoring all of the wounds that people have, where do you? Where do you land on that, Jim?

**JIM DAVIS:** Oh man, I mean this is what we as pastors are trying to, I'm growing in it. I'm not the teacher, I'm a student in this, but when I look at, we walk through books of the Bible and whatever the main point of the passage is, whether that's to two verses or two chapters or whole book, I want that to be the main point of the sermon, but I want to think about how people feel what makes them not want to do these things or do these other things, the whys behind what we feel. And I often, now in Orlando, we have the blessing of having the highest per capita number of counselors in any city in the world. Eleven institutions pumping out degrees here. But I'm blessed in that. So often I'll contact a counselor and say hey this is where I'm



going, what landmines do I need to be aware of? Where can I hit the heart here not as opposed to going to the gospel but in Tim Keller's and he said something like contextualization is knowing the storylines of your people and showing them that all those storylines find their happiest ending in Jesus. And I, yeah, I'll even plug 1 episode that we did on As In Heaven with a guy named Ben Kant, who nobody's ever heard of, but everybody should on mental health in the church and it was one of the best episodes on our podcast that we've ever had. I thought he just absolutely crushed it.

[00:36:54.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** We'll link to that in the show notes and thank you for the recommendation. I will give that a listen because I think it's important. I don't think it can be ignored, but what you just said in your answer reminded me very much of Keller and I don't want to deify him, but man, I do so admire him and he had a way of just disarming people by kind of looking at their presuppositions and taking them very, very seriously and then saying, but in the end, that's inadequate, have you considered Jesus? Only he said it a lot better. The other thing before we dive deep into the data, and the data holds a lot of clues for us, so I do want to go there, is you talked about and we talked about the founding of America, but you argue that the religious right these days is functioning more like the secular right that what we see around the Supreme Court politics and the Presidential races is, you argue, a form of secular religion. Can you explain that? Those are big words.

**JIM DAVIS:** Here's another myth of dechurching. We tend to think it's all happening on the secular left, it began there, but the secular right now is detaching, it twice, the pace of the secular left and there's a lot of reasons there we can dive in but that is absolutely what's happening. And so I want to, I look at it like the horse and the cart, there are some good Christians out there and the horse is Jesus, and the cart is politics and social engagement. And so that's that's good, I don't want to, but there are some people for whom the horse is politics and cultural engagement and the cart is Jesus.

[00:38:36.900]

And so we find people, and this is of course anecdotally, I can talk to my own context, but people who if the horse is political engagement and culture wars, then they're going to look around a church like ours and not be satisfied because that's not primarily, and honestly look at most churches in our area and not be satisfied. So they want to find somebody whose horse is the culture wars political engagement. And so they will join these movements on the secular right and be

getting some church like fulfillment in it. There is a mission, there is a community, but it's not church.

[00:39:22.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So, I want to be a little bit devil's advocate here and suggest something and just see how you react to it. One of the things in my casual conversations, no research behind it, but just churches I know have discovered that if they get onto the anti-woke agenda and they start parodying the religious right, it's a pretty quick way to grow a church.

[00:39:44.200]

Have you seen that?

**JIM DAVIS:** 100%. That's absolutely true. They will grow their church. And so you have in the data, you have some people who are still churched and that's what they're doing. And then you have others who have just de-churched. So I think you're 100 % right. I mean, the farther you drift to the left or the right, there's going to be a type of person that you will grow with.

[00:40:10.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** But in the horse in the cart analogy, you know, I've read stories like, you know, journalists have gone to visit these churches and these are places like the Atlantic or the New Yorker that profile churches like this that have seen explosive growth. And I think you're looking at hundreds of churches, not thousands or you know, tens of thousands of churches that have done this but the pastor's, perhaps sincerely perhaps cynically, have realized, oh in this moment if I say things that sound like I'm a republican nominee for president, I'm going to grow this church real fast and pack the room out. And those services tend more to be about big p politics and Little j Jesus than anything else. What do you think the future of those churches will be? Do you think this is a flash in the pan and five ten years from now? We'll see them, Peter out? What is your thought?

**JIM DAVIS:** That is a really good question.

[00:41:08.000]

I think the if I back up just a little bit, I think fear is driving a lot of it, and I don't want to minimize that because if you're, you know, if you're in your 60s and 70s and you look at a lot of the changes in culture, you know, we and he even could go to the New York Times do that was talking about how encoded we had to have 10 years of conversations into and that's and that's really hard. But I think there is out of fear,

what kind of culture is my child or grandchildren going to grow up in, but I have to, I have to imagine that the dust will settle and that certain type of person, it tends to be a little older, that generation is going to go away. It can definitely be some younger people doing this, but it feels to me like the dust will settle in that.

[00:42:05.300]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Well, and I think you're right, you know, the I hadn't thought because I've read those articles I've tracked this movement and I'm definitely not in that camp. That's not where I am personally. But I can imagine that a decade from now those churches have largely disappeared that moment has passed or they become basically political clubs, like they've secularized to the way you could argue that there are churches that exist on the left that are basically community organizations with a secular agenda. I could see that happening on the right, too.

**JIM DAVIS:** I could too, that makes a lot, I mean, I think that's a good articulation of it.

[00:42:45.900]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. Well, we'll see if that's true or not. But yeah, I think the political church has a very limited shelf life because things are changing. So so quickly. So you break down, it's five groups, right, that you really break down and study?

**JIM DAVIS:** It's five groups. We combine Mainline and Roman Catholic dchurching because they are almost identical. Six groups, five categories.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay so let's start with dechurched mainstream evangelicals. Tell me a little bit about what you're learning with dechurched, so defined Mainstream evangelicals because most people think of independent Baptists or, you know, that kind of thing with Evangelical. But I mean, I'm a presbyterian, former Presbyterian Evangelical. So this is interesting to me.

**JIM DAVIS:** So let me give two helpful, maybe caveats. Before we dive in one, we didn't develop these profiles by working, looking at the research ourselves, we didn't put our finger in the air after doing the research, we used machine learning. So, this is, these are computer-generated algorithms that mine, the seven thousand participants over 600 data points and it starts to lump together common answers. And so, that's how these categories came about.

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And the hope was not just to understand, but to equip, so that we can, as we engage The dechurched, not look at them all as one monolithic group, but be able to understand, oh, I know what I'm dealing with here. And the more that I've done that in my own personal ministry, it's been incredibly helpful. So that was the goal.

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One group that machine learning identified we called the Dechurched Mainstream Evangelical. So these are people who have casually dechurched from an Evangelical church, their orthodoxy scores are still extremely high, they're actually higher than those who still go to church. So they believe a nicene creed Christianity. I think it was 98 % of them believe that Jesus is the Son of God. 100% of them are willing to go back to church, 100%. It's about 2 .5 million people represented in this group in America. And we actually gave this study early on the executive summary of it to a church in Columbia, Missouri, The Crossing. And they were like, are you serious? There's this whole group. And so they created an initiative just to engage this low-hanging fruit. And in a matter of months, they had hundreds of new people physically worshiping in their church because all this group needs by and large is a nudge or an invitation, maybe coming to your home before you go to church.

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But it has been crazy to me as I have engaged this group and invited them to church, they almost always come and they often stick.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So what are their reasons like, life got in the way? They moved. What happens?

[00:45:33.700]

**JIM DAVIS:** Same things. I moved, Covid, life transitions, attendance was inconvenient.

[00:45:40.400]

Those are the types of things. Interesting enough, when you ask them why they'd come back, sociologists have long had the categories of belief, belong, and behave, so they believe in behave like Christians, but they don't belong in that way. But when you ask them what it would take for them to come back, it's all either in the belonging category. If I'm, you know, there's a good pastor friend, invites me, all community-belonging type stuff, or, and this represents their probably real

Christian faith, if God tells me to, you know, if God calls me or if I miss church, that was a big one, if I miss it.

[00:46:18.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Do you have any idea of what their personal disciplines are like? Like, obviously, you know, there's a prize there is their belief and, and again, I'd encourage people to read the book, look at the research, it is Nicene Creed. This is not even the Apostles' Creed. This is the Nicene Creed which goes into more detail, right? So these are people who, like, yep, I'm checking the boxes. I believe all this stuff. I'm not deconverting, I'm dechurching. Which is an important distinction, but you have an idea what their personal rhythms are like, are they still reading their Bibles, are they still praying, are they doing family worship? Or like what's going on in their homes?

**JIM DAVIS:** Definitely praying and listening to things online, and probably reading, family worship you wouldn't see all of them doing that but definitely engaging those things and you know, some of them may actually livestream church every week into their home.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I wanted to ask this early on it and I forgot, so I'm glad you raised it. So you are talking here the dechurching about physical church attendance, not necessarily livestream views.

[00:47:24.900]

**JIM DAVIS:** Yes. So this was a big conversation among us. What do we do with people who worship online exclusively? And we decided that they are dechurched. I mean, they are not a part of the body. They are not experiencing the sacraments or ordinances. They're not engaging in the one another's the way that we are called to do. The way that I described this, I lived in Europe for five years as a missionary and we would every now and then get to go onto a US Army base.

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And it was it was weird because, you may have done this before, we go into a base and you were on us soil and everything feels different and you are, I mean, this American architecture, there's American food establishments, the police and fire sirens make the right sound, you get free refills. Like this is crazy because we're so far from home, but it feels like home. That's what happens in worship and physical

worship that, like you were saying, it just isn't translated through the internet in the same way.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay. So and I guess if you're doing hybrid worship you would be caught as churchd in your study. So let's say, I watch online twice a month and I go

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Twice a month. Yeah, I count as being churchd.

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**JIM DAVIS:** They would count as being churchd, and I don't want to, I also want to give a caveat that I'm not anti-technology in the church. I think the question we need to ask ourselves is, how are we using technology not to replace what they were doing, but to move people in the direction of embodied worship.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah, and to supplement what you're doing and even as the new front door, right? I think we're on the same page with that. And I would agree long-term. I think the last stat I saw I don't know if this is from your book. I think was Barna was like nine percent of the general population said they wanted to access church exclusively online and I would have theological questions. Like what's your ecclesiology? What's your community? What is all of that?

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Because you know, yeah.

**JIM DAVIS:** And in strong cases are made that while the faith of those parents may remain intact, you know, will I mean, theologically will if they're real Christians.

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The likelihood of the children of the unchurched being, I'm sorry, the children of the dechurched being unchurched is very high. And so there's a generational impact when a family decides that they're only going to engage online and never be around the church that they were called and baptized into.

[00:49:56.100]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, I think that's very, very fair. And now that we're totally like out of that Covid era too, and this is the first summer at least, and we were in pretty tight lockdown. So I think people in California, people on the coasts would agree. People in, well, Europe wasn't as tight as some states and other places. But I think we'd agree, okay, life's back to normal again now, and the barriers to re-entering church physically are gone at this point.

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Ex-vangelicals, you talk about former evangelicals, they're getting a lot of press these days. What are you learning about? Ex-vangelicals?

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**JIM DAVIS:** So as with deconversion exponential locals a term, they get used in different ways. So we have to really define it for our purposes, this group that machine learning identified, is a group of people who do have a pain point. They left the church for a reason, it could be corruption or abuse in their context or the culture abroad. It could be spiritual abuse. Could be heavy-handed leadership. Political syncretism. They have their reasons that they left. What's fascinating, is that it? It seems like they left with their faith intact.

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I think 97% of this group would still say Jesus is the son of God. While they did very intentionally leave the church, they did not, it doesn't seem, leave the faith. And they would consider, okay, one of the reasons we call them exvangelical, they are done with white evangelicalism. Right now where they sit they are not going to go back to a church like mine, but they are open to different expressions of the church.

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They would be open to certain Mainline churches or house churches or maybe even the historic Black church.

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You know, anecdotally I've got a really good friend. Justin Holcomb, who's the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese here and there on the more conservative side of the Episcopal faith.

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And we've seen people who fall in this category, I know people who just can't bring themselves to return to a church like ours, but they're thriving in that conservative, Episcopal context.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay, and then a lot of them are not thriving in that context and they're at home, right? Because they're part of your dechurched study.

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**JIM DAVIS:** Well, right now, they're not going anywhere.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay, so they would engage in something different.

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**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, they're communicating they would consider something different. And again, this is another 2.5 million people we're talking about.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So, just so in case somebody doesn't understand syncretism, what do you mean when you use the term, because it's come up a couple times, political syncretism?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Maybe the shortest way would say, when, when a church, wholesale commits itself to one political party, and that is, you see it in the preaching, you see it in the discipleship, you see it in a lot and that, that happens on the left and the right, you know, I'm a firm believer that if the church leaders who were faithfully committing themselves to God's word in the gospel, they're going to get it from both sides. Because the gospel, Jesus doesn't align with the political party, they're going to be ways that Republicans, they do seem to do this better, the Democrats, they seem to be more aligned with the heart of Jesus in this way and that's going to get pastors and trouble in the polarization that we're experiencing today. But Syncretism is when we just adopt one political side or the other.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** No that's fair. And I mean it's a historic term that talks about when Christianity gets fused with Buddhism or another Faith system or you know Canaanite religion in the show yesterday and etcetera.



**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, right. Theologically speaking syncretism in the missionary world is when we take aspects of their faith and synchronize them into, sorry aspects of their culture and synchronize them into the faith that we're introducing, and it goes beyond contextualization.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Yeah. Fair, fair. Okay good. Then you also have a section or the AI, the machine learning, developed different trends for Black Indigenous, People of Color. So what are you learning about that group?

**JIM DAVIS:** So what's fascinating is we never asked AI to consider race as a factor. Never. That was not a factor that we asked it to look at, there were other factors we asked it to look at, but it developed this category of people who have dechurched from an evangelical space, and it's 0% white. It's mostly African-American and Latino. I think it's about 85% African-American, maybe 88%, maybe 15% Latino, and then some other. But this group of people, so imagine this group of people, it's another 2.5 million people, and they are the wealthiest of all the dechurched evangelicals.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You mean financially.

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**JIM DAVIS:** Financially, their income level is higher than any of these other groups. We're talking \$200,000 to \$300,000 income, master's degree, medical degrees, law degrees. The stereotypical BIPOC person in this category would be an African-American man, went to medical school, is practicing today in Atlanta, and maybe he's around the age of 50 and really hasn't been in church since he left Medical School.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow, okay. And what are you learning about that group?

**JIM DAVIS:** This group's Orthodoxy scores are very low.

[00:55:33.400]

Unlike the other two groups we talked about, their Orthodoxy scores are low and they would say they left because they felt uncomfortable in the church, they left because, it wasn't as extreme of a pain point as the X-ray, angelical. And what's really interesting is this really, it happens at a coming-of-age, it happens, you know,

in the college-age years or early working in this case, because they're so highly educated in the early professional years.

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And this is me guessing, but I can imagine that if you're an African-American who grew up in Evangelical space, you would, as a minority in a largely white church, that makes sense that it would that would be the age when we would start noticing things we had never noticed before, but for whatever reason, this group, it does not seem like the gospel, like they really latched onto the gospel at a young age.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Are there any signs that this, how many people are there in this BIPOC affluent group?

**JIM DAVIS:** This is another 2.5 million.

[00:56:38.200]

These first three groups are the same size.

[00:56:41.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow. Okay. And are they coming back?

**JIM DAVIS:** Well, they're not back.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** But I mean you know what the other groups are like if someone invited me or if I could find a different expression, what would they say?

**JIM DAVIS:** They would have some of the same things. They would say, if I moved and was lonely, I'd consider it, if I wanted Community, I'd consider it.

[00:57:03.600]

This group actually said, if God told me to go in some significant way, so this is different than I miss church. This doesn't, this is more of a like, well, God would have to do something big, like not believing that he will. And I do think that they would, those who do go back, would want to go back to churches that are really practicing ethically what the Bible teaches. They would want to go back to a church with a lot of empathy and relational wisdom.

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So a little bit different than the church they left.

**JIM DAVIS:** Right.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** By the sounds of it. You mentioned the phrase, I miss church. In these seven and a half million people that we've profiled so far, what percentage of people would go, I really miss it?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Well, we didn't ask if they really miss it. We asked what would cause you to come back and they said if I miss it.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** If I miss it. So in other words yeah, I'm not missing it yet. I'm having. Yeah. And having a good time out here.

**JIM DAVIS:** When we couple that with their Orthodoxy, it almost feels to me. Like they know. That's, that is or will happen.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay. Interesting. So, you know, one of my theories and I theories, I don't do research like you. I read the research, but I don't do it but one of my theories is that underneath this like oh I moved, or yeah, travel sports, or do you know how nice the beach is on a Sunday, or I just wanted to sleep in that the real enemy there is indifference. And people tend to do things that they see value in. So tonight I'm having dinner with my grown children and their girlfriends, fiance, as well, and like, we see a lot of value in that. So, we're going to spend some money on dinner.

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We're going to invest some time and dinner last night, I went to another dinner at our church. I saw value in that, you know, I don't just eat dinners, but, you know, you see value in a car you're purchasing, you see value in a relationship you're building into, you see value in things in my subconscious. It has always been you know if people are just like I don't really know it's that they just don't see the value in it. And therefore I think our battle is not against the church down the street. It's against indifference.

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Any thoughts on that? Did that resonate at all? Like what are we fighting?

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**JIM DAVIS:** I think that definitely is true. I think largely category we haven't covered in the cultural Christians. I would, I would apply it a different way but with the exvangelicals and specifically the dechurched, maybe the dechurched mainstream is the best way to describe this. It feels like, so I've historically gone to the gym and

been really involved in the gym. Early summer, we went on vacation, or actually early summer, I got COVID. Then we went on a three-week vacation. Then the day we were coming back, I broke my toe. And so like all these things to get me out of the gym.

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And now I'm without excuse, why haven't I gone back? And I know it has value and I feel gross. And I really intend on going back, but my habits are now such that it's going to take a real overhaul of my life.

[01:00:30.400]

You know, the way I eat and going to bed early and waking up on all those things.

[01:00:34.800]

So that's how I imagined it with those who are really Christians, don't have the pain points. Yeah.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay fair. You've got some interesting stats. This page 90-91 of your book, but reasons for leaving church among 18 to 25-year-olds and then 26 to 39 year-old. So basically that 20 to 40 demographic, what were some of the big findings in that gym?

**JIM DAVIS:** So with that, so we later in the book address that age group is a whole and Page 1991. We were talking specifically about the BIPOC group. Yeah, we've been talking about, so that would be different but as a whole, this is true of the BIPOC group, especially the age range of 13 to 30 is overwhelmingly when people are going to leave the church the most. That is when it's hardest to maintain our faith.

[01:01:26.400]

So that was especially true with the BIPOC Christians. Their discontent with what they were experiencing in the church went from like 2% or you know, early teenage years to I think it was 12% by the time they were leaving their parent's homes. So they got hit in that transition harder than other groups of people, but on the whole, the trick that transitions into your teenage years. Your adolescence then your transition into out of your parents home that's a second transition and then the transition into your professional lives, if you go to college or vocational life, if you don't, that's a third time, those are the three times that the people are taking an off ramp.

[01:02:13.300]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Okay, so let's talk about de-churched mainline Protestants and Catholics, and then I want to get to cultural Christianity. That's sort of the big one. But we'll go to mainline. And we've seen this slide for decades, right, in the mainline churches?

[01:02:28.700]

**JIM DAVIS:** I would argue that four things happened in the 1990s that really sped up this process. And so the first is the fall of the Soviet Union. This was a really big deal. Because before the fall of the Soviet Union, during the Cold War, to be American was to be Christian. I mean, this is when Eisenhower added, in God we trust on our money under God in the Pledge of Allegiance. And I'm old enough, which means you're old enough to remember a time when people, if somebody said, I'm no longer a Christian, it wasn't crazy for the next question to be, well, are you a communist?

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It was so closely aligned So then the Soviet Union Falls and there's space and freedom in our culture for the first time to be a patriot and American but not Christian. That was a big deal.

[01:03:15.000]

In the 90s the internet came along and 1994. The internet cafes are popping up for the first time, by 97 it's in most of our libraries and public schools, and so you can for the first time engage other worldviews in a way that isn't going to cost you social capital your with your friends and your family so that's second. The rise of the religious right created an ongoing political polarization, created a picture of Christianity on the far right side that caused people to say, well if that's what this is. And this is again this is when the main line in the Roman Catholic dechurhing are the biggest group in the 90s.

[01:03:58.300]

And so, they're saying if that's what Christianity is, I think I'm out.

[01:04:01.400]

And then finally in the decade basically with 9/11 and so in just 10 years the arch enemies of our nation have gone from being Godless atheists to religious fundamentalists, and said that had its own wave of had its own impact into dechurhing. So in the 90s is largely when we're seeing the mainline church and the

Roman Catholic Church, see their dechurching in earnest. This group is going to be more on the political Left. About 70% of them would say, Jesus is the son of God, but only 15% of them believe that the Bible is the word of God.

[01:04:41.500]

So, there's probably some work we want to do there. And what do you really mean when you say Jesus is the son of God.

[01:04:47.700]

So they look almost identical. They're dechurching at about the same time. They have average incomes. American institutions are working okay for this group. The real difference between these groups is that moving to a new community hit mainline dechurching harder than it did Roman Catholic and unsurprisingly, a scandal affected Roman Catholic dechurching more than it did mainline. So that would be the only real discernible difference. But we're talking about 20 million people here.

[01:05:21.100]

This is a huge category, huge category.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So that's half of the 40 million were Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants.

[01:05:30.000]

**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, you know, I'd probably, yeah, that would be right. 20 million would be mainline and Roman Catholic. 15 million would be dechurched. And in this initial phase of study, it involved all faiths. So five million would be other houses of worship.

[01:05:46.600]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So let's talk about cultural Christians. How do you define that term? What is a cultural Christian?

**JIM DAVIS:** So cultural Christian, we the AI, the machine learning it group to this group of people who casually deter checked. They didn't have a real pain point, but they aren't Orthodox. Probably about one percent of this group would believe that Jesus is the son of God, but they still generally have their fine with the Christian Church. They would call themselves Christians, often. They might show up on Christmas and Easter. They might opt to be married in a church

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I'm a good person, therefore, I'm a Christian.

**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah. And so you would find exactly that. So I'll call myself a Christian, but really it's about do you do more good than bad or do you have a good heart? And so this is Jesus' parable of the weeds in the wheat. I think, I mean, I think this is Jesus said don't be surprised. There will be some who look like they're in the Kingdom, but they are not. And so, in terms of what's going on there, absolutely is a purification, I think, going on in the American church, that is a good thing. I hate that they weren't ever in. But this group, and this is about 8 million people. This is a very large group, they probably were never Christians. So, when we engage them, I wouldn't just invite them to church.

[01:07:05.900]

I'm looking at them as a non-Christian.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I think the surprise to me, because when we talk about cultural Christianity, that's a term that gets talked about a long for years and years and years, and I would have assumed that that was 40 million people, you're saying it's 8 and there are more people, almost as many people who hold Orthodox views of Jesus, who are dechurched as cultural Christians, seven and a half versus eight. Almost as many people who hold very biblically authentic views of who Jesus is, who are going, see a church, as cultural Christians. That's a big shock.

[01:07:44.500]

**JIM DAVIS:** It is, and I do want to clarify, cultural Christians, this is a group that dechurched from an evangelical church.

[01:07:51.600]

Yeah, so the four categories, the third phase of our study, we specifically dove into what is happening in evangelicalism. So you have the mainline Protestant over here, and then we dive into people who dechurched from evangelical church. That's our space. And so in terms of our own mission in our own church, we wanted to understand it well.

[01:08:12.500]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So you argue this is not all bad news.

[01:08:16.500]

**JIM DAVIS:** It sure sounds like it right now.

[01:08:18.400]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I know, I know. I mean, my friend David Kinnaman, he'll say, you know, bad news Barna. Yet another study shows the decline in church attendance. How is, where is the hope in this? And David, by the way, and Barna, extremely hopeful group.

[01:08:32.700]

Love those guys and I love the work that they do.

**JIM DAVIS:** I would credit Barna was setting us down this path because they did a 2017 study on the Orlando metropolitan area, and Orlando used to feel like a you know, Church Mecca with all these booming churches, and RTS' here and Lingoneers here, and Campus Crusaders here and Wycliffe, all these things and we saw Barna study that said, Orlando had the same percentage of evangelicals as New York City and Seattle at 6%. And it was like his eye-opening moment for us and the difference is that our people who don't go to church, largely used to so it feels very different culturally, they still carry with them typical values.

[01:09:12.700]

So that's an excursus. But I'm very thankful for them because they set us down this path in many ways.

[01:09:19.000]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** All right. So where's the hope?

**JIM DAVIS:** Well, we start with the truth is our friend, a good look in the mirror is a good thing even if we don't always like what we see. The hope is over half of the 40 million 51% are willing to come back. They're willing to come back. And if you again if you zone in on specifically, dechurched mainstream evangelicals. 100% are willing to come back and, so, it's not just about butts in seats. So we're not just excited because we can fill our rows and offerings. Like we're talking about a moment to impact the generations because the children, again, of the dechurched will be unchurched. So it is a vital part of our mission to welcome them back into the church. So there's we're seeing with a lot of these people. It's not that hard. They those who are still Christian and have casually dechurched, they feel it. They want to come back. They need somebody to walk with them.

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Of course, even the exvangelicals, you know, we wrote about this and Justin Holcomb was very helpful because of his experience in abuse, there's some thoughts we have on walking someone like that back to church. It's a very different process.

[01:10:31.900]

But there's hope that people aren't leaving catastrophically, largely speaking. It's happening, and I don't want to minimize their pain, but there is a lot of hope here. I think that these types of analyzations have helped us to hone in on what we do, understand what our mission is. I also think, this is going to feel weird, but I think there's hope in realizing that the norm for God's people—and you can go back to Abraham, Israel, Jeremiah, the early church, the reformers, the global East and South today.

[01:11:11.900]

The norm is that we live in Exile. That's the norm. And it's not all bad. It is not all bad. That has been the norm for God's people and he has blessed them and he has been fruitful and he has drawn them close to him and we as Americans fear not sitting at the seat of power. But historically Christians have influenced their societies through the margins, not the seat of power. And we can all agree that Christians and power has not always been a good thing. It's not always going well and so I would say, there's hope in that, you know, of course, I want our culture to be such that faith can flourish, my children and grandchildren can flourish. I'm not wishing to be persecuted tomorrow, but there's hope because this is not abnormal. What's been abnormal is what we've experienced in the past hundred years.

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So we see a lot of hope, there is a purification going on that I think has been good for a lot of churches. Ours included.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Hmm. You know, my heart is for unchurched people. That's sort of what I've spent the last 28 years of my life doing, but you pick up church. People along the way formerly church people, dechurched people, transfer growth, etc, etc. What impact is this having on unchurched people? Like people who would not hold any kind of Christian belief? Or maybe, you know, they were cultural Christians who were just mistaken in their understanding, but if you really want to reach people who haven't heard the good news about Jesus, what do you do with data like this?

[01:12:42.600]

**JIM DAVIS:** So, our hope and what we've been starting to practice here, just beginning to, is first understanding who we're talking to, not just going and sharing a gospel tract or something, and if they don't listen, then that's on them. And I'm not disparaging gospel tracts. I came to faith through a gospel tract. But really listening and understanding who it is that we're talking to, because we're going to engage Christians who don't go to church very different than the non-Christians and very different than people who have pain points and have experienced pain. So really listening, understanding. I also think in the 20th century, we placed a high value on what's true.

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Now, obviously I'm not anti-truth. I believe the gospel is true, the Bible is true, but it came at the expense, you can see this in our apologetics and our sermons and our gospel tracts. It came at the expense sometimes of what is good and beautiful.

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So it shouldn't surprise us that now the truth of Jesus isn't being questioned in the culture, The good, the ethics, the beauty of Jesus is questioned. And so I think we need to think through, not just what we're saying true, but why. This is what Tim Keller did so well. But you know, Jesus is true and he's good and he's beautiful. And so tap into, this is 100% Keller. But you know, let me show you why you might desire it. Now, let me show you why it's good for you. And now let me show you that all of that is actually true. So he worked in the in the opposite direction. So I think listening having empathy growing in our own understanding of the gospel and walk with Jesus. And then of course, I have to have the caveat, the Holy Spirit needs to move, you know, we're not saying that hey read this book and you'll be able to win all these dechurched people. I mean, it's a miracle of the work of the holy spirit in our hearts. So we pray.

[01:14:32.700]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** What do you do with church hurt? Exvangelicals. What is a path back for them?

**JIM DAVIS:** I think it's affirming that you should have left that church. A lot of times. You should. You are right. That was not manifesting the character of God, the way that we are supposed to. Now, all of us fall short, but that was particularly bad. So I want to affirm that. And I would even say you don't have to go to church about right away. I do think church is ultimately good for you, but let's meet. Let's you know, if we already know each other, we already know each other but let me help you find a

space, a type of church where you will feel comfortable, that is very different. And not only let me show you, let me go with you, and you should be able to sit down with the leaders and ask questions about accountability and what they would have done in the experience that you went through. And so just holding people's hands along this whole journey and showing them that what they experience in most cases is not what God wants.

[01:15:49.000]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** You outlined five exhortations for church leaders. I want to drill down on exhortation two, which is extreme responses hurt people. What do you mean by that, Jim?

[01:15:59.400]

**JIM DAVIS:** So after writing the book, we started to use the language of medium walls.

[01:16:05.800]

So and this overlaps with the extreme responses. So in the extreme responses, I was specifically talking about one extreme, just happy to have people in the building, not calling them to anything they believe whatever, they do whatever. Hey, we're just happy they're here. And so that would be no walls, basically. Anybody can come in anyone can go out. There's anonymity, there's no accountability. There's not a lot of discipleship. On the other side are high walls. That's an extreme response too. If we go back to the parables of the weeds and the wheat. We're told, you know, God's got this and we're told not to just look at everyone and, you know, are you a weed or are you a weed? And so the example I use in the book is my two younger kids. They have this feeling that every white van is driven by a criminal.

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You know, kidnapper at best murderer at worst. And we were driving down and there was this van, and it was this great service that offered to carry people with special needs from one point in the city to the other. And my daughter said, see I told you, it literally says on the side of the van, we will take you. And then you're just like there is no convincing them, even if they know they're wrong. And you see this in some of these high wall, cultish kind of churches where we exist to shield our people and our kids, from the sin of the outside world were fundamentally operate on hermeneutic of suspicion and distrust, and that doesn't equip our people to go out in the world. So, these medium walls are what we're wanting to advocate.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So you're learning as you are doing all of this research, what are you changing or what have you changed at your church?

[01:17:52.300]

**JIM DAVIS:** So the way I preach is different. I preach to dechurching more. I preach to the value of corporate worship more, the value of being in the body more. We've started, not just our church, but a number of churches in Orlando, because the number one reason is moving and Orlando is the third fastest-growing city in the United States. We started to engage Christian realtors and school administrators. So like when you see Christians hitting the ground, let's help plug them into a church. So who are the first responders of sorts for those moving into our city? We're increasing our investment of the youth in a variety of ways. We're trying to make the blessing of mental health known, not just from a pop psychology sermon, but trying to affirm that this is a resource here that is a part of the spiritual formation of the whole person.

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We do a few more one-off seminars, we'll bring people in to do a special seminar on a on a certain thing. And I have, thanks to some influence from an organization called Made to Flourish, I have begun to ask people what is the best and hardest part about being a Christian in your workplace? and I began to try to listen more to them and incorporate that into, not only sermons but discipleship structures. And then we are developing a church planting pipeline, we're in the orbit, obviously here at RTS Orlando. And so we have students who are interns, thanks to Made to Flourish we have a residency program that takes that to the next stage. There's three more years after Seminary, kind of like a medical residency and our hope is that potentially every second or third resident, would be a church planter. And so they would get this experience and our hope is that, you know, we do not want to be a megachurch, I'm not against, but our hope is that they would take 100 people at a time every couple of years or whatever. And take elders, deacons, and successfully church plant in the city.

[01:20:02.400]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** So I'm all in favor of dechurched people coming back to church and reconnecting in person with other believers, but is there anything incompatible or do the streams cross if you're trying to reach unchurched people and dechurched people at the same time? Because I feel like I know how to speak to unchurched people and that is my heart. That's my life's work. Is it a is it a big flip or if you reach the unchurched, you'll also reach the dechurched?

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**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, I don't feel like the streams are crossing. I think there is an aspect of knowing your context. So again, this was an Orlando-based project. We are the sixth, according to Barna, the sixth most dechurched city in the world.

[01:20:47.200]

So that's our context. Someone in Seattle, Washington, or New York City.

[01:20:52.500]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** That whole left coast.

[01:20:53.900]

**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah, I mean, they have a different context. But probably many of these unchurched people they're engaging with at some point in their lineage, their people went to church. So, you know, potentially. But I think some of the basic skills, you know, that we're to apply are the same. We want to know who we're looking at. We don't want to make assumptions. We want to hear their stories. We want to hear their hopes in their storyline. And in the words of Tim Keller, we want to show them how that finds its best ending in Jesus. And why that is. So there are different paths but I think we're applying some of the very same skill sets and not assuming someone is something they're not would be at the high at the top of the list.

[01:21:41.100]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** It would seem to me that it would be lower hanging fruit easier to reach dechurched people who are like, hey 100%, I'm willing to come back, like someone invite me or show me a different context or tell me that. And then you could engage them in the mission. You know what I mean? It's like great. Let's go serve, let's get our friends. Who do you know that you could bring with you next Sunday?

[01:22:06.500]

Like I think I think that's got great potential.

**JIM DAVIS:** Well and they already have a lot of the building blocks. In my time in Europe, we were starting at zero. I mean, they had never heard of some of the basic things that we're talking about. A lot of these people. They already have the building blocks. So we as a church, are at a unique era where we can take advantage of that for the sake of the mission, this dechurching has to stop at some point, eventually,

even in the worst case scenario, like people are, there's not gonna be anybody left at church.

[01:22:37.200]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** There's no one left to leave.

**JIM DAVIS:** Yeah. Exactly. There is like, there is a moment of opportunity here that is going to change.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** To re-engage. Actually, and that's going to be my last question. I'm you brought up Europe a couple of times. Do you see fast forward 15 years, because you've read the Pew Research and Gallup studies that are extrapolating how many people are going to be "None," like no religion, by 2040-2050. Do you think America is going to feel like Europe or like Canada, or different?

**JIM DAVIS:** There's one big difference between Europe and America. Their church and state were integrally linked, ours are not. So that has caused sociologists and social scientists to call America stubbornly religious. We defy a lot of the trends in that way. What I do think, I think there's a link in the trust of the institution of the church and the way we trust and engage with all the other institutions. So I think some of the plot lines are very similar in terms of what does a culture look like largely without the institution of the church? My context was Italy, actually, where less than 2% of Italians, Catholic, Protestant, anything, go to any kind of church more than twice per year. And that includes like weddings. So, and you can see how this affects their social fabric, their institution. I don't think they're a perfect window down the tunnel of time, but I think there's some things that we can learn. I would also say if we take the average giving of American Christians at about 2.5 percent and we apply that to the 40 million, the total GDP of the people who have left is about \$1.4 trillion dollars and then they're giving their benevolent giving would be somewhere around \$24 billion dollars and so that's what's, and Christians, you know, we don't collect money to make ourselves rich, maybe some other theologies do. But this is, this is going. I mean, orphanages and hospitals and universities have been created by Christians, largely. And the way that, you know, the fabric that the social net, that churches create when you have \$1.4 trillion dollars, now, that's total GDP, not giving walking out of the church that's going to affect the resources that people in this country are going to have.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** No, and that's a good point, you know, so you said it's \$24 billion of potential giving that has exited the church. And if you look at that, like there are other organizations that are now getting quite nervous about the decline of the church, these are secular organizations, because the amount of charity, the

amount of other focus, the amount of community good that believe it or not actually comes out of the church is declining as church declines. And I think that's a really good point.

**JIM DAVIS:** 100%. And I would be remiss if I didn't also talk about missions and church planting. I mean, so that's \$24 billion dollars of giving there.

[01:25:48.400]

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** Wow. Well, I'll tell you, I'm so grateful you did this work and thank you to your co-author as well, Michael Graham and Ryan Burge and Collin Hansen, who we've had on the show wrote the forward. It's great. It's called The Great Dechurching. Highly recommend this book. And where can people track with you, Jim, online and also find Michael and Ryan?

[01:26:10.100]

**JIM DAVIS:** So we're all on Twitter. That's where we camp out most.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** AKA X. I still call it Twitter, too.

[01:26:19.800]

**JIM DAVIS:** I know. The little thumbnail changed and my wife was like, what's on your phone? What are you doing?

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**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** I'm on X now.

[01:26:28.600]

**JIM DAVIS:** But Twitter is really where we engage the most. You can find it. I'm JimDavis79. Mike is MSGWrites. Ryan Burges, I can't remember what he is, but he's easy to find.

**CAREY NIEUWHOF:** But he's done substack too and a great Substack as well. So listen, thank you so much. I really, really appreciate it. I learned a ton and am really grateful for your contribution.

**JIM DAVIS:** Thanks man. I feel the same way about you.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** Did I mention you may want transcripts on this one, so we've got them for you. Okay, you can go free of charge to [careynieuwhof.com/episode600](https://careynieuwhof.com/episode600) and you can get the show notes, you can get transcripts and a whole lot more really

grateful for this conversation. And next up, we're going to have another great one, Dave Ramsey and I, well we talk about some personal things, the ups and downs that he's faced and leadership, leading a Gen Z and Millennial team, and his strategy for succession and rules for working with your adult kids. Here's an excerpt.

**Dave Ramsey:** Every time I let go of something else, we change the show in 2020 from the Dave Ramsey Show to the Ramsey Show. It was emotional on the air, the day that we changed it. You know. I felt as unimportant as I am. I don't like that feeling. I want to be important. I'm a human being. I don't like that. So, but the noble thing to do was to set the show up that has, you know, about 30 million people tuning in a week through its various mediums for generational success that it doesn't die when I do.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** It's a side of Dave Ramsey you may not always see and man, I loved this conversation. I think Dave did too. That's next time. Hey, remember to check out The Art of Generosity Course today, if you're listening when this is live, because we're going to do a live run-through of that course. So, go to [theartofgenerositycourse.com](http://theartofgenerositycourse.com), where you'll learn my new program, The Art of building a generous Congregation. Of course, if you're listening after this episode is released, hey, you can still check it out.

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And TENX10 is a fantastic initiative, really seeking to re-engage Gen Z in the church. You can go to [1010.org](http://1010.org) to learn more about the mission and how you can be part of the solution.

[01:28:46.100]

Also coming up, we've got Judah and Chelsea Smith, Mike Todd, John Crist, a whole series on AI that I'm very pumped about. Philip Yancey is making a return, Jenni Catron, and a whole lot more. And if you're like me, you're always looking for ways to stay informed and engaged with the world around you. That's why I launched my On The Rise newsletter and over 100,000 leaders get it every single Friday. If you would like to check it out, easy to subscribe. If it's not for you, easy to unsubscribe. Just go to [ontherisnewsletter.com](http://ontherisnewsletter.com) and I will send you the best-curated content I could find every single week.

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Lots of stuff on the church but also some really curious things like fun videos, interesting podcasts I'm listening to, articles that will make you think, and a whole lot more. All you have to do is go to [ontherise newsletter.com](http://ontherise newsletter.com) and you can start



getting better every week when I deliver that to your inbox on Fridays. Thank you so much for listening everybody. I really do hope that this episode helped you identify and break a growth barrier you're facing, and thank you so much for 600 episodes. We've got a lot more to come down the pipe.