

Sunday Bible Study – Skeleton outline of Stephanie Spellers' book:

Church Tomorrow? What the 'nones' and 'dones' teach us about the future of faith.

- Stephanie Spellers, Morehouse Publishing, 2025

Notes for your discussion

Foreward – by Right Rev. Michael B. Curry – former presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal church, June 2025

“There is, in our time, legitimate anxiety about and concern for the future of the Christian church, at least in the Global North and historic West.”

“The result is a vision for the future that is decidedly *not* the way we’ve always done it but instead shaped by the Way of Jesus and his love. Walking into this future will require bravery born of deep faith. If we do it, the church could yet become a twenty-first-century version of the first-century Jesus Movement that is the root of Christianity.” xiv

Introduction

- There is a pattern of declining numbers of Americans (USA) identifying as Christian.
- In surveys starting 2012, the Pew Center for Research tagged religiously unaffiliated as “nonreligious” or “Nones”. The subset of those who were once religious and have abandoned the faith are referred to as “Dones” or “de-churched”.
- The book tries to discover insights from the nones and dones, and asks what shape or form the church will take in the future.

Part I – The Great Disaffiliation

Chapter 1

- Despite ‘catastrophic’ departures from ‘traditional’ religion as reported in the media, the majority of Americans still hold some belief in ‘the divine and spirituality’.
- Since the 1950s generations of Americans have become more willing to question authority, chart their own spiritual paths, and break ties to institutions. Church scandals, 9/11, the rise of White Christo-nationalism have reinforced the idea that religion isn’t especially good for individuals or society.
- With each generation, Americans tend to become less conventionally religious or religiously affiliated.
- Among the ‘Nones’ research indicates that almost half are spiritual or that spirituality is important to them, not all are atheists, most believe in a higher power, and some even believe in the God described in the Bible. 10% attend church a few times in a year, or more, despite choosing not to formally claim to be Christian. 60% question religious teachings, 47% don’t like religious organizations, 41% don’t see a need for religion in their lives, 30% had bad experiences with religious people. [P. 34]

- Even as religious affiliation has diminished significantly, overall belief, prayer and practice have proved quite durable: 70% or more believe in a non-corporeal soul or spirit, God, something spiritual beyond the physical world, an afterlife, and 44% pray at least once a day. [p.34]

Chapter 2 - Why did the pews empty?

- Church going as a habit in families is fading out, and consequently, households are less religious and there is no formal religious education. [p.39]
- After the 1960s new generations have sought 'expressive individualism' (You be you, Be true to yourself, Follow your heart.) to achieve true authentic selfhood. [p.41]
- Organized religion is seen to be at odds in an individualistic, anti-institutional, relativist, and subjectivist world to move towards an anti-authority, fluid, and multi-cultural ideal.
- The trend towards privatization, is reinforced by media, technology, and consumerism, and isolates individuals until the self is the only trustworthy source of truth or authority. [p.45]
- In consequence, high levels of loneliness are a pattern and feature of this non-inter-connected life. [p.47]
- In America, even Christian religion is become more secular and less religious. [p.50]
- Pluralization, as in many ideologies and faith options competing for attention, may seem to guarantee religious freedom, but mean that there is little or no established uniformity. Consequently, there is little respect for the integrity, history of the tradition or the group that birthed it. Following consumerist trends, even Christianity is customizable. [p.51-2]

PART II – The nones and dones speak

- **Methodology:** Spellers formulates her thesis based on 45 Investigative Interviews, the subjects selected from four metro areas and with additional Zoom interviews in three different US states. An extension of the range of subjects would have taken significant resources, but the author feels confident in her findings. [p.55]
- **Format:** one-on-one sessions 45-60 minutes, with four prompts: (1) Tell me about your spiritual journey... , (2) How and where do you experience or connect with the sacred...? , (3) How and where do you experience community and belonging?, and (4) what would you tell the church/organized religion, if it was really listening?

Responses to Question 1 – Share your spiritual journey

- Led to adopt the idea of a spiritual-but-not-religious understanding, because don't believe, churches hurt people, church is not worth the trouble, as a person, I can't be labeled or pinned down, wasn't ever religious anyway.

Responses to Question 2 – Where do you seek the sacred?

- Connecting intimately with family, friends, and lovers; being creative and embodies, especially in music, dance, and art; engaging in the natural world; reflecting in silence, especially through prayer, breathing, medication, and journaling; meaning-making, as in reflection and reading; engaging expansive spiritual traditions; and paying attention in a distracted world.

Responses to Question 3 – How and where do you experience community?

- Belonging, with chosen family; around music and the arts; in fitness and yoga groups, at work, in an alternative worship community;

Responses to Question 4 – What would tell the church?

- Responses to question 4 are framed as prophecies, “The speakers wouldn’t have called their messages a prophecy, but I believe we can receive them as such.” [p.129] “...I remain convinced God continues to walk with them and is speaking to us through them.” [p.130]
- Cultivate: **curiosity** – carve out mental and heart space to truly hear others and be curious about what God will do next; **humility** – admit we don’t have all the answers, and sometimes we’ve gotten it wrong; **mutuality** – ‘Go to accompany and learn from others and welcome them to accompany and learn from us’; **love** – believe you are beloved, and that there is enough love to go around;
- 1st Prophecy: real Christians please stand up to problems in society, political views and actions and follow your principles, rather than remain quiet and condone the status quo. [p.144-5]; and return to the Way of Jesus and be Jesus-shaped people [p.180]
- 2nd Prophecy: stop making idols of the institution, buildings, rules and dogma [p.152];
- 3rd Prophecy: go meet the God who is waiting outside [p.153];
- 4th Prophecy: form loving, embodied communities that welcome our whole, authentic selves [p.157]

Part III – the future of faith

- “If there is any hope for the future...churches will need to walk humbly but boldly..., make room for the insights and leadership of generations for whom this culture is home, and together reimagine how to embody the way of Jesus for our time.” [p.167]