



# Death by Suburb

[How to keep the suburbs from killing your soul]

## Study 6

of an 8 Week Study

### **The Environmental TOXIN:**

*MY CHURCH IS THE PROBLEM*

### **The Spiritual PRACTICE:**

*STAYING PUT IN YOUR CHURCH*

#### **Introduction**

Does church matter?

So many of faith think it doesn't. That church is optional. That it's hopelessly irrelevant. That it, ultimately, gets in the way of true spirituality.

No doubt, church is irrelevant. Some days it drives me nuts. But church—and the relationships that it creates—is one of the unique features of Christianity. A friend who is Hindu marvels at the community that she sees in churches. An immigrant from India, she's now a 'burbanite just like I am. And she attends a local Hindu temple.

"My religion is so individualistic," she says. "I don't find community or relationships at the temple."

I almost fell over when she told me that. I always considered American Christianity to be quite individualistic.

There's no deep spirituality without an attachment to a local church. And if you've switched churches a couple times the past five years, the issue isn't the church.

To go deep means to stay put.

—Dave Goetz

#### **Reading the Chapter**

This study is based on Chapter 7 of *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul*. Chapter 7 explains the toxin as well as the key spiritual practice. Read the chapter before completing the study.

#### **Understanding Your 'Burb**

Church attendance is patchy across North America, and in Europe it's almost nonexistent. Attendance in my Midwestern community, as best as I can tell, hovers close to 40 percent. In some suburbs it drops to 15 percent or less; however, in some places in the South, attendance tops 50 percent.



**1. How would you gauge the value of church attendance in your community? Low? Medium? High?**

What's the biggest competitor to church in your suburb?

**2. List some of the reasons you've heard people put forth for changing churches—or for not attending at all.**

- a. "I had a problem with how the last pastor left the church ..."
- b. No decent programs for the kids ...
- c. No young couples in the church like us ...
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.

**3. What makes the topic of church so emotional? What drives you nuts about the church?**

- a. It's filled with hypocrites ...
- b. It's racist—the most racially segregated institution in the country ...
- c. Its leaders are so disconnected from real life ...
- d.
- e.



- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.

**4. What are some of your assumptions about the role of church in knowing God?**

- a. That church is primarily about corporate worship, what happens in the weekend service;
- b. That church is largely a social obligation.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.
- i.

**Discovering Biblical Spirituality**

Theologically, there's the global, spiritual body of Christ, which links all believers together in a mystical union. And then there's the physical expression of the church: First Presbyterian Church or Second Baptist Church or Something Creek Community Church. The physical expression of the church takes on so many different forms around the globe. Those who attend house or cell churches often pan those who attend more traditional churches, and those who attend more traditional churches often discount those in house or cell churches.

The subject of church evokes so much passion and, often, anger. Perhaps that's why many simply chuck church entirely.



Yet much of the New Testament was written to local churches with problems. So our overblown expectations of church are founded not on Scripture. There appears to be no one best way to do church. The apostle Paul spent the second half of his life working with and writing to local churches.

**1. Read Ephesians 4: 1-16. What are some of the key functions of the church in the world?**

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.

**2. Read 1 Corinthians 12: 12-21 and 13: 4-10. Why do you think the apostle juxtaposed a passage on the body of Christ (the church) with one on love? Why do we tend to focus on the gifts and lose the main message of love?**

## Spiritual Exercises

Expect to get your feelings hurt at church. Expect to be disappointed in leaders. Expect to have your kids hate the youth group.

That's the stuff of church, and it's the stuff of a deeper spirituality ... if you stay to figure it out.

**Group Activity:** In sales, there is the saying "people buy emotionally and justify logically." That also may be true when people leave a church: it's an emotional choice that is justified with reasons like "we just need to find a better youth group for the kids."

Have your leader guide a discussion with the following:

1. What are good reasons to leave a church? What are petty? How do you determine the difference between the two?



2. How does one properly process the hurt that inevitably results as being part of the body of Christ?

3. When have you experienced the church at its best?

### **Quote to Live by**

*"Your Lord desires to purify your life, and he can use a very rough file."*

—MICHAEL MOLINOS, *THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE*

### **A Final Word from Paul**

*"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged."*

—1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-5 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)