

Thriving as a Church Refugee

By Michael Richter

Escaping Church: A Guide for Life Outside the Institution

By Tim Mather, Th. D.

Empowerment Press, 156 pp., \$12.99

It's no secret that the Church in the West is declining in membership. I'm impressed with the losses on visits to many "legacy" churches in Chicago. The edifices remain, mute testaments to past strength, but only handfuls of elderly worshipers remain of the congregations that built them. Similarly, some Chicago denominational associations can boast only one or two struggling church plants within the city limits themselves.

It's customary to blame those who, no longer being present, cannot defend themselves or to suspect an invasive secular culture, but increasingly some are examining the institution itself. Beyond relevance, the question is whether the very structure of the church is God-ordained.

Tim Mather, in his book "Escaping Church," would answer a resounding "No!" Starting from personal recollections of his own exodus (as a pastor!) from the church system, Tim quickly moves to the challenges of the "escape" itself and the difficulties of adjusting to life on the "outside." He then sketches out a plan for growth, fellowship, worship, and mission, starting at the fundamental scope of the nuclear family and extending even to national scope. Along the way, he deals with traditional objections to "the Called Out Ones" in areas of training, leadership, and giving. He emphasizes the freedom of the "adventure;" if one could pick out a recommended structure for fellowship from his writing, it might be a fully participatory and relational house church.

Some of his critique may be familiar: the emasculating imposition of passivity on the laity, the importation of pagan structures/ideals from the time of Constantine. Others are less so, such as the stifling of spiritual responsibility when learning is restricted to a single teacher (he contrasts learning in church service to graduate education) and the abuse of the doctrine of "covering." His application of the Kubler-Ross stages of grieving to the process of leaving church I thought was brilliant. Unfortunately, he treats some aspects that he presents somewhat cursorily, such as how to include the children in house church worship and the issue of women teaching. I understand that each of these topics require (and have) entire books dedicated to their exploration, but still wish that he had gone a bit deeper than his motivational coach encouragements.

The potential purchaser should be aware that, though Mather shows no rancor toward the institution, some readers may find some of his statements about it offensive. But to the increasing numbers of believers that have already become disgruntled or disassociated, I believe this guide will be inspirational.

Representative quotes:

“...with the development of crusade evangelism, preaching to the lost with emotional manipulation forces them to make an immediate decision. The pressure of ‘the decision’ to convert to Christianity is given no incubation period, resulting in thousands, if not millions of premature spiritual babies.”

“The joyful part of parenting is the fleeting nature of that authority...

”No one wants his/her thirty-year-old kid to be still living at home... Yet, the institution functions in exactly this way. Thirty years after being born again, church members are expected to eat only the spiritual food served by their spiritual pastor-daddy. They are not allowed to make any decisions on their own. They are told what to think, how to dress, how to worship, and how to raise their earthly children. They are taught to submit to the pastor-daddy because they must always be fed like newborns.

”This is the core of the dysfunction among the Saints.”

“Instead of doing church, *be* Called Out Ones.”

“Basic spiritual warfare is against our own hatefulness.”