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*Dear Church*

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Letter 1

## Not Fine

Dear Church,

I have wanted to write you for years, but I was never exactly sure what to say. Writing letters used to be so simple. My early attempts all started the same way: *Dear So and So, How are you?*

The second sentence was equally gripping: *I am fine*. Even at five years old, I knew that people are supposed to say they are fine. Not to mention that printing “I am spectacular” or “I am distressed” would have taken forever on that red-and-black-lined kindergarten paper.

If only correspondence were still five-year-old simple.

Well, when in doubt, go with what you know, right?

Dear Church, how the heck are you?

Learned anything lately? Surviving all your international projects? On the brink of any crazy ideas?

I hope, of course, that you and yours are well.

Me? Well, I'm not exactly basking in the spiritual high life. Unlike my kindergarten self, I am not always fine these days. And unfortunately, it's not just me, Church. Many of my peers seem to be calling in sick as well.

You may have read, or at least heard, the statistics on my generation's church attendance. If not, let's just say that you might want to think about adding truancy officers to your local church staffs.

George Barna, president of the Barna Group, compiled research from surveys of 2,660 twentysomethings and found that “Americans in their twenties are significantly less likely than any other age group to attend church services, to donate to churches,

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to be absolutely committed to Christianity, to read the Bible, or to serve as a volunteer or lay leader in churches.”<sup>1</sup>

Barna, of course, is not the only one noticing my generation’s shift away from the institutional church. We haven’t been nominated for the perfect attendance trophy in *anyone’s* award ceremony. Well-known church consultant Bill Easum warns of even wider attendance losses. He points out that “the vast majority of the population under 40 years of age is unchurched.”<sup>2</sup>

Not only are the twentysomethings’ pews getting cold, so is our commitment to religion in general. As a 2004 Gallup poll reports, “Younger Americans are more likely than those who are older to claim no religion.”<sup>3</sup>

My generation’s dwindling relationship with the church and its faith systems also have captured the attention of Christian authors. In 2002, Robert Webber’s *Younger Evangelicals* put the spotlight on twentysomething or young-in-spirit adults who “freely acknowledge that they differ with the pragmatist’s approach to ministry.”<sup>4</sup>

Dave Tomlinson, author of *The Post-Evangelical*, also underlined changing faith trends among younger-variety Christians. According to him, this group has “difficulty reconciling what they see and experience in evangelicalism with their own values, theological reflection and intuition.”<sup>5</sup>

To tactfully state the obvious, many twentysomethings are disillusioned with you, Church.

I am no exception.

Born a PK (read: Pastor’s Kid, not Promise Keeper), I logged hundreds of hours in the pews before I ever learned to pronounce the word *church*.

While some parents struggled to get their kids to take ownership in the local church, I presented a different challenge. Not only did I take ownership in our local church’s mission, I *literally* seemed to think I *owned* the building. I would have bet my offering that my signature was on the church deed, scribbled

with the same visitor pen I used to play tic-tac-toe on the back of bulletins.

In fact, I probably still owe a few apologies to the many well-meaning adults who occasionally reminded me not to run in the church hallways. As I sped by, unaffected by their warnings, I would flash them the obviously-you-don't-realize-who-you're-talking-to look. *These are MY hallways.*

As a pastor's kid, I took my role in the local church very seriously. Among a long list of other self-appointed responsibilities, I was in charge of flashing my dad a handwritten "It's 12:05!" sign when a particularly long sermon didn't seem to be coming in for a landing.

In short, my childhood was an eighteen-year course on Christian leadership. And while I like to joke about having front-row seats to seven days of sermons a week, I would not trade my initiation to the church for anything.

By the time I graduated from high school, I was on track to carry out Christ's mission with atypical intensity. I immediately gravitated toward Spring Arbor University, a Christian college in south-central Michigan that provided the perfect context for experimenting with my evolving ministry ideas. I doubt anyone was surprised four years later when, before I even received my degree, I launched my adult career as a full-time staffer at a local church.

And not just any local church. Westwinds, my first place of employment, was hands-down the most compelling context I'd ever seen the word *church* attached to. The attenders were passionate, the services were creative, the staff was driven. As a result of being teamed with this congregation, my adult years seemed to pick up right where my childhood left off: I was living, breathing, and bleeding church and having the time of my life doing it.

The more time I invested in local church, the more I believed—I mean *really seriously believed*—the premise that “the church is the hope of the world.”