

Jim's Tool Box

Spiritual, But Not Religious – A Challenge for the Church

Recently while meeting with the pastor and a team of lay persons of a local congregation in the district, we were reviewing some demographic information from [MissionInsite](#) about the folks in the neighborhood around their church. On the ExecutiveInsite report one of the topics is “Religious Practices.” As we reviewed this report for the study area around this church, someone noticed that **42.8%** of the folks in the survey area responded favorably that they “consider myself a spiritual person.” Yet in this same area, only **17.7%** of the population of the area agreed with the statement, “Important to attend religious services.” For those of us in the church, it’s easy to see that as a disconnect, isn’t it? However, the results shown on this MissionInsite survey, is only a “sign of the times” that congregations face in attempting to connect with folks who live in neighborhoods and communities around their churches.

“Spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) has become the description for many persons in our society today who are seeking spiritual meaning in their lives, but they are not turning to the church or other traditional religious institutions to find that meaning. In an article on [Beliefnet.com](#) about this topic by Robert Fuller (from his book *Spiritual, but Not Religious*), It is estimated that as many as one in every five persons (roughly half of those who are unchurched) could describe themselves that way.

Fuller points out that before the twentieth century the terms “religious” and “spiritual” were used interchangeably. “Spiritual” has come to be associated with a private realm of thought and experience while “religious” is connected more with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines.

I have been thinking about this group recently since I read an article by Larry Peers in the Alban Weekly email that is available through the Alban Institute (you can subscribe to the email by clicking [HERE](#)). In his article, Peers discusses how loyalty to religious congregations has waned among many people in the culture today. Many folks seem suspicious of the “organizational” aspects of religious communities and their leaders. He notes that this outlook gets expressed in a variety of ways, including the statement “I am spiritual, but not religious” or checking “none” on a religious affiliation survey.

The fact is that many people in the communities and neighborhoods around our churches are on a spiritual search. However, the challenge is that many of these people are looking anywhere but the church for answers to their spiritual needs. Many of these folks have been turned off by experiences they have had with the church or “organized religion” at some point in their lives. Other folks may not have ever had any contact with the church or faith as those within our congregations have experienced it.

Larry Peers challenges the church at this point when he says, “So, rather than throw up our hands in despair or give in to resignation, I believe that there is an enduring task for religious congregations – a task of connecting to those outside and inside our walls who seek spiritual nurturance.”

So what can you and your congregation do to offer “radical hospitality” to these seekers (some of whom may already be in your congregation)? Here are some possibilities that Peers offers in this article:

1. Examine the offerings of your congregation. What are you offering that explicitly responds to the spiritual needs of those who are searching, questioning and/or want to have meaningful experiences of encounter with God, with others in an atmosphere of dialogue and discovery?
2. Do an audit of your programs and the times that you offer them. Does your schedule make it difficult for different ages and lifestyles to participate? ... A parents’ group can be held during a children’s choir rehearsal, adult programs during religious school. Programs like “Messy Church” ... allow(s) parents and young children to experience liturgy together.
3. Are you an intentionally “practicing congregation”? Have you found ways for those who attend to enter into and cultivate practices that can nurture their spirit and that can deepen over time? Many who seek meditation, yoga or other experiences are seeking to develop a practice that speaks to their whole person. Some of our congregations are reviving centering prayer, ... or including service projects as reflective religious practice.
4. Ask the question, “Who owns our congregation?” Is one generation in charge or do you have a cross-section of generations and perspectives that are allowing you to look at your congregation through multiple lenses?
5. Can you enrich your own offerings by joining with other congregations for some joint programming that you collectively sponsor? When appropriate, can you sponsor interfaith programs that allow the seeker to learn various perspectives on some common human dilemmas and issues (ethics, parenting, dealing with transitions, etc.)?

These ideas are good suggestions for any congregation that want to give spiritual seekers “room” to check out what the congregation has to offer. “Spiritual, but Not Religious” is a growing segment of the population in our culture. How can your congregation make room for these seekers in the life of your church?