What makes people stop attending church and what happens to their faith after they have left?

As I approached the front door of the first of over a hundred church leavers I would interview, I thought I knew what happened to the Christian faith of those who no longer went to church.

I could easily understand why people choose to leave the church, I’d watched others leaving; and had contemplated shifting out myself on more than one occasion. Part of what held me in was the belief that leaving the church was inevitably the first step to a dwindling faith - the ultimate Christian disgrace - ‘backsliding’.

Two and a half hours later I left by the same front door somewhat bewildered. The couple I had just met didn’t fit my expectations. They had left their eldership role in a growing Pentecostal church nearly five years previously, yet their faith had undoubtedly continued to develop, their understanding of God at work in their lives was undoubtedly continuing, and they were involved in their community as an outworking of their faith.

I was intrigued and somewhat mystified. My plans to conduct a quick study of half a dozen or so church leavers, which would confirm my prejudices, were in disarray. In fact the study grew into a four year project involving 162 interviews with both church leavers and leaders in Evangelical Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (a group which I refer to as EPC churches).

The people I tracked were predominately in their 30s and 40s. They had made Christian commitments (as well as commitments to their respective churches) as adults (over the age of 18 years) and had been actively involved in their churches for an average of 15.8 years.

To try and sum up the faith journeys of 108 people spread from Dunedin to Auckland (with a few Australians thrown in) isn't easy. Each person's journey was in fact quite
distinctive with its own twists and turns, but what I did find was that those church leavers I interviewed fell into five clear groups.

**Displaced Followers**

The first category of leavers are those I titled the "Displaced Followers". I refer to them as followers because the faith they continue in has not substantially changed from the faith package they followed within the EPC church. They are called displaced because events and circumstances have encouraged them to leave the EPC church with which they continue to hold great affinity.

This group of leavers made up 17.5% (n=19) of those I interviewed. They left in two major categories either as the 'Hurt' - those who had expectations of particular care or support from the church body in times of need which they found were not met when they needed it; or as the 'Angry' - those who left the church in disagreement with the leadership of their church because of the direction, vision or leadership structure of either their church or EPC churches in general.

Both the Hurt and the Angry can be said to have left because of specific grumbles with the church. These specific grumbles centre around the leadership, direction and operating nature of the church.

The level of critique of the Angry and the Hurt does not extend to questioning the whole basis of evangelical/pentecostal/charismatic faith itself. On the contrary, it is these understandings of what the church should be that such leavers use as the foundation for their claim that their church has failed.

The Displaced Followers' post-church faith can be characterised under four headings.

The Displaced Followers continue in a received faith. They have not disengaged from the faith they received when they entered the church. The faith they received when they made their decision to follow Christ and join the church is the same faith package they follow today as EPC church leavers. Typically such a faith is based on an external authority beyond themselves.

Their faith is dependent - that is, although they no longer attend an EPC church each Sunday they remain dependent on the wider EPC community. A whole variety of such sources of dependency are available to these leavers including major seminars, trans-church based groups (for example Promise Keepers), Christian workshops, books, magazines, television and radio programmes and preachers.

While the Displaced Followers remain dependent on this wider EPC community they also remain dependent on the personal disciplines of the EPC church. These include either continued practice of, or the sense of obligation to quiet times, financial giving (beyond friends and family), service etc.

The post-church faith of the Displaced Followers is an unexamined faith. Their grumbles centre on the church rather than the underlying taken-for-granteds of the EPC faith.
Finally, they exhibit a bold faith. By this I mean they are very clear and definite about their Christian faith and the correctness of their decision to leave the church from a Christian perspective. Of all the groups of leavers it is this group who typically quoted a number of passages from scripture to reinforce their present faith position and the rightness of their decision to leave the church.

**Reflective Exiles**

The second category of leavers - those I call the "Reflective Exiles" (n=32)- leave their church from a quite different position. Although they too may have problems with the leadership, direction and practice of their church (or EPC churches in general) these issues are not the fundamental reasons for their decision to leave.

For this group of leavers, and those we will consider next, leaving is typically a process which occurs over a long period of time, perhaps 18 months or more. This process of moving away from the church begins gradually with feelings of unease, a sense of irrelevancy between church and what happens in other important areas of their lives, and a reducing sense of fit and belonging to the church community and its 'faith package'.

The gateway through which this group leave the church I have called Meta-grumbles. These are not grumbles about specifics within the church. They are not questioning peripheral aspects of EPC faith, but the deep rooted foundations of the faith itself.

The title 'reflective' is given to this group because of the reflecting and questioning stance towards their faith which now characterises them. I call them exiles because they are, albeit by personal choice, exiled from a community and a way of understanding themselves, life and God which has been very important, even foundational, to them in the past.

The faith of the Reflective Exiles can be characterised as counter-dependent. Where the Displaced Followers remained dependent on the wider EPC community the Reflective Exiles are pushing against anything EPC. When I asked this group of leavers what nurtures their faith now the most common response was "It certainly isn't . . . " followed by some description of aspects of the wider EPC community and the personal faith disciplines of the previous grouping.

Secondly, the Reflective Exiles are engaged in a deconstruction of their previous faith. That is, they are engaged in a process of taking to pieces the faith they had received, accepted and acted within for so many years. To do so is personally a very destabilising process for them, as their faith has been an important part of their world view, the foundation of important life decisions and an integral part of their sense of selfhood. They are involved in an ongoing reflective process which involves a reevaluation of each component of their faith.

Finally, and not surprisingly, their faith is very hesitant. Many spoke of having "put it [their faith] all down for a while and leaving it", because it got too confusing and disillusioning. Because of feelings like this their ownership of their faith is somewhat tentative.
Transitional Explorers

The third group of leavers are those I called "Transitional Explorers". The transitional faith interviewees displayed an emerging sense of ownership of their faith. This is shown in a confidence of faith, a clear decision to move from a deconstruction of the received faith to an appropriation of some elements of the old faith whilst giving energy to building a new self-owned faith.

To varying degrees this faith incorporates elements of the previous church-based faith. However these elements of faith have now been tested and found to be valid and worthy of being retained to the level of satisfaction necessary for the individual involved.

To use an analogy from the courtroom, the internal jury has reached a verdict on these faith elements and now sees them as being plausible, 'beyond reasonable doubt'. What constitutes reasonable doubt varies from person to person.

As mentioned earlier, for some the examination process involves rigorous theological and philosophical debate through reading and/or interaction with others. For others, reasonable doubt is based more on personal experience and what is plausible to them at an intuitive gut-level or through a deeper trust of their own feelings.

The transitional faith stance indicates that the internal jury has begun to read its verdict on at least some of the elements of faith and is reporting a verdict of positive personal appropriation ("this is something I can hold to"). The Transitional Explorers represented 18% of those interviewed (n=19).

Alongside these Transitional Explorers were a small group of those who were transitioning to alternative faith stances. This grouping was made up of two people who had moved to a more new age based faith and five who had so many questions, doubts and issues with the Christian faith that they were best characterised as agnostic in their belief system.

Integrated Way-finders

The final category of leavers were called the "Integrated Way-finders". Where the Transitional Explorers are in the process of reconstructing their faith and developing an emerging self-ownership, the integrated faith people have to all intents and purposes completed this faith reconstruction work. While there is a sense in which the 'integrated faith' is also still open and being constantly redefined and adapted, the major faith examination is now complete.

The process could be likened to the building of a house out of timber from a previous home. The first part of the process involves moving out of the old home and carefully tearing it down. In the demolition phase the timber, window and door frames, roofing materials and fittings are assessed as to their usefulness as materials for the new house. This process is what I have called the "reflective phase".
The next part of the process involves building the new house out of the materials retrieved from the old one and the incorporation of a number of new materials. This is the "transitional phase", where much of the structural faith building is done.

Finally the house is complete and livable and the person is able to move in. This final phase may include minor ongoing work to the house, rooms may still need to be painted, repairs made and at times modifications of various degrees undertaken. Although this work is ongoing, the basic structure of the home is complete and it now affords a safe place for the individual to live in.

This final phase in the faith journey is what I have called the "integrated faith" phase, because here the structure of the faith is to all intents and purposes complete and the person is able to appropriate it as their own faith system. People at this final phase, like the builder of the home, may well be involved in ongoing questioning and occasional periods of faith reevaluation (on some occasions involving quite substantial reevaluations), but the major structural work is now done.

The term 'integrated' is also descriptive of a second aspect of these people's faith, in that they are seeking to integrate their faith into all aspects of their lives. Of these people, like no other grouping previously discussed, it can be said that there is a more fully rounded faith that seeks to integrate the physical, mental, emotional, sexual, relational and spiritual aspects of their selfhood in a way deeply connected with their faith. Hence people at this faith phase are very aware of the deeper personal issues that lurk within themselves.

The term 'way-finder' may seem at first somewhat curious. Its use is intended to signal that the people in this faith position have found something of a way forward in their faith. In this sense they are way-finders. There were 30 interviewees in this category.

The reasons why these people left the church and the post-church faith they established need to be understood not only as the personal journeys of the individuals but also as the story of groups of leavers in a rapidly changing society.

One of the surprising results of the research for me was coming to see that for the majority of leavers (65% of those interviewed) this was not a solo journey but one which involved them in groups of people in similar faith transitions. I found that there are a considerable and growing number of such post-church groups which meet to discuss, question and reformulate and understand their faith.

Some of these groups also meet to pray and worship together in ways that appear to have more immediacy and relevance to their whole lives than what they experienced in their respective EPC churches. Many of the leavers I interviewed and others I met, especially those I categorised as Transitional Explorers and Integrated Way-finders, are part of these new groups which are experimenting with ways of being church - ways that may prove to be more appropriate in our rapidly changing society.

It is to these emerging post-church groups that we will return in the next article in this series.
NOTES

1 The number of interviewees (n) = 19.

Alan is part of a Wellington-based group called 'Spirited Exchanges', which provides a forum for those who have left church or are finding it unhelpful in their continued journey of faith. The group is an endeavour of Wellington Central Baptist Church, where Alan is co-senior pastor. He has completed a PhD (in sociology) on the topic "Churchless Faith", which analysed why people leave churches and their journeys of faith outside the church.