

When Someone Wants to Leave

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It's no secret that Christadelphian numbers have been rapidly declining for years. An aging population and a lack of uptake from younger members is partially responsible, but there is a feeling in the air that people are leaving far more frequently than they ever have before.

As research goes, there isn't much out there. Christadelphian membership has always been very hard to monitor and whilst the 2009 religious archive on the BBC website estimates there to be about 50,000 Christadelphians worldwide,¹ there is very little data available to determine how much that has changed in recent years. This phenomenon is not unique to the Christadelphian community. In his book *Faith After Doubt*, Brian McLaren states that "sixty five million adults alive in the US today have already dropped out of active religious attendance, and that number grows by about 21.7 million more every year."²

Over the last few years, I have witnessed many people making the bold decision to leave, and their reasons are incredibly diverse. Some simply lose their faith; others struggle to conform to traditional styles of worship or can't reconcile themselves with the perspectives about the role of women that are still widely held. Some seek other churches; others leave religion altogether.

We also cannot ignore the impact that Covid has had. When given space away from an in-person church, many have found time to reflect on what really matters to them. Countless people I spoke to felt that they could no longer relate to their church in the same way.

Whilst analysing these reasons is a topic more than worthy of its own article, I would like instead to focus on a different issue, to shed light on a situation that, while it won't be the experience of everyone in the community, is still very common. *I want to talk about what happens*

¹ www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/christadelphians_1.shtml

² *Faith After Doubt*, McLaren, B., Hodder & Stoughton, 2022

when someone chooses to leave. I would like to share my experiences and the experiences of those close to me and highlight some things that have both helped and hindered this transition.

For me this topic has real significance. It's not only being widely experienced by my peers but is something I have seen start to take shape in my own life as well. I do not believe that a shift in belief systems should equate to the breakdown of social connections, but all too often in our community, this has been the case. After watching countless families suffer, and struggle to communicate with each other, I hope these experiences will help us all to bridge the gap.

I'm not ready to leave. I know that I would struggle with the finality of burning those bridges and whilst I'm no longer an active member or even a regular attender of any particular church, I am still finding it hard to let it go. Maybe it's because of the social structures of having been raised within this community and owing almost everyone I have in my life to it. I know that even by writing this article I am opening myself up to criticism and questions, and I'm sure I'll be held accountable. But I hope that it will help others to navigate the pain and sadness of leaving a community that they no longer connect with. I hope it will serve those left behind in helping them to understand how to maintain those relationships.

Leaving

There is no *one way* that people leave. Maybe you haven't seen someone at church for a while, maybe their attendance has gradually and subtly got lower and lower until you realise at a business meeting that you haven't checked in recently. For others, officially leaving feels important and they want to express the reasons that have led them to this point, but I think that is rare. I think that most often, people drift away quietly, subtly, with very little fuss – and what this means is that as a community, we don't really understand their reasons or learn how to help them.

I recognise that for a lot of people their relationship with God burns bright long after they choose to leave the community, and that the ideas I highlight in this article won't work for everyone. All I can talk about is my own experience and the experiences of those close to me. It's for this reason that my focus is on supporting those who have lost their faith altogether.

For most, leaving their church isn't a decision that has been taken lightly. The very nature of our community is that our lives are so integrated that the decision to leave will have a far larger impact than simply where we go to church. Our church members are often our friends, our families, and sometimes even our co-workers. And as someone who has been raised inside

this bubble, the idea of separation isn't only daunting, but sometimes feels impossible. Deciding not to be a Christadelphian anymore has more impact than the loss of a belief system. It affects the events we can go to, the people who might turn away from us, the loss of a sense of community, and the loss of a sense of belonging to something.

When members make the emotionally challenging decision to leave, this separation is a grief that can be felt as acutely as the loss of a loved one, mourned as strongly as an illness, and felt as keenly as the breakdown of a relationship. What happens, then, when the griever is met not with kindness, compassion, or understanding, but with confusion, disappointment, and even contempt?

Most people who come from a religious community can probably sympathise with feeling doubt which, in itself, can be a healthy part of faith. The ability to reason, to question, to discern, is incredibly valuable and not something we should shrink away from. So why is it that so often we find ourselves in an environment where to be open and honest has become attached to fear and shame? Why do we hide our doubts, pushing them down like trying to keep a ball underwater, until, eventually, powerless to stop it, it bubbles up and breaks the surface. Repressing our doubts can't last. We need to create an environment where these things can be freely discussed, without fear or reproach and without the threat of the loss of relationships.

Being Left

So, what happens when, like the ball breaking the surface of the water, someone who has felt compelled to stay quiet on this subject finally breaks their silence? How do we treat this person? In this article, I lay out 10 points to consider in our interactions with those who are thinking of leaving. I hope to share a perspective that is less frequently heard – to voice the experiences of those who, whilst they feel they can no longer identify with the community, are struggling with the impact this is having on their social connections.

1. Don't suddenly invite them to dinner if you've never had them over before

Whilst these dinner invitations are well-meaning, if this request feels out of the blue it can be overwhelming. For someone who is beginning to distance themselves from the church, this could seem like an opportunity for confrontation, especially if you weren't that close before.

In all honesty, no two people are the same and I have heard mixed reviews about what people found helpful. For some, having an opportunity to talk was a great outlet whereas others

just wanted space. I know that this can make it hard to know how to help, and it's for this reason that I think having an *extremely* close prior relationship with that person is imperative if you did want to take this angle.

A good rule of thumb is *if you weren't doing it before, don't start now*. Don't change your behaviour towards someone simply because they have had a shift in their belief system. Any changes may come across as an effort from you to persuade them to come back, even if that's not your intention. For someone who is questioning their faith, losing their social relationships with people is the last thing they need, so I don't want to discourage you from this entirely. But, if you aren't that close, have the self-awareness to know how that invitation could be received. And if you do invite them round, make sure there is no feeling of judgement or pressure to talk if they don't want to.

2. Do give them confidence that this won't affect your relationship

The most common fear I have heard, when discussing this issue with those who are thinking of leaving, is how it will affect their relationships, particularly with family.

When your faith is your whole world, I suppose it's only natural that you would feel some disappointment if your family members don't choose to follow it. But the impact of your disappointment on the person who is thinking of leaving is both real and long-lasting. Nobody wants to feel as though they are letting their loved ones down and this, over a prolonged period of time, could damage your relationship with them beyond repair.

The bitterness and heartbreak so prevalent from those who have chosen to leave the community mainly stems from feeling mistreated by other people. Remember kindness, openness, and compassion in your conversations with them. Regardless of your convictions, or how firm you are in your own faith, remaining *open-minded* and *approachable* is the only way to maintain a relationship through this rupture. If you both choose to respect each other's beliefs, even when you don't agree, you will notice the conversation play out in a far more positive light.

3. Don't assume you understand their reasons

As previously discussed, people's reasons for leaving the church are incredibly diverse. They range from discrepancies over style of worship, to losing their faith in God, to issues over the role of women, homophobia, or systemic racism. Don't assume that you've heard their doubts, issues, and questions all before. *Really listen* to their point of view, if they are willing to talk about it, before you make suggestions or give them advice.

4. Do be mindful of the language you use

For someone experiencing a change in their faith, certain terminology can feel isolating and divisive. Phrases like ‘the truth’ always tend to put me on edge. When someone is questioning real fundamentals of their faith, referring to a set of doctrines as ‘the truth’ begins to feel as though this is some sort of exclusive club that they are no longer a part of.

I’ve also found that often when referring to someone’s lack of faith, the language people use can be overwhelmingly negative. Terms like ‘struggling’ or ‘going through a difficult time’ spring to mind, often accompanied by a solemn expression. But someone who is losing their faith may feel quite differently about this. They may not see this as a tragic loss but rather a simple change in their belief system.

Instead, just speak to them about what they are learning. Ask them about the things they have read or seen that have impacted their viewpoint. Choose to focus on the positives and the things that you do have in common. Regardless of the outcome, the journey of how we come to these answers is largely the same.

5. Don’t simply fall back on faith as the answer

We hear in Hebrews 11 that *faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. By that standard, faith is looking at the evidence, making a judgement call, and choosing a side. Some things may grow your conviction, others will cause it to waiver.

But when two people look at the same evidence and one person believes and the other doesn’t, is either one to blame? If I told you that the sky was red but you believe that it’s blue, telling you to have more faith wouldn’t achieve anything. You can’t choose to believe it’s red if you think it’s blue.

Even assuming that you could do this – click your fingers and instantly gain more faith – a person without conviction in that belief wouldn’t choose to have more faith in it. The value in our convictions is that we *believe* them. As soon as we are no longer sure, why would we keep piling on faith?

If we all come to the question of God from a neutral place, the burden of proof surely rests with the person who has a belief to demonstrate or prove the existence of God with evidence. To imply that the reason for someone’s lack of belief is that they need *more* faith actually turns that on its head. It puts the problem on the person rather than placing it on a lack of sufficient evidence or any of the other reasons that they may not believe. They can’t be blamed for *not*

being convinced by the evidence you've shown them, just as someone who *does* believe can't be blamed for forming their opinion that it's *true*.

6. Do your best to accept that you might not be able to change their mind.

I know it can be hard watching your loved ones drift away. Fear can drive us to do crazy things – to bargain, to threaten, to beg. All too often I have seen people resort to desperate measures to get their loved ones to return to the church. But this approach, short of serving any actual solution to the problem, seems to cause *additional* pain on both sides. One feels the immense responsibility of bringing that person back, and the other suspects that, rather than receiving the emotional support they need, they are being 'worked on' and aren't accepted as they are.

7. Don't assume you have all the answers

The birth of the internet in the 80's kick-started the information revolution in a way that no one saw coming. The internet has drastically changed the availability of information. With billions of resources literally at the tips of our fingers, the way we learn, research, and validate information has changed with it. Is it any wonder, then, that the answers to those hard questions, that once satisfied our parents, are no longer working?

Ill-informed facts, guesswork, or religious jargon might not cut it for a group of people who have grown up with this wealth of information on a device small enough to fit into their pocket. Where baby boomers would turn to other people or to their local librarian for information and to tradesmen for valuable skills, kids these days are far more likely to look for these answers themselves in a world where Google is their library and a YouTube tutorial is their tradesman.

In a study using data from the Baylor Religion Survey,³ assistant professor Paul McClure⁴ tried to determine if there could be a link between time spent online and time spent practicing religion.⁵ He found a correlation between high internet use and a more 'pluralistic' view of religion. In other words, those with higher levels of internet exposure were less likely to subscribe to one particular religion, to affiliate with religious tradition, or to believe that a single religion was more true than the others.

³ www.baylor.edu/baylorreligionsurvey/ (2017 data)

⁴ Department of Sociology and Human Services at the University of Lynchburg in Virginia, USA.

⁵ *The Buffered, Technological Self: Finding Associations between Religiosity and Internet Use*, McClure, P., 67(3):461-478, 2020

The *LiveScience* journal puts it like this:

Part of the reason for this may be that the internet exposes users to a huge variety of worldviews, beliefs, and ideas, which may lead individuals to challenge preconceived notions about what is important in their lives, McClure said. ‘The internet is the perfect breeding ground for new [ideas] that chip away at one’s certainty.’⁶

I share this not to demonise the internet, but to suggest why traditional methods are no longer working and to explain why trying to shelter members cannot prevent them from exploring other viewpoints. Hopefully this demonstrates how *important* an open mind – and the freedom to discuss other ideas – *really is*.

8. Do believe them if they say they are ok

Sometimes when a person loses their faith, an assumption is made that this has some connection to poor mental health. Maybe it’s the terminology we talked about earlier, but the feeling that they are causing others concern or worry is quite common for people who are thinking of leaving their church. It is natural, I suppose, that when someone expresses their doubts or tells you that they have lost their faith, this can lead to concern from those around them. And whilst this comes from a good place, it may be viewed very differently by both parties.

Bear in mind that they may not see this in the same way as you, that for them losing their faith may not be a tragic loss spiralling them into a state of mental unrest, but simply a change in their belief system. It’s worth remembering that correlation doesn’t imply causation. Just because someone’s loss of faith is correlated with a decline in mental health doesn’t mean that one *caused* the other. More likely, the loneliness, isolation, or anxiety has come about as a result of the *reactions* of the wider community, rather than the loss of faith itself.

9. Don’t compromise your own beliefs

It can be tempting, when you feel your church membership slipping away, to alter the way you do things, hoping to keep them happy. This demonstrates a sensitivity and care for your members that is to be valued as long as you aren’t compromising your own beliefs in the process. Often the changes you can make are *too small* and *too slow* to meet their needs anyway, and if you end up fracturing your church in the process, it might not be a price worth paying. Be open to

⁶ *Is the Internet Changing the Way People Feel About Religion?* Specktor, B., 2018.

change, but really analyse if this is something you are doing as a church because you've decided it's the right thing to do, or as a way to hang on to those you feel you are losing.

10. Don't fight forever

Like with any 'big reveal' to family, all anyone wants is to feel *accepted*. It can be really hard for someone who is leaving to be honest about how they feel when they know this action will let down the people they love. I know it's only natural for you to go through some of the processes mentioned in this article – to feel hopeless or desperate, to make assumptions, to try to bargain, to want to change their mind – but at some point, you may need to learn how to *accept* their new viewpoint. Maybe you will be successful in changing their mind, but the chances are by the time they come to you with this, so much thought – so much preparation and anxiety – has gone into preparing themselves for this moment, that when they approach you, they are already pretty sure. For both of your sakes, acceptance is imperative in moving on.

Open Conversations

Most of the people I have spoken to who have taken the courageous decision to leave have experienced several of these things first-hand. We have formed some bad habits as a community – habits that stem from a mixture of fear and a lack of understanding. We have struggled to confront our fears and we have avoided difficult conversations – conversations that challenge us, that cause us to question – because *not* having the conversations has allowed us to feel *safe* and *unthreatened*.

But the reverse is also true. On this journey I have come across people who have given me hope, who have navigated my doubts with me *really well*. These individuals have been able to have really open conversations with me about belief and have made me feel that my doubts are not only normal, but actually commonly felt. This acceptance and tolerance of different viewpoints has helped me more than anything else to feel that maybe there is still a place for me in this community.