

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

THE  
**MAINLINER'S  
SURVIVAL GUIDE**  
to the  
Post-Denominational  
World

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# Introduction

## Study Questions for Mainliner's Survival Guide

### Introduction

1. How has your congregation/denomination experienced the “vortex of doom,” that is, the seemingly irresistible spiral of despair?
2. What is your greatest fear about your congregation dying? Your denomination?
3. For much of the twentieth century mainline denominations dominated the cultural landscape, leaving a residue of nostalgia among some generations. What are some of the good things that resulted from that cultural dominance? What kinds of costs (moral, theological, and ecclesiological) did that cultural dominance exact?
4. What kinds of opportunities might be open to those who follow Jesus in a Post-denominational world?

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by Derek Penwell (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2014).

## Religion after the Revolutionary War

1. In what ways does the Enlightenment legacy of the freedom of the individual to decide matters of importance still inform modern thinking, both outside and inside the church?
2. Part of the significance of the Enlightenment centers on a reorientation of the way people think about the clergy. As a result of this reorientation, with some exceptions, clerical authority has declined. What has been lost because of this decline? What opportunities does this forfeiture of authority present?
3. Like post-Revolutionary War America, the current ecclesiastical landscape in America is undergoing a shift. Because of the general membership decline in mainline Protestantism, as well as rising student loan debt, the number of seminary-trained clergy is declining. A move is on to credential more nontraditional candidates for ministry. Is this a good thing? Why?
4. What are the similarities/differences between seventeenth-century deism and the popular twenty-first-century position “spiritual but not religious”?

## CHAPTER 2

### Stone-Campbell and the Seeds of Reform

1. What would be lost if the denominational systems for credentialing ministers unraveled?
2. In the eyes of many in emerging generations hierarchy is a bad thing. What kinds of alternatives to hierarchy exist that are able to withstand the impulse to “do your own thing”?
3. What are some ways that disunity among Christians is expressed?
4. How is disunity most faithfully addressed?

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### What Can We Learn?

1. How does the Chihuahua brain manifest in congregations? Denominations?
2. In what ways does contemporary distrust of clergy and tradition manifest itself? Does this present an opportunity for the church?
3. If you were able to suspend your fear of losing/goofing-up/disrespecting your church/office building, what kinds of exciting ministry could you begin to house?
4. Do you spend more time meeting about and planning ministry than actually doing ministry? If yes, how might you change things to invert the equation?
5. What's the biggest obstacle to your congregation/denominational office doing drop-dead, world-changingly amazing things for the reign of God? How do you sell it, ignore it, change it, or back-burner it so that you can get on with the interesting stuff?

## CHAPTER 4

### “Spiritual but not Religious” or Missional Rather Than Institutional

1. What is the goal and focus of your ministry?
2. How does your congregational/denominational structure encourage ministry? Discourage it?
3. Are there ways to reimagine your structure so that it becomes less visible and more capable of supporting ministry? Are there ways to reimagine your structure so that it encourages young people in leadership?
4. What kinds of organizational initiatives/programs were at one time meaningful, but are now a drain on resources? How do you deal with the pain of letting them die?
5. What kinds of conversations would you need to have to put mechanisms in place that would address the problem of who gets to say no?

## “Everybody’s Welcome Here” or Theologically Inclusive

1. How important do you think Christian unity is? Why?
2. Has your perspective on interfaith encounters changed over the years? If so, how?
3. Over what kinds of issues can you imagine partnering with people of other faiths?
4. What are some practical ways for pursuing those common concerns?
5. What are your motivations for engaging with people different from you?

## CHAPTER 6

### “Just a Minute, I Have to Update my Status” or Technologically Savvy

1. What voice does your congregation/denomination use when it talks about itself and its vision? Is it stiff and uninviting or natural and welcoming? Is it mostly informational, or does it invite engagement?
2. What are the top two or three things your congregation/denomination does that make you want to continue to be a part of it? What kind of stories can you share that will communicate those things in a genuine and heartfelt way?
3. If you have a choice between paying someone to refinish the floor in the family life center or paying someone to help you communicate better over the Internet, where do you spend your money? Why?
4. Are there “broom-handlers” in your congregation who’ve been successful at keeping the Internet elephants out of the parade? What are some ways you might help the congregation/denomination to push beyond the blocking tactics?
5. If folks in your congregation have a fear of technology that limits their ability to see the value of social media, how might you educate them, bringing them onboard to help with content creation and curation?

## “I Like Jesus; It’s His Followers I Can’t Stand” or Jesus the Social Radical

1. Are there ways to conceive of evangelism as something other than a sales job? (Remember, every good salesperson believes herself to be engaged in sharing the “good news.”)
2. Why must there always be a strong correlation between what Christians say and how they act?
3. Are young people especially astute about recognizing the Jesus Gap, or have they misread the intentions of Christians in the institutional church? Why?
4. How can congregations/denominations communicate in a positive way what they care about, instead of focusing on what they stand against?
5. What kind of cultural changes would have to take place for a congregation/denomination to begin to value more highly the intrinsic good than the instrumental good?

## CHAPTER 8

### “Are We Meeting at the Coffee House or the Pub?” or the Church as Radical Community

1. Can you think of people you know who are transplants from other places? How might you offer access to community to them?
2. What are the best ways your congregation creates community among its members? Are there ways to replicate that in a nonthreatening, generous way for people who aren't members of your congregation?
3. What do you think about attempting to create community for people who may never join your church? What might you lose? What might you gain?
4. Can you think of ways to encourage emerging generations to be independent, while still helping to provide the community they need?
5. What kind of cultural reorientation would have to take place for your congregation to begin doing things because they're the right thing to do, and not because they promise some kind of tangible return?

## “Going Green ... All the Cool Kids Are Doing It” or Ecologically Concerned

1. How would our relationship to creation have to change if we were to come to the conclusion that God loves all of creation not just as a playground for humans, but as an expression of God’s love of creating?
2. What kinds of things would we have to do to encourage an understanding that the church and science aren’t at odds with one another?
3. How might understanding things like climate science and evolution as ripe for theological inquiry—rather than as standing in opposition to it—help reorient our spirituality?
4. What other kinds of practical ways might congregations/denominations express their concerns for creation?

## CHAPTER 10

### “How About, You Know ... the Gays?”

1. Moving into the future, do you see mainline churches leading or following on the issue of LGBT inclusion? What are the advantages and dangers of either?
2. In your congregation/denomination what, if any, are the major points of resistance to including LGBT people as full participants in the life and ministry of the church?
3. What kinds of things would have to happen to answer those points of resistance?
4. How might you agitate for change in your situation?
5. What kinds of things might you do to try to repair the breach between the LGBT community and people of faith?

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