At June 2011 article on the Christian Post states that 80% of congregants are inactive. This of course means that only 20% are active. This isn’t news to most of us. You’ve probably heard some form of it before, often as a complaint: “20% of the people are doing 80% of the work.” Whatever the phrase, the truth of the matter is that too many people in our congregations are not engaged with the mission and ministry of their congregation and their own spiritual growth.

Why?

It’s true that people are busier and busier. It’s true that Sunday morning is now full of other opportunities – sports, shopping, the only day to sleep in. But Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, authors of the book “The Other 80 Percent” argue that a contributing factor is that churches are not engaging people in their own spiritual growth. We’re not minding the back door, as they phrase it.

Most of our evangelism efforts are focused on getting new people in the front door. Most of our churches work hard to greet people on Sunday, invite them to coffee after church, sign them up for a newcomer’s class, maybe enroll their children in Sunday School. Then somewhere 8-10 months into the newcomer assimilation process, our efforts wane. And we realize too late that they haven’t made any friends, haven’t joined a small group of some kind, and aren’t coming to non-worship events. We notice that we don’t see them around anymore. “Hey, where is that new family with the two young children?” But, by then, they’ve slipped out the back door. They’re gone. Is part of the reason that we (the church) have not engaged them in the mission and ministry of the gospel and of our congregation?

It would seem obvious that there have to be programs to incorporate people into, but Thumma and Bird argue that this is not the case: churches are actually offering fewer opportunities for long term members to grow through engagement with the gospel. When we couple this with the top reason given for why people’s participation in a church decreases (“my faith has gotten weaker”) we can begin to see one of the paths that can lead people out our back doors.

The Spiritual Life survey done by Willow Creek Church shows similar findings:

- 22% of those surveyed said that they “have stalled spiritually.
• 17% expressed a level of dissatisfaction with their church’s role in helping them grow spiritually.

Their most surprising data was that there was little correlation between how active a person considered themself to be in their congregation and how high they rated their spirituality or spiritual attitudes. In other words, even the “20% who are doing 80% of the work” are reporting being under-engaged or un-engaged spiritually by their congregation.

This should be a wake-up call to the church.

Incorporation of new, lagging and lapsed people into a congregation is hard work. Engaging people in the gospel is hard work. It’s the work of the congregation, not just a few people. It takes intentionality. It takes planning.

Carolyn Moomaw Chilton writes and blogs as a spiritual discipline and an invitation to conversation with others. She is currently on staff at Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia as the Assistant for Evangelism and Stewardship.