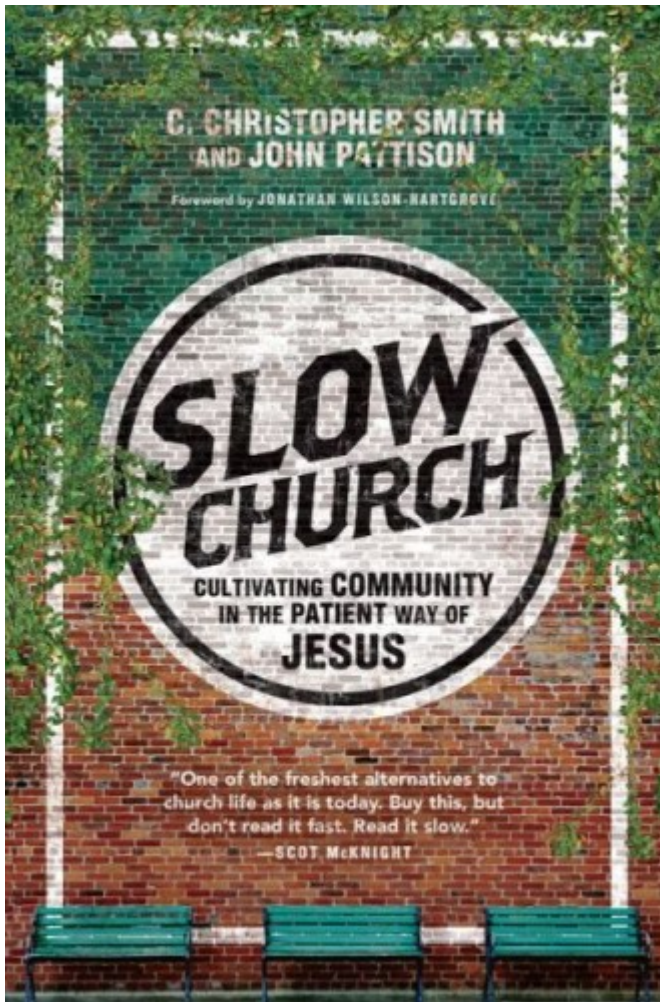


Slow Church, by C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison

reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Slow Church

By C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison
InterVarsity

If speed kills, is it possible that slowness saves? Christopher Smith and John Pattison contend that it does in this moving new book. On the level of atoms, motion is relative, but in our rushed and hectic lives, fast has become code for “controlling,

aggressive, hurried, and stressed,” while slow signifies the opposite: “calm, careful, reflective, still.” Fast is good in emergencies, but don’t we all want to slow down, especially on the weekends? Smith and Pattison think the church should help us do exactly that.

The authors take their title from the slow food movement, which combines nostalgia for the family farm, a growing demand for organic food, and the culinary standards of a gourmand to create a hearty critique of the stomach-churning excesses of industrialized agriculture. Translated into ecclesiology, churches should be more like a sit-down restaurant that grows its own vegetables than a drive-through fast-food joint that cranks out meals meant for the moment and then quickly forgotten.

According to Smith and Pattison, “location is everything” applies to churches as well as restaurants. “A Pinot noir from Oregon’s Willamette Valley,” they explain, “takes on the taste and texture of the grape, the soil, the barrel and the late frost. In the same way, Slow Church is rooted in the natural, human and spiritual cultures of a particular place.” I don’t know the difference between a Pinot noir and Two-buck Chuck, but I know a good idea when I savor one, and the authors have a great metaphor in their glass. Their book deserves a long, unhurried read.

In many ways, *Slow Church* is a paean to patience, which was once one of the most important words in the Christian moral vocabulary. For the early Christians, patience meant long-suffering and forbearance, words that sound old-fashioned today because they conjure a time when hardships outnumbered diversions. In our plugged-in culture, it is the distractions that make our lives so hard, and patience, rather than helping us escape the hustle and bustle, simply prepares us to face more calmly the day’s crowded schedule.

But patience needs to be an end, not a means, if it is to become more than a way of coping with the demands of multitasking. The church teaches patience by setting aside Sundays for worship, which should be a restful alternative to the laborious efficiency of the workweek. Pattison belongs to a rural “evangelical Quaker meeting,” and much of this book is a new and improved defense of what people used to call honoring the Sabbath.

One way to slow down on Sundays, Smith and Pattison suggest, is to stay at the same church. Every time we move from one church to another we lose a little bit more of our patience for all things religious. Like a plant that is repotted, we require

loads of fertilizer to keep our roots growing. Church mobility is not spiritually sustainable.

Another message in *Slow Church* is shaped by Smith's church background. He is a member of Englewood Christian Church, an urban Indianapolis congregation that was one of the original megachurches in the 1970s. (Full disclosure: I grew up in this church, and my parents are still active there.) Under the leadership of Mike Bowling, it has been reinventing social justice for the past 20 years. Englewood used to practice charity through the usual avenues of distributing food, clothing, and furniture. "After years of doing this," Smith reflects, "we found that it had little transformative effect on our neighborhood. Friendships weren't being forged. Lives weren't being radically changed. In some instances, we were probably even doing harm by fostering dependency on our handouts." Englewood ended its pantry ministries and became immersed in community development. It is now one of the national leaders in church-neighborhood partnerships.

Englewood stayed in its decaying neighborhood when a lot of its members moved to the suburbs, but it did not begin creating a new model of social engagement until a new generation of members moved right next door. "The farther one lives from the church building," Smith and Pattison write, "the greater the inertia that must be overcome in order to participate." *Slow Church* is all about integrating home, work, play, and worship.

Creating new ways to work is especially important for Smith and Pattison. They advise churches that are hurting financially to rely less on the offering plate and to "leverage their assets" for vocational stewardship. Churches can rent out their building to nonprofits, use their land for farmer's markets, convert abandoned properties for members to live in, incubate new businesses, or start a coffee house. "Choosing not to fill an open staff position is a great opportunity to encourage non-staffers to step up and become more deeply involved in the life and work of the church." They brag that Englewood has only one pastor on staff, and "he is very engaged with community development and daycare work and spends only part of his time doing traditional pastoral work." With so much going on, one wonders how Englewood members make time for worship.

Smith and Pattison never acknowledge the irony that their idea of a slow church, like a banquet prepared from scratch, would keep a lot of people very busy. Even more paradoxical is the mismatch between their anticapitalist rhetoric and their call for

churches to become captains of neighborly industry. They criticize the church growth movement for coming “dangerously close to reducing Christianity to a commodity that can be packaged, marketed, and sold,” and they have nothing but contempt for competitive markets, large corporations, and crass consumerism. Yet their call for churches to apply for government grants and to sponsor commercial enterprises would make churches subject to government rules and regulations, as well as the secular standards of management and efficiency that they so vigorously protest.

Is the slow church movement an alternative to the megachurch movement or just another church growth strategy? I suspect that the future of churches, like the future of education, belongs to hybrid models that promote the use of anything that works. Many of us connect to Christianity through multiple avenues, including radio, magazines, e-mails, and social media. Rather than making time in our schedules for big chunks of church, we fit bits and pieces of church into the gaps in our daily schedules, and we need churches to be more imaginative about how to make that happen. Churches that can shrink the distance from their members to their programs will flourish, wherever their members happen to be. Still, too much of modern churchgoing behavior is little more than theological snacking. Perhaps it is time for a healthier spiritual diet.