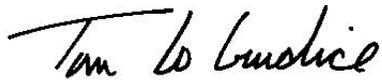


FROM A FAITH PERSPECTIVE: SCHOLARS AND BLOGGERS RESPOND
TO DECLINE AND GROWTH IN CHURCH PARTICIPATION

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Lo Giudice". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

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TO DECLINE AND GROWTH IN CHURCH PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the possibility of a relationship between formal and informal literature regarding current trends in decline and/or growth in Christian church attendance. Areas of interest that emerged were responses to data collection, effects of family life cycles on church participation, growing secularism and the cost/benefit of personal religious experiences. Formal literature attended to quantitative data and informal literature focus was on qualitative data. Informal literature provided solution focused strategies for growth and change where formal literature reported on particular groups of churches where growth is currently occurring. By looking at both formal and informal literature related to church growth/decline this paper may serve as a springboard for congregations and church members looking for answers as to why pews have fewer people today than “I remember when...”

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Chapter I

Introduction

Conversation at the fellowship coffee hour often revolves around who was not in attendance during worship that particular Sunday morning. The once full to capacity congregation of one thousand plus worshippers has dwindled to the one hundred twenty five faithful congregational members over the past fifty to sixty years. The church was founded in 1874 by German immigrants. Services were conducted in the German language for many years, and at some point in time it changed to one service a month until the early 1950's when the Church Council chose to adapt to changing demographics of the community. Non-German speaking members soon came on board as membership grew. Membership was diverse for the time; made up of people in the neighborhood, business leaders/owners, doctors, dentists, teachers, and lawyers.

During the mid-seventies membership began to decline until today's numbers. It seems every Sunday another face from the congregation is missing. As the congregation ages today's members are relocating to live by their children, moving to nursing homes, becoming shut-ins or passing away. For those not facing aging issues speculation indicates the member joined a growing church; one of the new mega churches, or has just decided not to attend church anymore for a variety of reasons, including employment and

sporting events. Families are also conflicted with activities children are involved in. Even Sunday School classes have little attendance (Patel, Lily and Marwell, 2013).

Recently, the pastor of this church gave a sermon on exile to the 50 plus congregants who sat reverently in the chancel. His main point was that Christians are a people in exile like the Jews who fled Egypt with Moses; they are a people wandering the wilderness, looking for the Promised Land. Christians are seeking others who believe and will join them on this journey only to find apathy, non-belief, and a secular world trying to stop them from their mission. There appear to be groups today who challenge beliefs of the Christian faithful; people who disregard and dismiss historical perspectives of faith as merely myth, and political motivation to drive the Judeo-Christian tradition forever from our landscape.

In the same community as the old German Lutheran Church there has been great change with other mainline protestant churches. Ten years ago an Evangelical Lutheran Church moved its ministry from a traditional church building to a storefront in a mini mall. Three United Methodist Churches have pooled their resources (all three church buildings are for sale and the last one will be the churches home), changed their name to be inclusive and are still threatened with having to close the final door. The oldest Presbyterian Church in the community closed its doors, sold its church building and united with a United Congregational Church to form a new community church, dropping out of the Presbytery and United Congregationalist denominations. Even one of the Catholic Churches closed its door due to lack of membership and priests. The community used to have three Catholic K-8 programs and a Catholic High School. One Catholic K-8 school remains open.

For a people in exile there appears to be many who continue to believe and attend local congregations. Why do they stay? For those who are questioning or have given up, why did they go? How do congregations keep members and draw-in new members? What makes your church more attractive than mine? Questions that take place during the fellowship coffee hour, but no one looks for an answer. Perhaps coffee hour is not the place to find the answer; perhaps scholars have answers, or statisticians, or even the leaders and lay people offering opinions in church periodicals and blogs on the internet. Maybe congregants and their leadership need new sources to assist in avoiding exile.

Statement of Problem

While Christian church membership is in overall decline (Robinson, 2007, Barnes and Lowery 2012, Putnam 2000, Hadaway, Marler and Chaves 1993), some churches are growing at unprecedented rates (Barnes and Lowery, 2012, Hadaway, 2011). What factors contribute to growth of member participation in some churches; declining member participation in other churches, and continued attendance by faithful members in those declining churches since 2000? Most resources showcase the Catholic Church, mainline protestant and evangelical churches, while there is an occasional inclusion of Jewish and Mormon faiths.

Definitions of Terms

Mainline Protestant Churches include United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian (USA) Church, Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches of the USA, United Church of Christ (Barna, 2009).

Evangelical Churches include a diverse group made up of Reformed, Holiness, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic and other traditions (National Association of Evangelicals, 2012).

Formal literature includes scholarly journal articles.

Informal literature includes website blogs, church publications and newspaper articles.

Delimitations

The references acquired for the review of literature were collected over a period of 60 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin – Platteville. Ebscohost was the major search engine used. Key search terms were “religion”, “church attendance,” “church growth” and “declining membership.” Some data was utilized from internet based research studies, such as, Pew Forum, Barna Group, Gallup, and General Social Survey. Anecdotal information from blogs were accessed through the Google search engine.

Significance of the Study

It is important for leadership and lay members of a congregation to be informed on membership decline and/or growth in churches in general; to understand predictors and/or influential trends in growth or decline of attendance and participation of congregants. An unintended consequence for the significance of this study may be the ability to transfer the findings to other volunteer organizations as church membership is strictly voluntary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review scholarly literature and informal literature related to the issue of decline and growth in membership and church participation.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Recent polls suggest approximately 40% (Robinson, 2007, Barnes & Lowery, 2012) of people in America state they regularly attend church. Studies by sociologists Hadaway and Marler as cited in published articles reveal that the number of persons worshipping weekly is closer to 18% (Robinson 2007, Barnes & Lowery 2012). The Pew Forum 2007 comparison study indicates 24% of respondents report attending church once a week with 15% reporting they attend church more than once a week. Their comparison study includes fourteen faith groups, not just Christian groups ("Religious landscape survey:" 2008). While many congregations report a reduction in worship participants the traditional pollsters continue to report 40% in attendance.

Discrepancies between what the traditional pollsters report and what churches report according to Putnam (2000) in his book *Bowling Alone* (p.70) is a result of people continuing to identify with a certain faith, not necessarily in attendance. Olson (2008) reveals some congregations do not keep accurate records on attendance and fall back on membership mailing lists to report numbers of participants in the church. It may be

possible to infer that members of liturgical churches feel attending on special church holidays and events, such as, Christmas, Easter, baptisms, confirmation and Mother's Day is considered regular attendance by individual standards (Olson, 2008). Hadaway, Marler and Chaves (1993) indicate "...people like to see themselves (or present themselves) as 'better' than they are, based on traditionally accepted social or moral norms (p. 749)." Their study indicates the non response sampling population of other pollsters may be problematic in obtaining relevant results, by under-reporting demographic groups that are less likely to attend church; survey respondents really do over report their participation in attending worship services. One role of religion is to infuse values and moral behavior patterns in adherents. Those who ascribe to said Christian values are more likely to see themselves as good people and believe their religious upbringing has everything to do with being well-intentioned when responding to survey questions (Peterson 2003).

Critical reviews and commentaries related to polls on church attendance share the opinion of poll participants needing to appear pious, or just thinking you have been to church in the past seven days, with church being the relevant term for those who consider themselves nature buffs and count a day on the ski slope or golf course as attending church (Marty, 1997, "The importance of," 1994).

Results from the General Social Survey 2010 indicate participation levels to be about half (18%) of the 40% Gallup Poll results. The disparity in results of similar public polling devices may be a result of stylized survey questions, which projects varying response rates based on respondents desires to report truthfully about their attendance or to just identify as a religious church-going person based on social desirability factors

(Brenner, 2011, Hadaway, Marler & Chaves, 1993). Researcher Brenner (2011) argues time diary studies are more reliable than surveys in capturing accurate attendance rates. The results of the comparison study between question surveys and time diary studies shows significant disparity in percentages of those reporting they attend church and those who actually do attend church. The time diary study does not allow for respondents to answer based on personal social desirability reasoning.

The idea of social desirability is not just restricted to academic scholars, theorists and pollsters. English novelist John Fowles (1969) wrote in his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, “Only one same reason is shared by all of us: *we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is (p.81).*” The narrator of this story probably would have responded he attends church weekly on the Gallup survey because his response is to create a better world for himself and the heroine of his story, at least in his mind’s eye. His goal is to make the reader feel and judge the characters as better than they are, “We are all in flight from the real reality (p.82).” Hadaway, et al. (1993) was well aware of the flight from reality as they refer to social surveys as instruments that measure perceptions and not actual behaviors.

Some research studies view the real reality of declining church attendance by examining age, period and cohort effects on church attendance (Patel, Lilley, & Marwell, 2013, Schwadel, 2010, Schwadel, 2011). Age and cohort (every 5 years) effects separate from each other show declining participation in service attendance, but when cohort and age effects are cross analyzed the results show the older baby boomer generation may be inflating church attendance figures as they age (Schwadel, 2011). This inflation in church attendance by older baby boomers may serve as one reason for disparity in polling

results. In the same research study Schwadel also points out younger baby boomers are more likely to be disconnected from religion. They are less likely to believe in a literal view of the Bible and less likely to use prayer in their daily lives.

The role of politics is considered in Hout and Fischer's (2002) cohort analysis as the number of people espousing "no religious preference" steadily increases. Those with moderate to liberal political ideology and weak affiliation with religious institutions feel religion is associated with conservative political agendas. Any attachment to religious programming is, therefore, seen as agreement with conservative politics.

A study related to those with no religious affiliation done by the Pew Research Center introduces John Q. Nones. He is someone who is making headlines for what he does not do. He does not align with any religion. The average religiously unaffiliated person is a male. He is young and white. He is not necessarily an atheist he is just not religious. He is a moderate or liberal Democrat and thinks same-gender marriage and abortion should be legal. He is not hostile toward religion he just doesn't want to belong. He most likely lives in the West not the South (Meet John Q., 2012).

One concept as to why church attendance is declining is that recent cohorts are delaying marriage and families, which was reasoning for attending church in previous cohorts. They are also extending their education process leaving them to again delay marriage and family. This most recent cohort is replacing previous more religious cohorts leading the decline in traditional religious participation. The authors proceed to report persons who profess no religious ties still turned to God or another spiritual force when trouble arose (Hout & Fischer, 2002).

Again, as researchers and pollsters indicate church attendance is steadily declining, especially when compared to the population growth. Today, 18% of Americans attend church/synagogue, while the population has grown the same percentage rate (18%) from 1990 to 2004; therefore, attendance has not kept up with population growth. Faith communities hit hardest in general by the decline in membership and attendance are mid-size churches, more established churches, which are 40-190 years old, and liturgical churches both conservative and liberal (Barnes & Lowery 2012, Olson, 2008). The number of evangelical churches grew by more than 5,000 between 2000 and 2004. During that same time period 2,200 mainline protestant and Catholic churches closed their doors (Barnes & Lowery 2012). Putnam (2000) indicates that both ends of the spectrum of faith based organizations have grown the devoutly observant person who typically is an evangelical or orthodox adherent and the entirely unchurched person with no religious preference, the more secular populous. The traditional mainline churches represent the middle that has “collapsed.”

Family life cycle is proposed by Patel, Lily and Marwell (2013) as a reason people either attend or do not attend church. The researchers looked at ages of parent groups, divorce or separation, and single motherhood as indicators of church attendance. Married couples with children are more likely to attend church as there is a support network in place of other parenting couples (Patel, et.al, 2013, Putnam 2000). Fathers who report regular church attendance are more likely to be actively involved in the care providing and emotional well-being of their children (Bollinger & Palkovitz, 2003). Divorced or separated persons with children are less likely to attend as their marital status may be more stigmatized, especially in the Catholic Church. Younger single mothers in

general do not attend as they also perceive their situation to be less than acceptable in the church. Older middle-age persons without children continue to attend as they have invested a great deal of time and energy in the church and continue for the churches sake (Patel, et al.).

Personal relationships and friendships are also considered a factor for church participation. The greater a person draws friendships from their particular congregation the greater their commitment to religious services and activities. The church environment appears more family-like where a member receives support and companionship from these informal relationships. Developing personal relationships is also used by some religious groups as a recruiting technique. The goal being to socially embed a new person into the life of the congregation so they learn to adhere to the level of religiosity the congregation expects of its membership (Stroope, 2012, Sharma, 2012). Sharma (2012) concludes "...having some as opposed to no friends at church is largely what makes the difference for espousing religious exclusivity."

Cost/Benefit of Church Attendance

Some parents schlep their offspring every weekend and several school nights per week to music lessons, and/or athletic practices and events. They spend a great deal of time and energy to develop their children and provide them with multiple opportunities to assist them in learning skills that will hopefully advance them academically and career wise in the future. For example, to emphasize the idea one mother, Ms. Williams plans for her child's future with two distinct goals in mind.

She does not want Alexander to be the only Black child in any given activity. In this regard, she seems quite successful. Across all the activities we observed (researcher) – piano, soccer, guitar, choir, baseball, basketball, and the school play – Alexander was one of the few Black children, but he was never the only Black child. At school, his grade level is about 10 percent Black. His friends include both Black and white children. The Baptist church the family attends has an all-Black, middle class membership. Ms. Williams’ success in achieving her second goal, that the whites with whom her son interacts be “cultured,” is more difficult to assess. (Lareau, 2003, p121)

Like many parents reported in *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (Lareau, 2003) Mr. and Ms. Williams are investing time and effort in their child in the form of human capital. There is a cost/benefit analysis in raising children and the goals of this investment for the Williams’ is to have introduced their son to diverse groups of people so he can learn to appreciate diversity in people everywhere (Lareau, p.121).

Much like the parents of Alexander analyzing the cost/benefit of his upbringing church attendance also has a cost/benefit analysis for members. Whether to attend or not attend church for some people is a cost/benefit decision. Benefits for attendance are varied and subjective. An attendee may find spiritual benefit in participating in the worship service; joining in on the music performed; the aesthetics of the church; the involvement of the sacraments; the message of the sermon, or the friend or family member sitting next to them in the pew (Olson, 2008). Persons who have a strong internal religious belief are also more likely to have higher participation rates in worship

services and have greater commitment to God. They may also feel a greater sense of self-control and confidence resulting from integrating their faith values into everyday decisions (Schieman, 2008, Hout & Fischer, 2002).

Religious participation has been associated with a person's well-being, life satisfaction and happiness. Social participation is reported to have the greatest effect on lower mortality rates. Religious participation is considered a form of social participation and is thought to possess greater benefits for a person than other social group participation. Adherents benefit from a sense of comfort, life meaning and also participate in regular rituals through service attendance. They have to be somewhere at a particular time as well as plan and prepare themselves for participation (Shor & Roelfs, 2013).

While benefits appear mostly subjective the cost of attending church may be additional. The time spent getting ready for church; driving or finding alternative transportation; parking or walking from a bus stop, on top of the hour or so spent in actual worship adds up. Time is the principal cost for church attendance. Money for offerings, travel, and Sunday clothing must be considered as a cost of attending church. There is also the cost of human emotion as members share joys and tragedies with their fellow members and in their prayer concerns (Olson, 2008).

Twenty one percent of recent Gallup poll respondents state they do not attend church because they do not have time/do not get around to it (Schaefer and Vankorlaar (2012). Anecdotal responses to time excuses include:

- I work six days a week the seventh belongs to me
- Ain't got time period
- I don't have time for God
- I don't get up in time on Sunday mornings/I overslept
- I need to mow the lawn

The American public is a consumer of goods and Americans certainly find time to shop. Any Sunday people flock to malls and stores ready to buy the latest sale item listed in the Sunday newspaper advertisement flyers. Not only do people shop for material possessions some shop for the perfect fitting church, like trying on lots of little black dresses until the consumer finds just the perfect fitting dress. Only to find when they wear it out on a date there is a slight flaw in it. So the dress gets dumped on the floor of the closet until the consumer goes shopping again in search of the elusive perfect little black dress that will never live up to expectations because, after all, it is replaceable. Much like the shopper in the analogy religious and sometimes not so religious people are searching for a church that fits perfectly, a product that participants purchase with their time and money. They are exhausted by religious consumerism (Warf & Winsberg, 2008, Olson, 2008).

This thinking process goes to explain the causes of religious diversity; explains the competition for members, which may be a high cost for the church that loses members and a benefit for the church that gains members. People who are visiting

various churches in hopes of finding a “home” church are said to be “shopping around” for a church. This simplistic view of shopping for a home congregation tends to overlook the role of religious faith and participation, which is the basic tenet of church membership (Warf & Winsberg, 2008).

Potential members are shopping for churches that are spiritually vital and alive, and devoid of conflict (Hadaway, 2010, McMullen, 2008). Worship services should be contemporary with use of audio/visual projection systems, electric guitars, drums, keyboards and music leaders that invite congregants to join in simple gospel choruses. Involving children in regular worship service experiences is vital to church growth (McMullen, 2008).

Very few church shoppers are seeking liturgical churches and/or churches embodied with a sense of reverence; meaning obedience and deference to God’s will and being reticent, reserved and respectful toward God (McMullen, 2008, Olson, 2008, Henry). That is unless the church shopper has a penchant for congregations that are not growing and generally have internal conflict due to lack of growth and funds to support the mission work of the congregation.

Whether a church is growing or not the mission of each congregation is vital to the whole religious experience. Putnam (2000) contends that faith communities are associated with the largest group of social capital in America, which is a strong predictor of involvement in volunteerism and philanthropy. Belonging to a church community is voluntary. Members may generously give their time, talent and tithing or not. The

important part of being a member is just being there and sharing the worship experience.
Do Bloggers and pastors agree with researchers?

Chapter III

Review of Anecdotal and Informal Information

Everyone has an opinion. The pastor and elected church officials discuss opinions, congregational members gathering for fellowship hour following worship services share opinions, as do the men's group that meets at a local restaurant for breakfast, the church basement ladies sewing their quilts and even the young people hanging out by the youth room have an opinion on why church membership is on the decline. Some people even have an opinion on how to change the dynamic of declining membership.

A total of thirty-seven blogging websites and church publications regarding declining numbers in church membership/participation were reviewed. Five of the sites reiterate declining numbers in church participation only (Bouma, 2008, "Mainline church membership," 2011, Bullard, 2011, Ross, 2012, Vande Bunte, 2013). Of those five sites

“Mainline church membership” (2011) and Bullard (2011) also report on churches which have seen gains in membership. Articles also list the largest 25 churches by membership with the Catholic Church still leading the way.

There are sixty eight million Catholics listed in the 2011 yearbook of churches (“Mainline church membership,” 2011 & Bullard, 2011). Only 36 percent of Catholics as reported in an article in Catholic Digest attend mass on a weekly basis and more than forty million adherents are inactive. Catholics who attend weekly mass are anecdotally considered the largest religious organization and those who don’t attend are the second largest religious organization (Rigney & LaNave, 2010).

Churches of Christ witnessed a decline of 708 fewer churches during a nine year period of time (Ross, 2012). Christian Reformed Churches noticed a decline in Sunday evening worshippers over the decade from 1997-2007 of 46 percent (Vande Bunte, 2013). Between the years 2006-2007 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) membership declined by sixty four thousand members and twenty two congregations (Bouma, 2008). Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventist Church and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day-Saints (Mormon Church) increased in membership. Churches that are witness to growth of memberships continue to grow and those churches reporting declining membership roles continue to decline. If averaged out membership in churches remains stable for now (Bullard, 2011), but to a church in decline this average is of little comfort.

Why the decline?

Judgment! After spending time on social media an ELCA pastor concluded the reason people quit coming to church had to do with judgment, not the Judgment Day, but the feeling of being judged by church members. Unchurched people expect church members to live out their faith, and show care and love for others as they profess in their worship rituals on Sunday mornings. Not judgment for their lifestyle choices; their dress; the amount they give, or living lives different from established members (Hansen, 2012).

The Presbyterian Church (USA) claims its decline is part of the overall picture for all mainline Protestant churches with lower birthrates unable to sustain the churchgoing population. Counter to lower birthrates is the aging population, particularly in mainline churches where there is a disproportionate number of older members over the age of 65. Older members' attendance decrease may be a result of health issues, poor eyesight or hearing, no longer driving or just the logistics of being able to get to church in a timely manner (Weems, 2010).

The United Methodist Church states it has lost its evangelistic zeal (Gryboski, 2012). For many adherents in mainline churches the thought of evangelizing is a foreign concept. Only 31 percent of this group professes to have personal responsibility in sharing their faith with other people. Fewer regular adherents are involved in a personal discipleship activity while only half of them believe the Bible "...is accurate in the life principles it teaches" ("Report examines the," 2009). For many followers of Christianity they no longer hold to traditional Christian values. Fifty-two percent of Christians from one survey and fifty-seven percent from a second survey believe that eternal life is not just for followers of Jesus Christ anymore, but is available to people with other religious

belief systems ("The decline of," 2009). Questions arise as to if Christians are swaying from the traditional teachings of the gospels or if perhaps they are redefining them to meet the needs of a postmodern society that shops for churches to fit personal agendas (Catalyst, 2010, Dworin, 2012).

From a different perspective traditional teachings may play a significant role in declining church membership being viewed as a good thing by some authors of anecdotal information. They believe the church is now preaching to true believers, members who are not offended by hearing the truth about gospel teachings. What remains in congregations are adherents who really care about the church; are being more honest about their beliefs; are committed Christ followers and can make a big difference without worrying about barriers brought on by less active adherents (Clifford, 2012, Demastus, 2009, Rainer June 19, 2013).

Catholics and Protestant churches consider many inactive adherents' delay in marrying and having families as a factor in not returning to the church as they once did. Traditionally, young people stray from church attendance until they have children of their own and then return to the church for baptisms, religious instruction and youth programming. The more years the member is away from the church the harder it is to return (Rigney & LaNave, 2010, Radziszewski, 2013).

Attendance frequency data may be the best measurement of declining congregational membership (Dworin, 2012, Weems, 2010, "Report examines the," 2009, Rainer, 2009). Members who do attend worship services are attending less frequently

and purport softer commitments to their home congregations, including their volunteerism within the church ("Report examines the," 2009). While many identify as being a regular worship participant the idea of what constitutes regular worship has changed (Weems, 2010). If a congregation of 400 shows members regularly attend 2 out of 4 weeks per month the congregation really has 200 active members and not 400. Two hundred members have silently slipped out the back door without notice (Rainer, 2009). Regular worship attendance has slipped from every Sunday to competing with whatever fits into the individual/family schedule (Novak, 2012, Marty, 2010).

Some of the slippage out the "back door" is a result of family and/or personal crisis, such as, loss of employment, divorce, major illness, or grief to name a few (Novak, 2012, Rainer, January 21, 2013). A crisis can be emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausting. Going out of the house to attend to basic needs may be tough enough and the thought of participating in other activities, including church may be overwhelming. For a church member who is struggling on a personal or spiritual level it is expected they will have the support of clergy and other available church resources when needed. For others who are leaving by the back door the reason may be as simple as the church does not provide childcare during service and another church does; complex personal concerns; internal conflict either within the congregation or the denomination, perhaps both and external conflicts with secular family activities. Congregational and pastoral spiritual stagnation may also lead to exiting members. There is always another thriving church offering more exciting worship experiences (Dworin, 2012, Marty, 2010).

An example of denominational conflict and mass exit is demonstrated within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) denomination. A conflict began in 2009 during a meeting of the churchwide assembly. The assembly voted to open the ministry to gay and lesbian clergy, and other professional staff members living in a committed, monogamous same gender relationship. The Lutheran (August 2012) reported the following,

As of June 30 (2012), 926 congregations had taken first votes to disaffiliate from the ELCA. These 926 congregations took a total of 1,004 first votes. Of those, 699 passed and 305 failed. There have been 671 second votes; 637 passed and 34 failed. Of those, 625 have completed the termination process and are no longer on the roster of congregations of the ELCA....Most of the votes came in reaction to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly's votes on sexuality (p.10).

Prior to the discussion and vote on human sexuality the assembly voted on a resolution to be respectful of differing opinions on the subject of same-gender unions. There were 230 delegates voting no on respectful discourse. Dissent permeated the assembly's air even before the resolution on human sexuality could be brought to the floor (ELCA News Service, 2009). An October 11, 2013 ELCA News Release update indicates that there are now 647 congregations that have disaffiliated from the ELCA roster of congregations (ELCA News Service, 2013).

Within the Episcopal Church between the years of 2001 and 2005 conflict revolved around a district bishop, local congregational finances and changing pastoral

leadership styles, yet leadership continues to be optimistic and believes with conflict comes opportunity. Amidst high staff turnover at the Episcopal Church Center morale had been a matter of concern for leadership (Nunley & Schjonberg, 2007).

Conflict, stagnation, or busy lives in general it takes a six-to-twenty-four month period of time for a member to exit the home congregation without notifying the pastor or saying good-bye to fellow members (Dworin, 2012). Pastors and church leaders would benefit from tracking attendance fluctuations in adherents. This is where accurate attendance frequency data may prove to be vital to survival of a congregation. It may afford an opportunity for strategic planning by the congregation and leadership to address concerns of members who may be quietly slipping out the back door.

When churches were seeing their highest attendance numbers organized religion was more institutionalized in the cultural fabric of family living (Radziszewski, 2013, Faser, 2013). For most families it was the only opportunity to socialize outside the home as community churches also served as meeting places for secular activities, such as, children and youth programming, blood drives, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and community service organizations. It was also expected that spiritually active members attended local churches for weekday fellowship opportunities. Today, many people do not feel they need the church to be spiritual after all the church is a building and spirituality is a state of mind, a feeling to be expressed on a personal level (Faser, 2013, "Report examines the," 2009).

In response to those claiming spirituality alone can do the job and does not require a church building blogger Robert Cornwall (2010) argues there is value in institutions as “...they alone have the strength to continue bearing the load “ (Cornwall, 2010). By churches bearing the load the reference is made to uphold traditions, community volunteers, and values, even values that are part of this nation’s political discourse (Marty, 2010).

Socially liberal Christian churches, which are comprised of mostly mainline protestant churches, have put aside traditional church doctrine in favor of secular causes. In an effort to attract younger and more open-minded people with support of sexual liberation ideology, shared sacraments and attaching little importance to theology these churches have instead continued to decline in membership. Conventional followers’ traditional worship experiences were being displaced by growing secularism in these churches (Douthat, 2012).

On the flip side politically conservative Christian churches, which include fundamentalist, Pentecostal and evangelical congregations have seen growth in attendance, but Douthat (2012) feels their theology has been compromised as they tend to preach a gospel of wealth and health foregoing New Testament writings.

It appears both conservative and liberal Christian churches have undermined their theology in an effort to seduce new members into the fold by appealing to the secular side of culture and attaching little emphasis to theology (Brittain, 2013). Where young people are concerned conservative Christians alienate them and liberal Christians bore them

(Stewart, 2012). Furthermore, in both cases liberal and conservative Christians fail to discern a difference between their religious identity and that of their cultural and economic belief systems (Brittain, 2013).

One pastor in an ELCA mission church is uncomfortably leading the way in balancing conservative and liberal theologies. Nadia Bolz-Weber is an unorthodox ordained ELCA minister and is pastor of a start-up church, House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado, which meets in an Episcopal Church. She is tall, muscular, sports several tattoos and is super-entertaining in her delivery of the gospel message. In an article from The Washington Post, Michelle Boorstein (2013) describes Bolz-Weber's theology as, merging "...the passion and life-changing fervor of evangelicalism with the commitment to inclusiveness and social justice of mainline Protestantism (p.2)." Bolz-Weber experiences God in the people she works with; in the messiest parts of people's lives, including those who have been hurt by religion as she was. Her small, but growing congregation was originally launched for disaffected young people, but she resonates with "...a growing group of Christians who are asking the same kinds of question (Boorstein, 2013 p.3)."

Individualism is seen as a driving force in youth culture. It becomes conspicuous in the world of young people (here-to-for referred to as millennials) in self-satisfying and self-regarding personality traits. For some millennials who espouse familiarity with religious belief systems God is seen as a personal "...divine butler, part cosmic therapist..." (Douthat, 2012). During conversations with fellow Mormons in the age group of 20s and 30s Bolton (2009) found many to be disillusioned with and critical of

their faith. They no longer follow what they consider are treasured myths of their parents' and grandparents' generations. They believe much of what was taught in their childhood is historically inaccurate and false (Bolton, 2009).

Certainly, lack of interest and questioning traditional belief systems, especially by millennials is hampering growth in mainline churches. The age group that most identifies with "no religion" is the 25-34 year olds (Weems, 2010). Twenty percent of this age cohort profess they are atheist. For many the path to atheism was guided by the thought process of if there is a God why is life so miserable. One young man remembers trying to strike an either/or deal with God. Essentially he asked to have things made right or he would not believe (O'Neel, 2013). Perhaps God was already working through him in a not so obvious way, but that idea is what faith is about.

Help is on the way!

With far more bloggers writing about the problem of continuing decline in church attendance roles it is refreshing to come across a few anecdotal and informal writings with a more positive outlook. These writers are solution focused. They certainly do not promise an end to declining numbers, but if a congregation and its leadership wish to effect positive change the writers do provide some guiding principles.

Begin with the idea if you want to grow your church, lose any agenda to grow your church. When congregations make a conscious effort to stop trying to be a mega-

church and start being a presence in the local community members will have a greater sense of purpose and not sneak out the proverbial back door. Besides people seeking a new church can smell an agenda wafting through the front door from the parking lot (Holladay, 2013, Nieuwhof, 2013).

Another idea Holladay (2013) and Nieuwhof (2013) share in common to turn around declining churches is to minister with passion to the outside. Look to places in the community where the need is great and serve. Look to the lives of people in need, whether the need is food, shelter or spiritual care and do what the membership is able to do to serve.

Being flexible and adaptable is an important gift for members to give to their own congregation. Understanding that experimentation is not only vital to bringing in new members, but it is also vital to personal spiritual growth for current members. Churches that keep the message but change the delivery provide opportunity to learn from different perspectives (Nieuwhof, 2013). Nadia Bolz-Weber's church is a liturgical church where members provide worship leadership, even providing sermons at times. Her congregation has grown from eight to one hundred eighty attendees in five years, from disaffected young people to include Grandmothers, homeless people, corporate types and soccer moms. Here the message is that God wants to be known and the delivery is the difference (Boorstein, 2013).

Remember to be patient. Declining membership in churches has been going on for decades. Turn-around is a process; embrace it with prayer (Holladay, 2013).

Chapter IV

Conclusion and Implications

Both formal and informal literatures provide insight into growth and declining attendance in Christian faith communities. They agree mainline Protestant church communities are losing membership and Evangelicals and non denominational congregations are experiencing growth. The two forms of literature diverge as to causes.

Formal literature considers data collected through surveys, time diaries and age, period and cohort studies. As multiple surveys' results vary by substantial percentages scholars consider that social desirability reasoning is a probable explanation for the disparity in declining church membership. For some respondents of surveys they over report attendance habits as they want to see themselves as good people. Time diaries, age, period and cohort studies, therefore, are likely to provide accurate data on church attendance.

Informal literature also considers survey results when looking at declining membership, but is more likely to conclude reasoning different from social desirability.

Some bloggers and church publications conclude that judgment about members, lower birth rates, lost evangelistic zeal, delay in marriage and family, personal crisis and denominational or inner-church conflict as basic reasoning for declining membership. For some members attending church periodically is normal and does constitute regular worship participation.

Both scholars and bloggers agree there is competition between church attendance and secular activities. Family activities and personal interests may take precedence over attending church. The two groups also consider the role of politics in declining membership. Adherents who have defined themselves as politically liberal are amongst the highest number of people who now claim “no religious preference” in survey results. For most of those in this group they continue to be spiritual, just not religious. Politically conservative members participate in the consumerism of church communities while shopping around for a church that adheres closer to their ideological belief system in both faith and political content.

Scholars consider the cost/benefit for church attendance, where informal literature looks at value in institutions. Both claim that the mission of a church is vital to the whole religious experience.

Scholars may not consider the human-side of religious attendance and informal writers may not consider the academic perspective to religious attendance, especially data collection. Whether a scholar, blogger or church magazine contributor the importance of this research is to be informed of what each has to contribute to the study of church

attendance. The importance of being informed by both methods of reporting may assist in predicting and influencing trends in religious participation by Christians and other religious affiliations.

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