

An Agenda for Research on Member Attrition

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I don't mean to irreverent, but it seems to me that the problem of member attrition may have started in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had stopped being part of the fellowship in the Garden and God had to come looking for them.

When Jesus was in the midst of his ministry, He also had to deal with this problem. Scripture records for us the large numbers of people celebrating the Triumphal Entry that had all by vanished a mere week later.

In spite of the commonness of this problem, there is a surprising paucity of research and analysis. The purpose of this paper is to examine a selection of work that does exist, draw some general conclusions about what we know, and finally to make some suggestions regarding where we ought to go from here.

What We May Know About Member Attrition

In examining the existing work on member attrition, I want to distinguish between the work done by religious practitioners and that done by social scientists. Each of these has its own particular approach to be problem clarifying its respective merits.

The Church Growth Literature

I started my search through the Church Growth Literature with some of the "big guns ". Some of the seminal works by Peter Wagner and Donald McGavaran make impassioned calls of churches to be aggressive in their attempt to bring new members into the church. What is surprising is that there seems to be no mention at all of the difficulty of keeping old members in the fellowship or of the possibility that a significant percentage of those new members many not be around a few years down the road.

In the last ten years, there seem to be a few exceptions to this general pattern. The most ambitious of these is the work of our guest to these meetings, John Savage. Because we have had intense exposure to his work (Savage, 1976), I will not dwell on it here.

Another attempt to deal with the problem of member attrition can be found in Lyle Schaller's *Assimilating New Members*. Schaller devotes a chapter of the book to attrition. He makes a series of what he calls "assumptions". (Actually, he seems to forget that he has assumed things and quickly begins to treat these things as facts or policies. This is a fault I have seen in much of the Church Growth movement in general). These fifteen assumptions are:

1. every person who joined the church did so in good faith;

2. the inactive member has a good reason for begin inactive;
3. the inactive will continue to be in that status until this reason has been dealt with;
4. the most direct way to identify the reason for inactively is to ask the inactive member;
5. inactive members will first offer excuses rather than reasons;
6. our approach to the inactive members should be one of "active listening"
7. this listening approach will take six to ten hours;
8. this listening approach will require several visits;
9. the longer we wait of this process to begin, the harder it is to return the inactive to the congregation;
10. we need a system within the congregation to return these people to active membership
11. the caller needs to be very sensitive to the inactive member's "feelings of inadequacy and guilt";
12. the congregation needs to become attend to the early signals of an inactive's conflict;
13. because spiritual needs of people change over times, some may become uninvolved in response to these changes;
14. we need to become aware of counterproductive assumptions that we hold;
15. we can't always control why people become inactive, but we can control our reactions to them. (Schaller, 1978: 117-120)

The Institute for American Church Growth has made some general suggestion regarding how one becomes inactive. In *A Shepherd's Guide to Caring and Keeping* (IACG, nd), three types of inactivity are described. First, a member becomes a "Non-Active Member". This person attends the church one to two times per month and exhibits little involvement. Following this, the individual becomes an "Inactive Member", attending only a few times a year and losing some degree of personal identification with congregation. Finally, the inactive becomes a "Drop-Out" whose membership exist sin name only and who would refer to the congregation as "your" church.

The Social Science Literature

Work on member attrition in the social sciences seems to have begun out of a general concern for understanding the unchurched (Hale, 1977). A special issue of the *Review of Religious Research* (1980), devoted to the unchurched, focuses some attention on inactive members.

In one article in this special issue, Everett Perry, James Davis, Ruth Doyle, and John Dyble performed a cluster analysis of the 1978 Gallup Unchurched data. The cluster analysis identified three distinct groups of unchurched people. These are the Nominal, the Indifferent, and the Estranged. The Nominal are people who are religious in name only, identifying themselves as Protestant, but not holding to any traditional beliefs. The Indifferent are people who hold traditional beliefs, but with very little commitment. It is the Estranged that have special importance for understanding member attrition.

According to Perry *et. al.*;

The Estranged resemble those who do attend church in their attitudes and beliefs. They hold tractional Christian beliefs. Religion is important in their lives. In fact, they tend to exceed the

churches in reported personal religiosity. Most of them were active in a church at one time, but for a variety of reasons they no longer feel the need for a church. (1980, p. 389).

Perry and the others compare these religious types and find that the Estranged are very much like Churched protestants in many ways. However, some of the differences that do emerge may be helpful in planning to deal with member attrition. The Estranged are much less likely to have religious fathers or to attend Sunday School than are their churched counterparts. Another significant ties to the congregation. In spite of this, the Estranged seem to be somewhat supportive (roughly 20%) of church programs.

Another article in the special issue with relevance to our study is a piece by David Roozen. Also using the Gallup data, Roozen specifically examines the Dropouts. What is especially useful about Roozen's work is that he focuses on re-entry as well as disengagement. Roozen claims:

Most studies of religious disengagement and disaffiliation stop at the point of defection, leaving the impression that disengagement represents a permanent state. Such an impression is heightened by the lack of any substantive body of research on the "rechurching" of church dropouts. (1980, p. 431)

It is surprising that in eight years, Savage's work remains the only exception to Roozen's observation.

In his study, Roozen discovered that most "dropping out" occurs during the teen years. When controlling for the age distribution of the total sample, Roozen calculates the dropout rate for teens to be 15.5. This figure drops to 9.1 for the early 20s, levels off to just under 5 until the respondent reaches 55 and then drops to under 3.

Roozen provides some evidence as to why people drop out. The most common reasons are personal life experiences and the irrelevance of religion. Somewhat less common are maturation and intrachurch conflict. When the age categories are examined separately, Roozen finds that teens are more likely to mention maturation and irrelevance as causes of dropping out. But older populations seem to focus instead on personal contextual factors (changes in work schedule, health, family). In fact, for populations over 54, the other causes almost disappear.

Roozen found that 51% of the dropouts returned to active participation in the congregation. The majority of returns reentered the church between the ages of 20 and 34, suggesting that family changes (i.e., birth and education of children) may be important.

Roozen makes three general conclusions. First, dropping out is a fairly common activity. Second, contrary to the work of Savage (1976) and Hale (1977), church discord does not seem to be an important casual factor. Third, the rate of return is such that there are only minimal losses to the religious organization over the long term (the 60s were a major exception to this trend with a dropout to return loss of nearly 10%).

A more recent examination of people who have dropped out comes from the Project Canada research, conducted primarily by Reginald Bibby (1986). In a presentation to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Bibby reported on a study of inactive Anglicans from the Toronto Diocese. Bibby claims that we have caused unnecessary alarm with the confusion of infrequent attendance with religious defection. He says that what has happened is not a decline in religion, but a change in religious image from that of religious commitment to religious consumption. He calls this "Religion a la carte".

While inactive have significantly lower attendance rates, they still maintain fairly orthodox positions. The majority of inactive hold traditional doctrinal positions and over half of them report themselves to be "committed Christians". What is especially surprising is that a high percentage (77%) of Anglican inactive think that it is either "very important" or "somewhat important" for them to be Anglican.

Inactive Anglicans show nearly identical patterns to active Anglicans in terms of attitudes and values (the exception being that inactive are less likely to oppose premarital sex). Contrary to what network analysis would predict, inactive also report a considerable number of friends who are still within the Anglican church. While inactive are much less likely to see the parish to be a source of social life and do not feel that they fit in with others in the parish, it is interesting to note that a sizeable number of active feel the same way.

For the inactive, the church plays an important role as the mediator of rites of passage. Bibby reports:

It is highly significant that there is *no less anticipation by inactive* than of the need for such church services. These past experience and future expectations make the conclusion inescapable: for many Anglicans, especially the numerically dominant inactive, the Church is expected to play largely a *service role*... [This] "right to rites" may be largely a struggle for *consumption without commitment* (1986, p. 11 emphasis in original).

Bibby claims that, in spite of their lessened commitment, these people maintain strong ties to the Anglican tradition. He claims that "[c]ontrary to popular belief, they are not 'lost' to the church. The truth of the matter is that they literally would be hard to lose (p. 12)".

What All this May Mean

Taken as a whole, this body of research suggests several things. First, member attrition, as we already know from experience, is a common occurrence. Second, inactive members, while retaining some phenomenological connections to the parent body, either lose or never had social connection within the church. Third, due to life cycle effects, the inactive member stands a decent chance of returning to the congregation.

First, Roozen's research claims that 46% of the 1978 Gallup survey met the qualifications for being dropouts. Perry et. al. found that over 30% of the total unchurched population could be considered Estranged. Schaller points out that a certain number of members may "grow out" of a congregation, withdrawing as an intermediate step toward a new church. From our own

perspective, we have just heard Dale Jones describe the attrition numbers for our own denomination.

If this phenomenon is normal, how should we respond? Knowing why people leave the church is important. Perry et. al. put the problem well:

The questions for church leaders are: to what extent are the criticisms of the Unchurched accurate and justified, prodding the church to change; and to what extent are the attitudes and lifestyles of the unchurched self-destructive, suggesting it is they who must change (p. 403)?

In an attempt to encourage these populations to return to church, it is important that we look at the situation from the perspective of the inactive member. Not only should we avoid the tendency to be critical (as Savage and Schaller remind us) but we need to evaluate the state of the congregation. Is the church closed to outsiders? Are there clear socialization patterns to help people adjust to the new setting? An understanding of the attrition of members must focus on both the individual crises of the members and the social structure of the congregation.

This lessened identification with the religious group has its counterpart in the objective data of social connections within the congregation. The dropouts seem to be socially isolated in comparison to the regular membership. This finding, present in much of this research, is also consistent with my dissertation findings (Hawthorne, 1986).

The implication here is that people need to be legitimately tied into social groups. This is not something that should emerge from necessarily be programmed, but something that should emerge from normal interactions. Another program possibility is that especially isolated groups (e.g., divorced, singles, youth) need ways of tying in, not just to other special populations, but not the congregation at large.

Third, when taken together, Roozen's work and Bibby's work provide reason for religious organization to remain optimistic. If Roozen is correct, most dropouts (after their teen years) have left the church due to life cycle changes. This suggests that with another change (e.g., children), the likelihood of return is fairly high. Bibby's research illustrates that people still expect the church to be there in times of family need. If the congregation can be responsive to their needs without begin either punitive or condescending, these ritual occasions could provide the dropout with a socially acceptable excuse to return. In the absence of a shared group excuses, returning is only done at great social psychological risk to the dropout.

Where We Go From Here

Even though this review of research has described some specific pieces of quantitative work, much still needs to be done. As I mentioned earlier, the Church Growth literature suggests an absence of quality data. But the Gallup survey data is not much better. That data was based upon limited number questions and developed from a larger population survey. Savage's work provides detailed accounts of individual case studies but still suffers from a lack of theoretical development (I'm counting on Ron Benefiel to provide us with some guidance).

It seems to me that what is needed is research that can connect congregational characteristics with individual church dropouts. There are several gaps in our understanding that need to be filled. Let me touch a few.

We need to know much more about how attendance patterns change over time. Do dropouts begin by missing only one Sunday? Is there a gradual decline, a sort of threshold effect, or a dramatic break? Until that information is available, the kind of "early warning system" advocated by Schaller cannot be developed.

We need to know how people build social relationships within the congregation. Are they connected in a series of small clique structures? If so, do these cliques also connect in some grand scheme or do they exist as building blocks in coalitions? Another factor relates to whether contact within the congregation (i.e., only on Sunday) is enough or if outside social contacts are necessary.

Another unknown is the role plays in all this. Perry et. al. suggest that the pastor is principal contact. But how does the pastor manage to build significant relationships with all of the potential dropouts and returnees? Also, before the pastor can serve as doorway through which people can return, we need to know more about how people perceive the pastor. Is he seen as part of the congregation, its figurehead, or some extension of denominationalism?

We need much more information about what dropouts perceive as the barriers to participation. If they are internal (as Savage and Schaller suggest) then what causes feelings of anxiety in some while others can deal with congregational tensions without defection? If the reasons for leaving are external (i.e., changes in work schedule, poor health) then the church cannot provide ways of coping with such changes until we know more about how people in modern society connect their lives in the church with their lives outside it. Do these fit together, with great focus on integration, or are the parts compartmentalized (as sociologists like Hunter (1983) suggest)?

Finally, we need more information about the subjective meanings of church membership. From an organizational perspective, we have always been clear on what it means for someone to join the church. But what does that membership mean for the individual? Is the vows be broken? Is membership something that can be traded in when one tires of it? Or does the individual believe that once she has joined the church, she is committed to stay whatever happens within the local church?

There are many other questions that could be asked. However, I feel that these are some of the major issues that need to be addressed. This much should keep us busy for awhile.

In this paper I have attempted to review what we know about member attrition, analyze it, and suggest what we need to know. The problem of member attrition is one that has faced congregations for many years, and yet we seem to have made little progress in dealing with it. Perhaps if we can begin to close some of the gaps in our knowledge base our future programming can be substantially more effective.

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