

# **The Case of Jo Dropout: One Person Heartbreak a Case Study**

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The subject of this case study is a married Anglo Female in her mid thirties. Three years ago she severed all ties with the Church of the Nazarene of which she had been a member since age 12 and an attender since birth. She is the middle child born to Nazarene parents who are still living.

Having received the B.S. from a Nazarene college, she pursued graduate studies earning the M.A. and Ph.d from a major mid-western University and currently maintains a counseling practice in a suburban setting. Her husband, the oldest child and only son of four children, was reared in the Church of the Nazarene and followed a similar educational track, receiving the A. B. from a Nazarene College and the Ph.d. from a state university.

For the purpose of this paper and with respect for the assigned title, the subject in this case study will be identified as "Jo". It might be useful to know that Jo was quite willing to talk to me about why she dropped out, even though it took her over thirty typed pages to tell "her story."

## **Church Background**

As a child, Jo can never remember not going to the Church of the Nazarene. Along with her siblings and parents, Jo attended services on Wednesday and twice on Sunday, assuming that it was the only decent and Christian thing to do.

Her recollection of the church are not flattering, Sunday School teachers tended to be older, stern and judgmental types while the church leaders were clearly held in suspicion by the city in which she lived.

"There always seemed to be considerable conflict among the members of the church", she wrote, with this additional observation. "Even as a young girl. I sensed that our church consisted of people who were social misfits in the community."

While at school, Jo enjoyed acceptance and popularity, being elected Home Coming Queen and receiving several other honors including the National Honor Society. The story wasn't quite the same at church. There, she was linked in oppressive ways with the pastor's son who regrettably was mentally deficient. Due to the pastor's denial, she was made to feel less than Christian for not wanting to date the boy, something she did "just once" before realizing there are some things worse than manipulation and guilt.

During college years, Jo continued to be well received. She faithfully attended services at "college church" though starting to feel some disdain for a "camp meeting" environment. She participated in Student Mission Corp and was actively involved in student government.

Subsequent to college days, Jo moved to an unfamiliar city due to her job assignment. Without much thought, she attended the city's only Nazarene church where the pastor was "pretty dull and pretty dumb but relatively harmless." That passage was short lived since the pastor resigned weeks after her arrival. His replacement was "less dumb but decidedly more harmful."

He preached sin and denomination every Sunday. My Senior High Sunday School students were running to the altar every Sunday night. I, too, was riddled with guilt, mostly from my negative feelings toward the pastor.

I did the only thing I could do in a city with one Nazarene Church. I left.

## **Two Years Out**

Jo found help in the Mennonite Church. "There", she said. "I grew, breaking the sin, guilt, saved cycle. Unfortunately for J, her new found freedom didn't last due to her decision to marry a "solid" Nazarene.

With marriage came a move to major city. With that came several choices, most of which were "dismal". Her husband insisted they attend a Nazarene church and they did. When the matter of faculty announced that they were going to transfer their membership to the church they chose to attend,

Jo objected, inducing his rage. Knowing that her decision was final, Jo husband called the Pastor and explained Jo difficulty while confessing his own embarrassment.

Though not members, Jo did become involved, teaching classes, serving on the Women's Ministry Council, a "second class slot, sort like the NWMS President." Her husband sang in the choir and met the Pastor for breakfast on a weekly basis. In time, they joined the church and Jo was elected to the board and was definitely part of the "inner circle" and was key decision maker.

All the while Jo and her husband attended First Church. Jo was in graduate school and unable to attend all of the church services, much to her husband and her in-laws dismay. "The more I felt that way, the less connected I felt with the church." In time, she resigned her Sunday School post and wanted to simply attend Sunday School with her peers.

I was disappointed to discover that I couldn't connect. There were no other educated women. Oh, there were lots of professional women who were wives of some high level much at mucky muck but no women with to whom I could have serious conversations. The pastor didn't help the matter. He and his submissive wife were heavy into marriage enrichment much to my amusement. He was domineering and she cowered at his command, saying all the right things that I'm convinced weren't right at all.

That whole scenario reinforced her husband's view that men are the "controllers" and women are "controlees". The more Jo resisted that model the more angry her husband became believing Jo to be "backsliding". Still, he attempted to maintain the "Mr. Perfect" image at

church, concerned about appearances. Jo's inability to sense "belonging" and her unwillingness to "try harder". At home, he grew more violent and ultimately resorted to physical abuse. Jo left him and left the Church of the Nazarene.

## **Good Bye to Church of the Nazarene: That Church Can Make You Dysfunctional:**

The perceptions of Jo's peers in the Helping Community, Concerning Nazarenes

Many of Jo's friends and support network affirmed her decision to "drop out". Her group of professional peers believed that the "cardinal doctrine" and the heavy judgment messages were potentially harmful. Here are some of their responses or observations she had made concerning them.

I used to go to bed every night as a child, terrified that I would die during the night and go to hell. I hate Sunday nights to this day." **ex-Naz Clinical Psy**

My sister still gets depressed nearly every Sunday night. Though she is no longer a Nazarene, she still struggles with the terror of dying and going to hell. Rationally, she knows better but emotionally, she struggles.

When she was a child, she frequently screamed hysterically, usually on Sunday nights after an evangelistic service. It is still hard for her to grasp the security of God. **Jo talking about her sister.**

The sickness patients I work with are Nazarenes. I think it has something to do with their understanding of perfection. **Jo's Psychotherapist Friend**

I have never seen such a disturbed group of "normal" kids. By that I mean, these were not psychotic or even seriously disturbed kids. They were just typical Nazarene college students. It must have something to do with that which the Church teaches. **Psychologist**

I, too, have now seen several current Nazarene students in therapy, or rather I should say I tried to see them. They didn't stick. I could not connect with them. There was nothing there inside of them to connect...no available core of realness. No ability to look at themselves openly. Just words they learned in a class to describe something they didn't understand.

They, like my husband have very strong defenses and very strong denial and a very strong need to be perfect.

So, Jo has left but life hasn't necessarily been happy ever after. She continues to work through hosts of issues relative to life as an ex-Nazarene.

**You can take the Girl Out of the Nazarene Church But It's Tough to Take the Nazarene Church Out of the Girl: Jo's Sentiments on Leaving**

While some of my friends were ejected from the system catastrophically (fired), others slipped away quietly in disillusionment. I quit three years ago, feeling more comfortable in being identified with the sinners with the Pharisees. Unfortunately, I have left the church but the church hasn't left me.

By that, Jo confessed that she was having great difficulty in reframing her understanding of God, the person of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, Scriptures, grace, sin and her response to it all, an integrating process that "Nazarendom stifles, prevents or retards..."

"I suppose", she added, "that I would like for the church to be able to accept that some folks must leave and should be able to do so without being pigeonholed as less spiritual." "As for me, I had to." "For my patient's sake, I couldn't remain blind."

### ***There's got to be a morning after: After Jo Dropped Out***

Though it was not commonly known that Jo and her husband separated, no one from the church of which they had been an integral part and members for six years made any kind of contact with them. The pastor, with whom Jo's husband had breakfast on a nearly weekly basis didn't phone nor did anyone identified with the Sunday School or choir.

Jo admits that she was a little surprised that there were no inquiries but quickly added, "It probably wouldn't have made any differences any how." "No one could do anything about the system that contributed to the problem and most of the folks we knew weren't aware there was a problem."

### ***Anxiety Producing Themes: some Contributing Factors to Jo's Decision***

Having read and reread Jo's "case", and having had countless hours of conversation with her, there appears to be several working assumptions about the Church of the Nazarene that finally made her withdrawal from it necessary. A brief review of three or four of these may prove helpful before making some final comments about reinvestment.

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1. She perceives the church to be predominantly legalistic in her growing up years. Accordingly, salvation is a result of our goodness or at least avoidance of sin, "As long as we looked okay and talked okay, we would act like the devil."
2. She believes legalism promotes judgmentalism. Here are a few of her comments on the subject. I guess I am objecting to an overall attitude of judgmentalism. It's an attitude that keeps you at a distance. You can't get close to the people, and really love them if you are judgmental about them. Judgment separates. I think the Nazarene structure is great of people who have difficulty with intimacy, spontaneity, vitality and exuberance of the abundant life. A legalistic, externally oriented system is antithetical

- to those things. I heard judgment. I didn't hear that could never get away from his love. What I could never be free from was judgment.
3. She senses that Nazarenes have difficulty being honest about their own "stuff". After hearing a sermon on sanctification, Jo recalls, I remember writing in my journal, "Lord, is that what it is all about?" She happened to be at the home of her in-laws on that same day and had attended church with them.  
"I tried to initiate conversation about the sermon out my mother-in-law made short work of it." "What's there to discuss?" Jo's mother-in-law went on to add. "I have not sinned nor have i been angry since I was twelve years old for it was then that I was sanctified."  
The same dear sister went on to describe her youngest daughter as being obviously carnal. Jo assess the same person as "being the only one in the family who was able to be assertive and not always so nice." Describing her feelings about the meal. Jo said, "I left the table with feelings of desperation, inadequacy and guilt while being more confessed than ever.
  4. She was convinced that lack of authenticity fueled, denial, projection and alienation.
  5. That feeds yet another problem. If you are in the habit of denying reality, you quite naturally have to do something with your junk (evil) so the easiest thing to do is to project it on someone else, the bad guys (drinkers, smokers, dancers...anyone but me).

### ***Projection can lead to Alienation***

The Nazarene deal with conflict by excluding people who are different. Maybe not directly by certainly indirectly by making them feel unloved or unwelcome. Differences simply isn't tolerated, it's obliterated.

I believe these anxiety producing themes were at work in Jo for twenty years before she made her decision to leave. They are precisely the issues with which she is working during reentry.

### **October 19 is Over: Time to Reinvest**

**Having left the church of the Nazarene, Jo has joined a non-denominational church of 4000. She isn't "real" involved but she does belong to a prayer group that meets monthly. All of her friends are "dynamic committed Christians who live with a clear sense of commitment." "I consider myself the least spiritually mature of the whole bunch."**

"Now, I struggle to free myself from damaging concepts while I continue with my covenant to grow up emotionally while asking God to create in me a loving heart." "I' am growing. It is painful. But it is joyous." "For the first time in my life, God has become friend."