

ABSTRACT

The Abandonment of the Church: A study of church membership decline

by

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This study addresses the decline of church membership and attendance in several rural communities in Virginia. Various factors have resulted in this downward spiral and this study seeks to enlighten the body of faith as to the realities of Christian church membership decreasing. The research further seeks to potentially reverse the decline and potentially inject a turnaround by providing effective practical solutions.

In the words of Thom Rainer, it is unfortunate that the oxymoron “Cultural Christians” even exists. Today’s culture seemingly believes that it is more important to work first and then attempt anything else later. Church is no longer a top priority for the mass majority. It is sad to see the decline of church membership and church involvement in the community. The research and interviews done to complete this dissertation will enlighten as to how we can turn around the demise of the local church.

The term Christianity has been redefined over the years to mean something different depending on the person asked. The very direct and concise definition that many learned and embraced growing up has been replaced with a much looser meaning. It has been reduced to an amorphous term (Williams 4). Major findings were presented with contributing factors and common patterns. The findings show that people are inconsistent in their church attendance yet have a love for and faith in God without longing for a commitment to community fellowship.

The Abandonment of the Church
A Study of Church Membership Decline

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by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
CHAPTER 1 NATURE OF THE PROJECT	1
Overview of the Chapter	1
Personal Experience	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of the Project.....	4
Research Questions	4
Research Question #1	4
Research Question #2	4
Research Question #3	5
Research Question #4.....	5
Rationale for the Project	5
Definition of Key Terms	5
Delimitations	6
Review of Relevant Literature	7
Research Methodology	8
Type of Research	8
Participants	9
Instrumentation.....	9

Data Collection	9
Data Analysis	9
Generalizability	10
Project Overview	10
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT.....	12
Overview of the Chapter.....	12
Church Facts	13
Churches are Shrinking.....	16
Churches are Changing Faces.....	20
Pastors Beware.....	23
Lack of Outreach.....	26
Theological Foundations.....	27
Churches are Living Contrary.....	27
Volunteers are Lacking.	28
Working on the Sabbath	29
Judgmental Church Members	30
Ways to End the Decline.....	31
Church Growth.....	33
Biblical Foundations.....	34
Biblical Committed Worship.....	34
Building the Church.....	38
Pastoral Leadership.....	39

Inward Ministry.....	41
Church Isolation.....	44
Research Design Literature.....	46
Summary of Literature.....	48
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT.....	50
Overview of the Chapter.....	50
Nature and Purpose of the Project.....	50
Research Questions.....	50
Research Question #1.....	50
Research Question #2.....	51
Research Question #3.....	51
Ministry Context(s).....	51
Participants	52
Criteria for Selection	52
Description of Participants	53
Ethical Considerations	53
Instrumentation.....	53
Reliability & Validity of Project Design	53
Data Collection.....	54
Data Analysis.....	54

CHAPTER 4 EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT	56
Overview of the Chapter	56
Participants	56
Table.....	57
Church Attendance Survey.....	60
Research Question #1: Description of Evidence	61
Research Question #2: Description of Evidence	62
Research Question #3: Description of Evidence	63
Research Question #4: Description of Evidence.....	64
Summary of Major Findings	66
CHAPTER 5 LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT	67
Overview of the Chapter	66
Major Findings.....	68
Ministry Implications of the Findings.....	75
Limitations of the Study.....	77
Unexpected Observations	78
Recommendations.....	79
Postscript	80
APPENDIXES.....	82
A. Survey/Interview/Questionnaire Schedule and Questions	82
B. Pastoral interviews.....	85
C. Confidentiality/Anonymity.....	86
D. Consent Form.....	87

WORKS CITED.....88

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CHAPTER 1

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter One, will introduce problems as to why members are leaving the church. As one attends churches across the country and researches the subject of churches with declining membership, a few things are becoming apparent. It is becoming clearer that the majority of people do not attend church on a regularly consistent basis. The American Church Research Project defined a regular attendee as someone who attended at least three services out of every eight Sundays. Using this formula, the results reflected that a paltry 23% could be considered regular participants (Olson 29).

This work will examine the cultural shifts occurring in society that are affecting the local church. Millennials in particular are heavily inclined to experience church in a nontraditional way. The best way to reach a certain age group is to train and equip those in that age group to reach their peers. The rural small church cannot financially compete with mega churches, but this project will uncover ways in which they can spark community interest and retain members. The local church needs to have a resurgence and impact the community in the way it once did. The church needs to reposition itself to make a difference, not only in people's lives spiritually, but also through social involvement, economic empowerment, and challenging individuals to better their mind, body and soul.

Personal Experiences

My experience as a life-long church attendee and pastor has provided me with many personal experiences and reflections which I can use as a starting point to ask important questions. Growing up in the church, I had the opportunity to observe how members would attend church and give weekly. I was also able to see how service was conducted and how

members interacted with one another. As I have matured into an adult, I have noticed distinct differences in the vast majority of churches that I interact with as to how churches operated now as opposed to then. I am unpleasantly surprised that, unlike when I was younger many church members pick and choose a Sunday or two during the month to attend service rather than attend weekly.

There are times that I recall members only attending because they were serving during the service that day. As pastor, I would only see some members when we served communion or on specific holidays like, Easter, Christmas, and Mother's Day. It was also common to see certain members only when their children were singing on Youth Sunday. These instances were all too frequent and presented a problem for me. Finding the root of these issues and what could be done to correct them are at the heart of this research.

Given the opportunity if I could change one thing at the church where I pastor it would be their understanding pertaining to organizational structure. The anomaly that exists there is they do not believe the pastor is the leader of the church especially as it relates to administration. The problem existing is there are families that have been at odds with each other for at least the past decade. They chose not to work together and refuse to cooperate. Their unwillingness to set aside their personal differences is hindering the church from progressing. The constant infighting by these said family systems have been the source of regression and have stunted future growth.

In the Baptist context where I pastor, the congregational system is not conducive for a leader to excel unless the majority is in favor of his decisions. When issues arise or things need to be accomplished, a vote must take place before a quorum. This process is often time consuming and the source of contention. I would enjoy seeing this process changed whereby the pastor can make unilateral decisions. The pastor is the leader and called by God. In order for

things to get accomplished the church body must allow the pastor to lead and so that decisions will be made without bureaucracy, in order for things to get accomplished.

A proven method that enhances church growth in small churches is small groups. I recently proposed doing small groups and several members of one family rejected the idea referencing they felt church members could not keep information confidential. Pastor Larry Osborne, in his book *Sticky Church* describes how churches with a long history of adult Sunday school are prone to reject small groups (Osborne 22). This is certainly a major issue where I pastor, as the Sunday school has become a sub-church that operates independently of the pastor and church bylaws.

In recent months things have worsened as the “pew pastor” has become more determined to usurp my authority and stage a coup d'état. The issue of title and power-hungry individuals is pervasive in the rural church. What further magnifies the issue is the unfortunate truth that the potential leader usually lacks proper education or experience for the position.

Those who are willing to be disrespectful towards the pastor fail to understand or are ignorant to biblical teaching concerning respect for leaders. Don Hooser states that most lack a genuine healthy fear of God. If they knew the repercussion of such disrespectful actions, they would possibly reconsider how they interact and respond to leadership. God will most assuredly judge each of these deeds (Hooser).

Statement of the Problem

There seems to be an apparent exodus from the Christian church. While church planting is popular within many denominations, church doors are closing at an alarming rate every year. The pastoral position in many churches has a very limited timeframe of about three years. In certain localities, there are numerous churches located within the same block. While this may

appear to be a good indication of church vitality, the unfortunate news is many of these churches are at less than half capacity.

Statistics are proving that less than 18% of Americans attend church and the number is trending downward. Far too many churches lack activities for children and youth, therefore parents are turned off by the church's inability to address the needs of each member of the family. There is a major lack of churchgoers inviting others to attend and getting them to do so is not as easy as it sounds (Evans 6).

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research is to determine why rural Christian churches in Virginia are losing congregants and why attendance each week is so inconsistent. This research will be conducted by interviews, focus groups and surveys within churches around the state. The goal is to limit the loss of membership within churches and to provide tools that will increase the sustainability of churches by minimizing decline and enhancing revitalization of the church membership.

Research Questions

Research Question #1

What happened in the church to contribute to the visible decline of membership and attendance?

Research Question #2

What are some of the things the church is actively doing in the community that can be visible by those who are not members of the local church congregation?

Research Question #3

What are the common themes that can be observed within the local churches that are experiencing decline?

Research Question #4

What methods in the church have contributed to church health and growth?

Rationale for the Project

The purpose of this project was to determine why rural Christian churches in Virginia are losing congregants and attendance each week is so inconsistent.

A church is only as strong as its membership. Many churches are losing members, and finances, as well as global and local missionary work, are down. My survey revealed that less than 15% of those in the poll believed members were in service once a week. This is reason enough to search for solutions.

In addition, research reveals that those things that were once used to draw people to church are no longer reaping the same results. A recent survey in Facts & Trend magazine shows the unlikelihood that unchurched people would attend a service for specific events. For example, survey results revealed that 75% would not attend a recovery group. Focus groups such as this are very popular in many churches and serve as an accountability forum, but this survey reflects that unchurched persons are unimpressed by them (Facts & Trends 11).

Definition of Key Terms

In Virginia's Baptist churches, the term "church member" applies to someone who has joined a church congregation. Becoming a church member happens in one of three ways: one must be baptized by water at the said church; a letter must be received stating the individual is leaving their previous church in good standing, or an individual may make a public profession of

their faith and admittance that Jesus is Lord. The term “church member” can also be used interchangeably with “congregant”.

Distinctions are made between new converts and church transfers. People become new converts when they accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior for the first time. An individual will usually stand up during an invitation period, confess publicly their beliefs, and agree to be baptized by water at a later date. The conversion process for a new convert will begin by a process called salvation. Salvation is the deliverance from the power of sin through redemption (Lockyer Sr. 939).

Church transfers happen more frequently when individuals who already knows Christ transfers their membership from one church to another. This act will increase the church roll at the new location and decrease the roll at the last location if the member alerts the former church clerk.

Revitalization means finding ways to breathe new life into the local church. Areas in the ministry that have become stagnant will be examined in order to decide if restructuring should occur or if the ministry should end.

Sustainability means that church membership numbers be maintained and the number of members who leave the church is reduced to a minimum.

Delimitations

In an effort to gather numbers for this study, it was necessary to survey and question Virginia churchgoers, including pastors, who have a proven record of consistent attendance. Those who attend randomly or are engaged in church affairs less than three times a month would not be able to provide enough data and would lack personal observations. It would be difficult for them to relay the information necessary to provide useful answers.

It is important to interview and include a wide-ranging age bracket in this study. The various age differences will best reflect the different thought processes and perspectives shared by young adults and seniors. The community is represented by young adults and seniors so this study should reflect that same demographic.

Review of Relevant Literature

Personal interviews, magazines, articles and the work of leading organizations are all an integral part of this study. Some key sources are mentioned here. The literature review in Chapter Two is more extensive.

Thom Rainer is considered a leading authority on the subject because he has several published books on the subject and has conducted over twenty years of dedicated research. He is the current CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources and the author of several books most notably *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*.

The Barna Group is an organization that has conducted millions of interviews and spent thousands of hours doing research on topics about faith, culture, leadership, vocation, and other related topics. They are a valuable, credible source of relevant statistics and trending behavior.

Alan Hirsch famously said the “church that aims at ministry seldom gets to mission even if it sincerely intends to do so. However, the church that aims at mission will have to do ministry, because ministry is the means to do mission” (Hirsch 236). Ministry and mission will need to go hand in hand if the downward trend is to be thwarted.

In the United States, Christianity has been in decline for decades. In the 1980’s those polled by Gallup had 66% confidence in organized religion compared to 36% in 2019. One instance of decline is how Pope Francis has lost favorability in light of the many sex abuse scandals by priests (Bailey 1).

George Barna discusses the lack of faith and vitality that can be observed in many churches. Churches across the country have become a ministry in theory only and a memory of what they used to be in terms of in-reach or outreach taking place. The buildings may be open for services, but lives are not impacted in a significant way. These churches have a few faithful, committed members and can afford to keep the lights on and afford a speaker, but they are not fulfilling their duty as a vibrant church (Barna 22-23).

The rate of religious attendance is the same now, in 2020, as it was in 2009. This reflects decline, because the population has grown the rate of Christians in the country is less. Once or twice a month attending a service has become the norm for the majority of church members (Pew 1).

When churches practice Biblical principles toward evangelism and mission work, they can experience a turnaround in members attending more. The issue at hand is whether or not the church is being Biblical and, faithful and being a Christian presence in the community (Stetzer and Dodson 4).

Research Methodology

Surveys and personal interviews will be the most engaging and logical way to gather the information necessary for this study. Church history and historical data will also provide information to determine a downward spiral in membership and attendance.

Type of Research

Pre-intervention will be the goal of this research. Church decline and lack of participation by members is not beneficial to the overall mission that God has called His disciples to fulfill. The goal of this study is to gather data detailing why church membership has declined and to conclude with solutions to intervene and turn that decline around.

Participants

Five pastors will be the primary participants because they see the congregation each week and have varied interactions with the members. They are all thirty-five years of age or older and are African American.

Current and former church members are also participants because they are the most familiar with the church context and culture. These individuals will be at least eighteen years of age and attend worship services at least twice a month.

Instrumentation

This study employed an exploratory, mixed-methods design. In order to respond to the goal of this project, data collection relied on a few different instruments. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with church pastors. A questionnaire hosted by a professional site was used to ask specific questions about church attendance and absences, and follow-up questions were asked of the interviewed pastors as more questions arose and needed clarity.

Data Collection

This study occurred over six months. The researcher interviewed several pastors and had them invite congregants to participate in an online survey. The interviews occurred face-to-face in a private setting. The interviews were recorded on a password-protected device and will be deleted upon completion of this research. Those who participated in the online survey did so of their own free will and were anonymous. The researcher formulated a list of factors from the data and shared the major findings with judicatory persons.

Data Analysis

This research used a mixed-methods approach with qualitative and quantitative instruments to collect data. For quantitative data collection, a survey within SurveyMonkey was used a

(Appendix A). This was an online survey that asked people to rate 50 statements and questions from 1-5 that best describe their congregation to assess the overall health and vitality of the church. This data collection tool provided data to identify theological and system behaviors of church vitality.

Generalizability

The intent of the study was to address the current downward slide of church attendance. There are common trends in declining churches that need to be addressed and this study does that. Suggestions for improving growth would benefit many ministries. The information shared is helpful for pastors to study and embrace. Because many are not aware of the decline, this study will be enlightening. The applicability and practicality of implementing findings of this study is simple and not defined by demographics or size of the church.

Project Overview

This project was designed and completed to study churches that are in decline and offer a resolution that will curb the membership decrease. The purpose of this research was to determine why rural Christian churches in Virginia are losing congregants and why attendance each week is so inconsistent. The goal is to then use the findings to turn things around by gaining new members and retaining long-term congregants. This research revealed there are common patterns between the churches studied and similar contributing factors. This work also provided significant insights that may help other congregations turnaround if they struggle to maintain vitality and growth.

This project was compiled and designed to study churches that are in decline and offer a resolution that will curb the membership decrease. This research work provided insights that offer ways to turnaround a ministry that may be struggling to grow and remain relevant in the community. The Biblical foundations of this work help aim attention on the mission and heart of God that speaks to spreading the gospel. Theological behaviors are developed from

understanding Biblical teachings, and they will be focused on the factors that stress advancing the gospel.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The church membership of the local church body must be rooted in Biblical and theological foundations. The issue of members leaving the church is a broad problem that has to be confronted and addressed. Understanding the value of people and the impact they can make on the life of the church will be of great benefit to the leadership team within the church. Concepts researched and synopsized here will provide insight that can potentially curb church decline. Attending church is an outward demonstration of one's expression of faith. Church attendance is a public expression of one's inner belief that like-minded believers fellowship together. Church members do not always attend church each week. When examining those who attend church services with inconsistency, the overall church attendance number is reduced (Barna 5).

Important Questions to Ask

Schultz asked many questions in his book *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* that pertain to why church attendance may be lower in 2020 than in years past. Is anyone asking why do those who love Christ skip church on Sunday morning? Why playing sports on Sunday is so important? Why is it okay to sleep in on Sunday morning? Why is church no longer the priority it once was? Why is it okay to exchange morning church time for eating breakfast or brunch (Schultz 21)?

Church Facts

The following verse makes it apparently clear that Christians are to live their lives in a manner that includes sharing their faith with others. Matthew 28:19-20 King James Version says “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Because believers are commanded, and therefore expected, to share their faith it seems odd that the church would be in decline. There is no ambiguity in the Bible as to the required mission work of the church, but it would be hard to gauge the percentage of those who are actually witnessing. Many of today’s churches seem self-absorbed and uninterested in reaching out into the community. Regression is nothing new; the Hebrews were sent a letter not long after the first church because there was a functional and theological decline (Hull 87).

The word of God teaches people to be care about the welfare and well-being of others, yet far too many selfishly focus on their own desires. By simply adhering to the Biblical teachings to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love thy neighbor, the local church would grow. Growth would result almost by default because people are drawn to places that help others and make a positive difference in the community. Many believe that pastors are getting rich, yet are invisible in the community and that churches of today are nice big beautiful buildings yet one hardly hears of them doing anything for others outside of their community. The research will hopefully shed light on why many churches now focus inward rather than outward and how shifting to outreach ministry will not only grow the church numerically but also bless God.

Many church budgets do not include money for missionary work. Many rural churches are so strapped for cash that they do not include outreach in their budget and that within and of

itself is a major problem. Thom Rainer' points out that grow a healthy church outline how giving to the local church lags behind economic growth. One way the church misses out on funding for example is when a member loses their job. Once the member regains employment, they are unlikely to give at a pace that would include the weekly giving they missed while unemployed (Rainer).

Seventy-three percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians. A common saying in America today by self-identifying Christians is that they do not have to attend church to have a relationship with God. Church attendance is in decline, and one major reason is because of the nonchalant attitude many have towards church attendance. Unfortunately, the world is moving from a place that overwhelmingly and openly embraces Christendom to a post-Christendom society (Brown 3).

Church is no longer the center of American life, and cultural beliefs are shifting to a place that systematically alienates the church of Christendom. This change has been small yet consistent. This shift is illustrated by the educational system in the United States. Until 1986, the Bible was a book taught in American schools when it then became illegal to do so. That was the first year that the Bible was not a part of each student's primary or secondary curriculum (Brown 3).

Church attendance is down so much that many are unwilling to accept the truth and will misrepresent the fact that they do not attend as much as they claim. While 40% of church goers claim to attend on a weekly basis, the number is closer to 20%. Those who attend are getting older, and with each generation the percent grows higher of those who are unaffiliated with church. Many will say that God exists but getting them to attend church is a difficult task. Eighty

percent of Americans have a belief that God is real but only a quarter of that number will attend church weekly, which is disheartening (Thumma).

Overall, church numbers are down 30% from 1990-2005. Mainline churches, including Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed, and Pentecostal, represent the fastest decline. These mainline churches do best in conservative states as opposed to liberal states, which may seem counter to common sense (Olson 77). In the Southern states there is a significant jump in immigration and growth, yet church attendance is not keeping pace (Olson 75).

Ed Setzer discusses how nominal Christians are becoming the none while Christians who have been convicted remain committed. In other words, there are certain Christians disassociating with the name Christian but still practicing the beliefs. He suggests that Christianity is not collapsing but rather nominalism is in free fall. A 2014 General Social Survey found that in the last two years of the study a larger percentage of evangelicals attend church than at any other time in the last 40 years. At present 55 % of evangelicals attend church at least once a week (Setzer and Dodson 3)

Many who attend church are beginning to voice their displeasure about not experiencing God in a real way during Sunday morning worship services. According to research by the Barna Group only 44% who attend regularly, say they experience God at church (Barna).

The backlash of the Bible not being taught on a regular basis to children has an effect on how they view life and faith. According to George Barna, only 3% of the nation's 13-year-olds have a biblical worldview (Barna 37). When the Christian faith was openly and widely accepted, there was a strong congruent relationship between the church, government, and education (Carter 14). It is not clear how the church can survive without the support of the youth.

Money is an essential part of maintaining a healthy church. In 2000, a study revealed that 31% of churches had healthy finances, but that number had dwindled down to 14% by 2010. Giving is down across the board in the majority of churches, and it continues to decline. Each year over two million church members fall from active to inactive status. One very concerning and alarming statistic is that half of all churches in America did not add one new member between 2010 to 2012. Two full years of zero growth, and this does not reflect those who died or left the congregation (Hewitt 3).

Churches such as those led by T.D. Jakes and Joel Osteen are considered mega churches and have 20,000 plus members. When there are churches of this magnitude, one can easily assume that church membership is not in decline. By focusing on mega churches one can miss the fact that rural churches are getting smaller. As rural churches lose members, it is becoming increasingly harder to pay the electric bill, insurances, and salaries (Smietana).

Churches are shrinking

Times are ever changing and so is the focus of many churches. It is challenging to write about and research how the church is losing members and how outreach ministry is dwindling. History has shown that when Jesus is not the focal point and His instructions are not followed then the results will be minimal or temporary. Leaders are deviating from the simplicity of the gospel and focusing more on antics and programs. The sad reality is that many churches are filling pews yet are unaware that God's will is completely being ignored. There was a pastor who once served at a church there was a lot of focus on in-reach but little focus on out-reach. He attempted to make it very clear that by solely focusing on the members who attended on Sunday that the church membership would decline and in 10-15 years, the church would cease to exist. A church can invite members of the community and encourage members to bring friends, and the

church could grow and add a generation. If the great commission is not a part of the church mission, then the church is sure to die off.

Outreach ministry can be defined by the programs that churches provide to fulfill its mission. Those programs or services offered to people in the community, not solely exclusive to church members, could be tutoring after school, evangelism on the streets, food banks, or social movements. The programs are not be the main focal point of the church but serve a great purpose in defining the church's whole identity. The in-reach focus on those who are members will grow the people's love and commitment to the Lord (Sider et al., 66).

Hopefully, this research will bring awareness to the fact that many churches need redirection and discipline to discipleship. The word of God as spoken in Matthew 28:19 is still relevant today. Matthew said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

When Jesus spoke these words, they were spoken into perpetuity. This commandment was given to those who were following Him as He walked the earth and for those who would follow Him in the future. There is no expiration date on this commandment. This message seems to be losing ground as time goes on. As the focus shifts to praise teams, programs and services void of preaching the idea of spreading the gospel is seemingly being lost.

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey of those who identify as Christians and the number has decreased from 78% in 2007 to 71% in 2014. The number of religiously unaffiliated rose from 16 to 23% during the same time-period (Powell et al. 70). The Protestant community suffered the greatest loss as membership declined by 5 million people. A contributing factor to the decrease is that the American church is aging, and young people are not as involved as they once were. Young adults aged 18 to 29 make up 22% of the population yet make up less than

10% of congregations. Pastors and church leaders must address this withdrawal from the church and work to correct it (Powell et al. 70).

LifeWay Research found that 7 out of 10 Protestants between the ages of 18-30 who had attended church regularly during high school quit attending altogether by age 23. By age 30 a third of them still had not returned. One quarter of Protestant young adults have abandoned the church (B. Allen, 2). Barna Group research found that 60% of young people leave the church for an extended period of time starting around age 15 (B. Allen, 3). A study done by the Millennial Values Survey revealed that whether a teen lived with their parents or not did not make a difference in church attendance. One reason for disengaging from religion is that they believe their faith does not seem relevant in their daily lives (B. Allen 8).

According to excerpts from *The Condition of the Church in America* compiled by Andy McAdams, 1,400 pastors leave the ministry on a monthly basis. These pastors are leaving because of spiritual burnout, contention in the church, and moral failure (McAdams 2). A paltry 15% of churches in America experience growth, and just 2.2% of those are growing by new converts joining their membership. In a 5-year period, 10,000 churches in America have disappeared. The number of those who do not attend church has doubled in the past 15 years (McAdams 2).

People who do not commit to a ministry cannot make a significant impact on these trends, and they contribute to the numbers of church attendance with irregularity. Carey Nieuwhof discusses some very good points about people who attend multiple churches. When this happens, these individuals bounce around from church to church with no real commitment to the ministry. This can be compared to dating with no commitment, engagement, or investment

and is an expression of a consumer culture where one can take but feel no longing to give. This lack of commitment contributes little to nothing to the mission of the church (Nieuwhof).

The decline in church attendance is a very real problem, yet it is a topic that few desire to discuss. The Great Commission is becoming a vanishing mission, and the decline of church membership is directly attached to it. If the topic is not being discussed, then it must be asked if the church really thinks decline is a problem. Whether pastors and leaders are willing to accept the truth is one thing, but facts and figures do not lie. *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* compiled data from over 300,000 Christian congregations in the United States of America and found that over 17 percent of the American population attends church. Conversely, that means that over 80% do not attend services. Since 2004, the number has increased of those who do not attend (Olson 177).

The increase in church growth is failing to keep pace with population growth of the country. Half of all churches failed to add one new convert in a calendar year. Nominalism and secularism are the main reasons for diminished church growth (Goodmason 2). Church transfer seems to be the going trend in which churches are growing or internally. This growth is happening by member's children or family joining or by believers switching church or joining from other denominations. Some refer to this as shuffling the deck. It is still the same deck of cards just at a different table.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a survey. The report depicted the diverse national religious life. There is an apparent shift of individuals changing religions or denominational affiliations. This includes more attention being placed on holding onto the members currently in place than evangelizing the community if an effort to bring more into the fellowship (Pew).

A look at Christianity in China will put the plight of the religion in America into a better perspective. Christianity is shunned in China and forbidden yet it is estimated that millions of Christians exist there (Philip 48). Why then would some risk their freedom and lives for their faith in a country where it is rejected yet in American many fail to express their faith in a country with religious liberty? David Aikman former writer from *Time* magazine estimates there may be 80 million Christians in the country even though they face repeated persecution (Phillip 48).

Changing Face of Churches

The church of today is vastly different that it was fifty to sixty years ago. The differences can be found in the outward design and architectural structure of the building but also in the lack of people worshipping in the pews. The inward focus of the local church has stunted its exponential growth. The outreach ministries that once focused on others in the neighborhood are now more centered on only the members of that particular church in many cases. There are those who reminisce about having a world similar to the Ward and June Clever days when families were closer knit and went to church together. Those times were filled with how much influence the church had on the world and not the other way around. Those days are seemingly gone now, as the church seems to have an agenda of caring more about entertainment than it does about winning the souls of the lost. This inward focus has led to stagnation and declining membership. Some research shows the decline began around 1965 within the 24 mainline denominations (Olson 177).

Say it with us: “The church is broken.” These are the words of Thom and Joani Schultz as written in *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*. There needs to be an admission that believers need to work together and as of this writing that just is not happening. Accountability and taking ownership of the problem must happen. The majority of those who claim to believe

do not attend a house of worship and this must be corrected if the church is to ever grow. The fastest growing segment in America as it relates to religion is the portion of those who claim no religious affiliation at all (Schultz 17).

This current generation must be willing to embrace the fact that ministry and the way church services are conducted is changing. Sunday school was once one of the key centerpieces that drew seekers of biblical knowledge to the church. When I was a child Sunday school attendance was required of me by my parents. Classes were broken down into groups by age and gender. Some of my most vivid memories were of the women and men's Sunday school classes involved in heated discussion. It was so popular that some would only attend their designated class and then leave before church began. Sunday school has lost its popularity amongst many pastors across the country and it is fading fast from the local church (Bird 21).

Online and television services are becoming the norm and mainstream. With avenues such as this gaining popularity traditional sit-down church services are decreasing, and attendance is shrinking. Millennials are predominantly shifting towards one of two preferences as it relates to the church. They have been labeled "nones" and "dones". Nones are those who have no preference and do not choose to align themselves with one religion or another. There are those who have served and attended faithfully yet desire to walk away from organized religion (McSwain 2).

There is a segment of America that also must be accounted for and that is the unchurched. Why people are leaving the church matters and the answer to this question is critical to understanding how to curb the decline of church membership. Not too long ago church attendance and basic biblical knowledge was the norm for most Americans. Culture in the

country is changing swiftly and shifting from many being churchgoers to becoming churchless (Barna and Kinnaman 3).

The downward spiral of the church losing the normative part of American life started to happen in the 1990s. During this decade studies revealed that, one out of seven adults who were unchurched had never attended church on a regular basis. Fast forward to the 2010s and the number has increased to one-quarter (Barna and Kinnaman 21).

Studies show that church growth is not keeping pace with the influx of people in the country. Many churches are not adding one new member through conversion growth in a calendar year. Nominalism and secularism are claiming church members too (Goodmason 2). The representation of churches that are growing is around 15% and of those less than 3% are from conversion growth (Chuang 4). The longevity and loyalty of commitment to one church seems to be outdated. Internal growth is mostly what is occurring, and this is where members are changing membership from one church to another. Members church hopping is similar to shuffling a deck of cards. A new pastor comes into the community and members of other church go visit to check it out then subsequently join. Less money is spent to lure or simply embrace members from other churches. Therefore, it becomes a matter of financial resources and lack of effort for not developing methods to reach the unchurched and lost.

Jesus was and always will be concerned about humanity and the advancement of love being spread throughout the world. The central and key focus of the church should not solely be the church and only the local membership but the world at large (Sweet 68). The original twelve disciples were sent out into the world as well as the seventy-two others who later were sent forth with one theme and that was to make more disciples. The shift in what is termed ministry and what is actually doing the work of God has become very blurred. During the days of Jesus

ministry would entail healing the sick and preaching to the lost. Quite different in 2018 church leaders may call having youth over to the church for a pizza party ministry. Preaching inside of four walls and interacting with church members has its place but it will not affect the overall state of the world in terms of being spiritually depraved. The church must go out into the world to make a difference and become uncomfortable in their cushioned pews to the point of engaging the lost, hurt and broken. In the same manner Jesus did most of his ministry outside of the synagogue so must the current church of today.

Pastors be Aware

There is no shortage of verses in the bible about leadership principles. One example rarely seen in society today but was recorded in the bible is the passing of the mantle between Elijah and Elisha. Mostly like to be seen especially in the Baptist church is when the membership will have a vote to affirm the person to pastor the church. The important thing to remember when being voted in is that the membership can also vote the individual out. Continuity is necessary to bring about not only change but also results. If a pastor is to implement ministry and teams to evangelize the community they need to have leaders surrounding them with a like mindset. General Colin Powell once said “You have achieved excellence as a leader when people will follow you everywhere if only out of curiosity.”

Many pastors have said that a pastor cannot truly begin to be the pastor until seven years have passed. The reason time has to pass is to build trust and so those who oppose him/her can leave the church or possibly have died. A title alone will not make members follow. A title will not automatically make someone the leader because a leader must have followers. Influence is necessary to move people in a new direction. To be certain and for sure a person can lead and not just manage others simply ask them to create positive change (Maxwell 14).

Jesus did not leave the church powerless and disabled when He ascended to heaven. In His "Great Commission" Jesus said, Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: 10, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matt 28:19-20) In his writing, John MacArthur states that in this verse, Jesus not only has the authority to command us as the church to go and win the lost to Christ, but He has also given us the power to obey His command. MacArthur writes, it was in light of His absolute, sovereign authority that Jesus commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." The transitional word is therefore. "Because I am Sovereign Lord of the universe," Jesus was saying, "I have both the authority to command you to be my witnesses and the power to enable you to obey that command (Macarthur 340). In the Mount of Olives, as the Lord was preparing to ascend to His throne in heaven beside the Father, Jesus said, "But ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8). These verses are directly linked to the views God has for those who accept and believe on Him. Those who love the lord must be ready and willing to share with others that Jesus is the only way. God not only allowed humankind to have a word to read and inspire them but to compel them to advance the gospel throughout the world. Sharing the gospel and good news of God is the minimal expectation and the least a believer can do.

Marvin McMickle, in his book *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* Deals with the importance of preachers not only speaking powerful words but the need for inter-connection of speech and action (Tisdale 91). This generation is short on hearing words and long on seeing action. The preachers and pastors of today's church must be willing to walk to the talk.

A pastor must be willing to confront church goers, like Moses when he went to Pharoah and delivered God's instructions. Amos did not take a back seat when he spoke against King Jeroboam. Nathan confronted David and declared, "You are the man." Whatever the prophet of God is willing to speak about, He must also be willing to act on (Tisdale 91).

Preachers must have the courage to care. They must develop this within themselves and commit to it. Hearts and emotions must be invested in the things that matter most when preaching. Eloquence and zeal are the hallmarks that are the makings of a good preacher (Tisdale 92).

The pastor who is truly called of God to pastor will face many trials and tribulations and suffer through many situations. The apostle Paul is recorded in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 as saying, "We do not lose heart. Though hourly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." The work of being a pastor cannot be underestimated or understated. The task of preaching the gospel and adding souls to the kingdom is an arduous journey, and one will inevitably show the physical signs of wear and tear. Paul reflected the model that pastors should attempt to mimic. He did not show self-doubt or self-pity, rather he pressed his way to spread and advance the gospel (Thomas 15).

A pastor or preacher can have integrity, model stability, be a paradigm of responsibility and yet create empty seats because their preaching is not fulfilling to the people. When people attend church week after week but go home feeling empty, they will leave the church (Wise 167)

Lack of Outreach

Many churches in rural county areas have very little to no community involvement. Most of the activities and services within the small rural churches are structured for those who are

members or regularly attend the worship services. Due to a lack of outward and community focus the sustainability of these churches are in question. In many cases evangelism and missionary activity is either void or misplaced. Leaders are so focused on those who attend and on catering to their needs that they are missing the opportunity to canvas the neighborhoods and affect the area. For example, a local church could ensure that everyone within a three-mile radius know the pastor, church location, times and mission of the church. By making the presence of the church known, it would at least afford people an opportunity to come to service by way of personal invite and be acquainted with the local church. Growth will not and cannot occur without interaction in the community. A downward spiral began in 1965 and is expected to continue in all denominations (Olson 177).

The apostle Luke refers to one sheep separating itself from the rest of the others. One must consider whether it is more important to stay with the ninety-nine or recover the one that has wandered away. Sadly, too many churches are focused only on the ones who stay, but ministry and the words of Christ reflect the need to intentionally go after the one who has strayed. With so many sermons and services tailored around the topic of prosperity and riches, it is no surprise that the foundation of the church is weak and unstable. While the messages have their place and certainly can be Biblically based, they do not possess life-changing power as found in the saving grace of the message of the gospel.

Outreach should not just be included in a mission statement or casually mentioned during discipleship class; it must be the focus of every church. Jesus called out to every believer to spread the good news. When Christ first encountered the fishermen, He instructed them to drop their nets and follow Him. Matthew 4:19 states, “And he saith unto them, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Jesus is willing to transform those who follow Him into fishers of

people.” This willingness to transform and instruct is why the pastor and leadership of the church must dedicate time and energy to growing the numerical status of the local church. Preaching and spreading the gospel outside of the confines of the local church is what ministry is all about.

The reality is that many will not reach out to people because it will cost them something. People must leave their sinful life behind and follow Christ. A fisher of men must commit to prayer and fasting. They must also dedicate time and attention to studying the word and teachings of God. Letting go of a familiar lifestyle is costly. Jesus beckoned the four fishermen to leave behind their family, friends, possessions, and other familiar things. In essence, He was saying abandon everything, deny yourself, and follow me (Platt 21).

The Lord declares that He will give people time to turn to Him according to 2 Peter 3:9. Each generation is finding that the outsiders of the church are growing in number. Because each generation has more than the last, there is little wonder that, the culture of not attending church is growing. The majority of Americans identify themselves as Christians. However, many of those who confess Christ simply do not attend a place of worship to express their faith. It is hard to capture the depth of someone’s faith, but surveys and research can reflect actual church attendance (Kinnaman 19).

Theological Foundations

Christians are Living Contrary

The current state of the church is in a critical place because far too many who attend and become members are professing their love for Christ but living contrary to His teachings. Craig Groeschel discusses this in his book *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living as if He Does Not Exist*. Those who follow Christ should have lives that reflect and mirror the life He lived and taught. Groeschel shares how the lives of many believers closely resembles the lives of

those who are unsaved and this should not be the case. Church attendees need to begin living transformed lives as ones having been redeemed and do so with urgency. Groeschel had a life changing experience in college, one that all ministers should have at some point in their journey. He felt God set him aside to share the gospel across the world and to tell everyone he knew about Christ. The warning he issued was for those called to ministry to never let the work become a job (Groeschel 26).

In *Not a Fan*, Kyle Idleman shares the¹ narrative that many are fans of Jesus and not really followers. Those who follow Christ desire to be in His company because of who He is and not what He can do. Followers seek out those who are lost because they are concerned about the well-being of their spiritual destiny.

Volunteers lacking

One major thing that is hurting the church is the lack of overall participation from the membership including the inability to find those who will volunteer. Bob Rognlien, author of *Empowering Missional Disciples*, discusses a time when he felt frustrated because he was unable to gather the amount of leaders necessary to do many of the church programs. During the meeting, members of his dedicated team were shedding tears of frustration trying to figure out what was wrong. If good fruit lasts, as Jesus taught in John 15:16 then they should have been able to find help when they needed it (Rognlien 7).

Good volunteers are hard to find. There are often a few members who hold multiple positions and to ask more of them is unfair. There are many who are satisfied doing absolutely nothing. This problem is real and widespread in many churches. The reasons may vary depending on the area and congregation, but the results are the same. When churches lack volunteers, less will be done.

Working on the Sabbath

A scripture found in the Old Testament states Exodus 20:8-11: ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: ¹⁰ But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it. Times have changed, as in 2017 more women work in the workforce and more work on Sunday. The number of women working rose from 18 million to 66 million by the year 2000 that is an annual growth rate of 2.6% (Tooss 15).

Due to the increase in Americans working on Sunday, it is often used as a day to work additional hours or rest. One-fifth of Americans admit to going to religious services a few times a year but say there was a time they used to go a lot more. Half of those say that practical issues prohibit them from going. These issues include being busy and, having a hectic life or crazy work schedule. Then there are those whom say that attending services is just not high on their list as they have other things to do deemed more important (Green 7).

Churches should consider alternate times to Sunday morning worship because today's culture is a 24/7 one. For example one business professional admitted he changed churches because he had to fly out on Sundays and Saturday services worked better for him (Rainer, Number One Reason 13).

The issue is that when given the option to work overtime or to earn a living many will not say no to working on Sunday. While there are many churches mostly the larger ones that offer

different days to worship, Sunday is still the most popular day to worship in church. Church attendance is in decline partly because so many now work on the weekends.

As culture changes churchgoers are adapting as well. More women now work as households require additional income or single mothers are the head of household. This is significant because this increase in women working will cause them to not be available occasionally on Sundays. The factor most responsible for the earlier high growth rate was the rapid increase in the labor force participation rate of women, which stood at 34 percent in 1950 and increased to 60 percent by 2000. The number of women in the labor force rose from 18 million in 1950 to 66 million in 2000, an annual growth rate of 2.6 percent (Toosi 1).

Judgmental Church Members

Church members have a way of looking at newcomers in a way that is not welcoming. Often in the rural church the membership consists of a lot of relative and those who live within a short distance of one another. Many newcomers do not feel welcomed by these church communities.

One church also admitted that there was an attitude of “we are better than you” that was felt by young churchgoers. They further mentioned that it seemed that the focus was too much on people’s faults (Kinnaman 183). People who feel uncomfortable on their initial visit will probably not want to return a second time to be mistreated. There was an instance when a member that had a drinking problem joined a local church. Members of the church talked about him among themselves and in the community. He found out this was happening and stopped attending. Rather than talk about him and judging him because of his flaws they should have shown compassion and love.

There are times when Christians can be hypocritical, mean spirited, and judgmental. When a Christian acts out in an unchristian manner, even those outside of the church and non-Christians will know when something is amiss. The Apostle Paul was very descriptive of the attributes and characteristics every believer is to strive for as written in Galatians 5:22-23. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control are all things Christians must exhibit. Jesus warned His followers not to judge others unless they want to receive judgment. As those striving to do better believers must remember that not all will be on the same page or at the same pace of progression (Hamilton 10).

Ways to end the decline

In order to curb the decline of church members, church leaders and disciples of Christ must develop ideas and methods that are practical and able to be implemented. Thom Rainer is the president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources and founding dean of Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism as well as a popular Christian author. He has a few suggestions that can make a difference with church growth. Having led a church and denominational consulting firm for fifteen years he is duly qualified to offer a unique perspective. He offers multiple points that can provoke thought for making necessary changes.

The first point he offers is an unfortunate trend currently existing in American churches. People no longer see the need to attend church. Some blame it on the culture while others may say it is bad politics. Others will say pastors do not care as much as they used to and too many members are hypocritical (Rainer, The Number One 5).

Internet usage is at an all time high, and religious services are broadcast around the world via television. With so many options to view or hear gospel music and sermons without ever setting foot in a church building, believers are often choosing to not attend. Many no longer feel

the need to be a church member, and the sense of being a part of a Christian community is fading. For those who do attend their attendance is infrequent and inconsistent.

Second, the running joke amongst pastors is who has the most “CME” members. “CME” stand for Christmas, Mother’s Day, and Easter. These three services typically represent the highest attendance throughout the year for most churches. Churches cannot remain self-sustainable from the attendance of only three services. There are even those who only attend when communion or food is being served (Rainer, *The Number One* 15).

Studies reflect an increase in attendance for holiday events held at churches. LifeWay Research found six out of ten Americans would typically attend a church service during Christmas time. Americans living in the South attend at the highest percentage while those out West attend at the lowest. The research further found that more would attend if someone would just ask them to come (Pipes 1).

Third, there are churches that do not have expectations of their members or they are set very low. When nothing is expected, many will deliver and make good on the low expectation. Rainer believes an insufficient emphasis on groups is a reason that members are disconnected with one another. Small groups have the ability to assist with assimilation and camaraderie within the church body. Sunday school classes once served a similar purpose, but many churches are no longer offering them. There are too many churches which are only focused on themselves and have a me, myself, and I mindset. Congregations cannot appreciate the edifice more than the people who fill the seats inside the building.

Churches that are evangelistic and have missionary missions are committed to teaching discipleship. The pastor and church leaders are committed to teaching the Biblical understanding of what it will take to advance the gospel outside of the church walls. Lastly, Rainer also

believes successful churches will have multiple locations or campuses. In his opinion, those without multi-venues are not strategically designed to grow. These points should not suggest that these are the only ways to grow a ministry, but they provide a good place to start the conversation about how to halt the decline (Rainer).

Pastor Jamie Loya says that if you preach Christ, the people will come. People will unite their race, language, gender, or generation, and these things will not matter. The one thing all have in common is all are sinners, and all need a Savior. Preach the cross, and the people will come (Loya 41) While in theory this method of preaching only sounds appealing, this is not all that the church must do. From the early days of the church, it was God's intention to send the church members out from the church into the outer ends of the earth (Moreau, Corwin & McGee 54).

The impact of discipleship must never get lost as time passes; the early church made discipleship a priority. Throughout chapter two of Acts, discipleship principles are foundational. The first disciples were keen on making other disciples. The principle of discipleship was second nature in most things they were doing, especially in the Jerusalem church (Hull 62). Sheep breed sheep. This understanding mirrors what Jesus was teaching and firmly places the responsibility on members to be concerned with growing the local church.

Church Growth

The church is not the building and the word "church" has taken on a two-fold meaning to mean a body of people and/or a building. Jesus Christ must be the centerpiece of the church (Wellman). Ephesians 2:20, "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." When Christ is the center, it becomes all

about Him and not about antics or theatrics. Since Christ is the center of the Bible then it is only right that He be the center of the church.

There must be a drawing of the Spirit as no one is coming to God on their own as the word states in John 6:44 that God draws the people. “Helko” is the word used for “draw”, and it is a mistranslation because it does not mean draw but rather to drag, led or impel by an inner power. If the Spirit is bringing people to God, one must consider why are people leaving the church (Wellman).

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch believe that the missional-incarnational church will make Christian teaching attractive by being a living example for who have not yet embraced it (Hammond and Cronshaw 44).

Biblical Foundations for church growth

Biblical Committed Worship

It is God’s desire for humanity to only worship Him. Exodus 20:2-3, “I am the Lord thy God thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” The idea of worship and commitment is nothing new to God and is detailed in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. God is faithful to guide and protect those who worship and honor Him. Deuteronomy 5:6-7 echoes the same sentiment.

Psalms 133:1, “We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.” There is great wisdom and comfort in knowing there are others who are like-minded in their beliefs and have the ability to worship as a harmonious unit together in one place. While the words church and assembling together may not be written, it is apparently clear that God has always desired for believers to worship together.

What follows is an examination of five additional Biblical texts to illuminate a Biblical foundation for the church to grow: Acts 2:42-47, Acts 11:21, Acts 5:14, Acts 16:5, and Matt. 16:18.

Acts 2:42-47.

In these verses, the author details two distinct things that would grow and sustain a healthy church. The first thing believers must do is continue steadfast in good Biblical doctrine. Those who are able to follow and adhere to the instructions of the Bible will have little to no desire to leave the church. When the pastor and leaders of the congregation provide steadfast doctrine, as the apostles taught the early church, then God is able to speak and move in a clearer, more effective way. This suggestion may sound simple and to be expected but many modern churches use different methods to attract people that may or may not include firm doctrinal truth (Walvoord and Zuck 360).

Many professed believers of the gospel believe that the Bible is the authoritative source and guide for faith and practice. Humans are inclined to exhibit depraved behavior and God alone is the cure for humanity's fallen nature. There is a propensity to sin innate in man since sin entered into the world. Good stories, poems, or clichés will not evoke the power of the Holy Spirit to convict and redirect, that power is reserved through prayer and understanding of the holy word (Elwell 406). Given the amount of so-called preaching on Sundays from men and women in the pulpit that is void of any scriptural accuracy there is no wonder a great falling away from the church is occurring.

Acts 11:21.

“And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord” KJV.

If the focal point of the church is not to make disciples of all nations, then the growth of the church can become a sidebar and not the main purpose. Those who know God in an intimate way must show concern and have compassion towards those outside of the church. Thom Rainer describes performing an autopsy on the church in order to get to the root of the problems as to why a particular church is losing members. He suggested dissecting the church issues and pulling apart all of the main problems in order to discover how to turn the situation around. Witnessing the demise of a church can be traumatic and those who desire to see it turn around must be ready and willing to commit to the difficult task that will lay ahead (Rainer, Seven Key 8).

The trauma of observing an autopsy is only beneficial if it is received as a warning to the living. This process is not about dwelling on the past but bearing fruit in the future. The prayer commitment in each chapter of Rainer's book is a positive challenge, where others may have failed. These commitments are vital. The state of the world and the direction of it can be redirected by the ideals of the universal church. In order for this to happen churches must rediscover the model Jesus provided.

God has a desire that all would turn to Him. It is so important that people turn to God that He has His hand on His people. Not everyone will embrace God and His commandments but it is still His desire that they will. The goal of the Christian church is for all who enter the sanctuary to accept Christ and for those who encounter its members to turn to the Lord. The church body has to fully understand and become reacquainted with God's intended purpose. The hand of the Lord is all-powerful. The prophet Jabez confirmed as such when he called on the name of the Lord by asking for His hand to be with him.

A pastor must have a desire to lead and a burden to care for the flock. Pastor Tony Evans stated that as a pastor he frequently has carried the burden of people's hurt, pain, and

disappointments. Yet he counted this burden as one of his greatest joys (Evans 9). Pastors must also have resiliency to stay the course for the long haul. Pastors are called and selected to be leaders; they are to have deep faith and be unwavering in the position to follow Christ at all times. Preachers preach messages of motivation and enlightenment yet sometimes they need to apply to their own lives what they have preached to others. (Beecher 33).

Acts 5:14.

God is about the mathematics of multiplication. Adding to the church is an outward manifestation of an individual accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. It is important to establish the things that God favors, in order to clearly define a plan of how to go against it. Mission work was being accomplished in these verses. The word mission never appears in the Bible but the Bible is still a missionary text from cover to cover (Moreau and Corwin 25).

Acts 16:5.

As churches were established in the faith, they increased in number. The important sequence of this text is critical to the church growing in size. Faith must be established and be a foundation of the church. Since faith is, the tool God uses to unlock power in the life of the believer, it is only right that faith also is the central link to increasing the size of the church. Mark, the evangelist, records that asking in faith and believing will result in such a thing coming to pass. Keeping in mind how Mark defines faith. He believed that if a believer has faith that God will grow the church then some way and somehow it will be done.

Matt. 16:18.

God spoke clearly that it was His intention to build the church upon a solid foundation. Given how God revealed, His intention to build the church, He must be displeased when there is a decrease in attendance. The issue lies not with God but in how His mission work is executed by

the laborers who are called to go forth. Those who will deliver the word of God and lead the church must be deeply rooted in Christ and ready for the long journey. The long-term commitment by pastor and people in the modern church does not always give way to the long term. Church members and the pastor must remember that Jacob wrestled with an angel, Israel had to be led through the wilderness, and nothing eternal will come without going through a struggle.

Perseverance is the central key to sustaining a ministry and church membership longevity. Famed preacher and pastor H. Beecher Hicks stated it this way, “When caught in the midst of a storm, a minute will seem an hour, an hour will seem an eternity.” Life and death are held in each breath (Hicks 21).

Building the church

Adding to the church is possible when God is viewed as the architect. His blueprint is amazing, and, when followed, optimum results occur. Jesus chooses each person; they do not choose Him. He made this choice because He desires that his followers might go and bear fruit. John declared this is true in John 15:16. God ordained the believer to be fruitful and bring about increase.

The church was not designed to increase because of multiple church services, events or activities. The Bible does not record a commandment that believers must invite others to church in hopes someone would join. Jesus did not say the goal was to get others to attend church by way of worship services. The model way was for each person to mimic the life of Jesus and follow His example as He demonstrated through grace (Rognlien 7).

This model of demonstrating a life reflective of the gospel is more important now than ever as social media and the news makes every story easily shareable. For example, recently in

the news, a pastor of a large congregation was caught cheating with one of his married female members. He is a married father and pastor of a church. The adulterous affair went viral on social media because the woman's husband came home earlier than usual. He discovered the affair and chased the pastor off the property while pointing a gun in his direction. The pastor ran away without his clothes and hid naked behind a privacy fence. This senseless sinful act by church leadership gives the local church a black eye. Comments posted to the news feed were calling pastors hypocritical, and opportunist. Other comments said that issues like this are why they no longer attend. These problems are all too common in the church and further damage the reputation of leadership abroad. The sad unfortunate truth is that many will judge other leaders against this low shameful act of the now remorseful pastor. God requires the highest standards for leaders and living a righteous life is how the church will grow and produce good fruit.

Pastoral Leadership

Proverbs 27:23, "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds." The pastor is the shepherd of the church as the congregation is the flock. Pastors are to lead the church in the most direct path that leads to the Lord. While it is impossible for a pastor to be without sin or exempt from its impact, a pastor must put his flock before himself. Spiritual lives are at stake and sheep are known to be animals that need to be led.

President Harry Truman made a revealing relevant statement concerning his position in the White House and it can also be applied to pastors. The buck stops with the leader. Regardless of all who touch it, pass it around, lay eyes on it, the buck stops at the pastor's feet. A preacher empty on the inside can very easily translate to empty seats in the church (Wise 1). The pastor has a very important role in developing sermons, strategies, and ministry opportunities that will aide or assist in growing the church fellowship.

The pastor must implement procedures and activities that create involvement. One of the best ways to grow a church is to have the current members invite others to visit. Word of mouth is a powerful tool and best of all it is personable and free. Training people to evangelize the community is essential to growing a local church. The pastor can offer proper wording, methods, and techniques for prospecting. Most importantly, as the leader of the church, the pastor must set an atmosphere of intentionality when it comes to growing the church and the local ministry (Wise 2).

Just like other leaders, pastors just come with varying degrees of motivation and outlook with objectives for growth. Some have experience while others attempt to learn as they go on the job. An old saying states, “If you aim at nothing, you’ll hit it every time.” It is important that pastors have visions and dreams for their location. Pastors need to see themselves growing their congregation. While it is never about just numbers, it is important that the local church have a real plan in place to add to the congregation numerically. Brian Houston even compares dreaming to having faith. He says, “If you’re dreaming about something you can do on your own, you’re dreaming to small” (Houston 10). Those who preach the gospel need to remember that growth is part of God’s plan. Acts 2:47, “Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” Whatever is God’s will should be a person’s desire. Those who pastor and lead must hunger and thirst for the same thing God does.

Many books have been written about the lack of mission work being done in the world. Those books also reveal ways to correct the erroneous behavior. The word of God offers many passages of scripture for the reader to engage in evangelism. Missional church communities must

read the gospel as stories to be lived out and shared with others and not simply as good readings or bedtime stories (Hammond and Cronshaw 13).

Jesus always taught His followers to follow His lead. He did not preach hypocrisy in terms of “do as I say and not as I do.” He lived as He taught and exemplified holiness. During His tenure on earth, many betrayed Him yet He appointed twelve to follow Him closely. There was nothing extraordinary about these men; they were unexceptional and rather ordinary. The advancement of the gospel hinged upon the shoulders of these twelve men. The plan was simple, these disciples were to spread the good news, and if their efforts failed there, was no backup plan (J. MacArthur 2).

Inward Ministry

A church that focuses solely on its membership and their well-being or needs is certain to decline. The church will not only decline numerically, but its members are also failing to follow the commandment of Christ and to advance the gospel. The Bible is very specific and direct in terms of what is written concerning mission work and the goal of a Christ-centered church. Christ expected and commanded his followers to go to those who are disenfranchised, hurt, lost, and in need of a Savior. Matthew 4:19, “And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew is forthright about whom the believer should follow and what they will be taught as a result. Jesus is not about decrease but about adding increase to the church body.

Churches desiring to affect the community where they are located cannot be afraid of engaging the people. To be in communion with someone means to walk with them. When people are in pain, hurting or in grief they need a friend willing to walk with them through their difficult hour (Vanier 16).

The church can no longer be just a place where people come and go only to learn the gospel, but they must learn and appreciate it in such a way that they can propagate it (R. Allen 180). Inward ministry will only accomplish this for those who are members of the church and leave those in the community to fend for themselves. The gospel is for everyone, members and non-members.

The following verses reflect the intentions of Jesus' desire to have people follow Him and turn from their worldly desires. Jesus never intended for His church body to be inwardly focused on itself. These verses help show that Jesus commanded believers to go to the lost, hurting, and those who are in need, minister to them, and love them. Matthew 4:19, "And he saith unto them, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Follow is the key word in this scripture. One must first follow Christ before he can spread the gospel. As one adage says, "you have to catch the fish before you try to clean it." Matthew 22:37-39, "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all they soul, and with all they mind. 38. This is the first and great commandment. 39. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Matthew is informing the reader that the best thing one can ever do in life is to love others as much as one can love themselves. The task will not be easy, and death could be the end result. Matthew 24:9, "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you; and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake."

Advancing the gospel can bring pain and suffering to the one who is willing to proclaim that Jesus is the only way to get to God. Churches will suffer loss when there is no one willing to subject themselves to the potential negative outcome that can occur because of sharing the word of God. Matthew 25:29, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." God will

continue to pour out and provide to those who are doing something constructive with what He has given them. The church has a responsibility to increase in number. It is an expectation of the church, and God has provided the necessary tools to be successful. Jesus provided the model of duplication. He selected people He felt would best serve Him and carry out His desires. The church would do well to mimic this highly successful effort. Matthew 28:19-20, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Jesus issued the mandate for His followers to go and spread the gospel. If those who believe would follow this one instruction, then the gospel would be advanced all over the world. The best ministry is one-on-one up close and personal. This would be a great model to use in the local church. Currently the majority of churches have an expectation of the pastor growing the membership numerically. Using the example of Jesus would reverse this expectation and place the responsibility on the membership, as it should be back on the sheep or members as sheep breed sheep.

Jesus sent disciples into the world the same way the Father had sent him. Paul and Barnabas were sent for famine relief, evangelism efforts, and church planting. Titus was sent to ensure transparency with financial administration and to teach competent church administration. Apollos was sent to nurture the church as a skilled Bible teacher (Wright 146). There are many examples of godly men and women being sent into the world to fulfill God’s work.

Ministry focused only with the four walls of the church is not only doomed to shrink as members die off but is also contrary to the explicit teachings of Jesus. Jesus spoke in Mark 2:17, “When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, they that are whole have no need of the physician, but

they are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” The point in this scripture is that Jesus wanted to be very clear that those who think they do not need help would never seek it. The church in its original context was supposed to be a healing station for those who were hurt, lost, and in need of deliverance. The modern church must reconnect with the teachings of Jesus, make the church inviting for those who are “sick,” and commit to doing the necessary mission work to seek them out.

The servant of Christ will be the one who places the call of serving and honoring God first in their life. Churches have to ask themselves if they are positioning the members to spread love and the gospel outside of their edifice. Servant leaders are what the church needs and Christ desires. Mark 9:35.” and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all.” Servants serve others and are not self-serving. An inward focused church is only serving itself. There should be no expectation for growth when the ministry is only concerned about the needs of the members.

If the church will not heed to the words of Christ then they should certainly not be considered a church. The church represents and stands for all that is Christ. Mark 16:15, “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Everyone will be afforded the opportunity to hear the gospel. This can only occur when those who have already embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior engage in efforts to reach those who have not.

Church Isolation

In the previous section, the discussion was focused on how many churches solely focus on in-reach ministry, but for some the problem goes much deeper. There are churches that are isolating themselves from the community and world around them. Many care more about the church building than the people. Beautiful buildings and picturesque landscaping are beautiful to

look at and can play a role in how people view the church establishment. While it is necessary to have well-kept and structurally sound buildings, the edifice and grounds cannot be the only thing the members are concerned about. If one were to tour, the churches located throughout America and around the world, one would see elaborate multi-million dollar complexes and facilities. These buildings have basketball courts, swimming pools, coffee shops, bookstores, cafeterias, day care centers, and much more. The pews have padded seating, large movie screens, surround sound, and cinematic lighting, and some have separate chapels. Paid professionals are in place to run the expensive and sophisticated equipment. On any given Sunday one may experience live bands, mimes, dancing teams, choirs, and various other forms of groups taking part in the services. (Chan 37). The deeper issue is not whether or not it is reasonable to have such things, the bigger question is whether they enhance having a relationship with God. When millions are spent to build a building and hundreds of thousands and millions are spent to maintain the yearly upkeep and meet payroll, one must wonder how much is left over to do ministry work and if there is money allocated for community ministry after everything else is paid? Mission work and charity in the community is often void or limited in church budgets.

The situation is made worse because members are so closely connected that they do everything together without involving others. Unconsciously, and possibly unknowingly, they are further isolating themselves from the community in which they claim to serve. Without community interaction and involvement, those outside of the church membership will not be exposed to the local body of faith. There may be times when it is difficult to get church members to socialize and interact with those outside of their tight knit circle. The church members have to give themselves the opportunity to mingle with the so called “lost” and unsaved. The ones who claim to love Christ and serve Him must demonstrate their feelings by action. Those who are

isolated from the unchurched speak in church words and terms. The conversation can be difficult to follow or understand by those who have little to no Biblical knowledge or church attendance. Terms such as stating that an individual is saved or bought with a price have no meaning to someone outside of the church. The integration process can begin when language of inclusion is taught through discipleship. Isolationist is not a word or direction the church should be working towards.

Two-thirds of young adults outside of the church said the faith, is dull, flat and boring (Kinnaman 123).

Jesus was against isolation; he was relatable and touchable. The church paradigm has Christ as the centerpiece, and the goal is to model His example. When following the words and teaching of Jesus, isolation is unacceptable. Discipleship is the core of the ministry of Jesus. During His earthly ministry, He gathered twelve selected men to advance the gospel throughout the world. Either the church is to mirror what Jesus did, or they should remove the label of church and relegate themselves to a social club. Member seclusion will not help them grow but will further perpetuate isolation. The sad outcome of this behavior is that outsiders will be unlikely to visit these types of churches, much less join. It is vital that Christians share the gospel with sinners in the world. Jesus never intended for people to be confined to their church buildings and wait for the lost to come to them. That way of thinking goes against everything Jesus taught. Christians have to be concerned with more than their own. Those who love God must have concern for those who have yet to embrace him as Lord.

Research Design Literature

The problem this research work addressed was one of physical numerical church decline. The literature review covered the subjects of church decline, church growth, and how to

turnaround the decline of attendance. Certain themes were reoccurring: pastoral leadership, biblical interpretation of missional work, outreach, and how those other than pastors can witness the love of Jesus.

The research design literature aimed to study and define the importance of being intentional about church growth. The Biblical foundations presented held a core concentration of what it meant to be doers of the example of Christ; Mark 16:15, “Go into the entire world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

Several issues were raised from examining the scripture that explained how churches are losing their way and vitality. This study was an explanatory, mixed-method design. According to John W. Creswell an advantage to the explanatory design is that the “researcher can initially explore views by listening to participants rather than approach a topic with a predetermined set of variables” (Creswell 561).

The research sought to offer insight and answers into why church attendance is stagnant or declining in many areas. By using external authors and biblical texts, the aim was to explain why churches are declining in attendance and what can be done to curb the trend.

In an effort to explain common patterns data was analyzed to identify church behaviors and to learn from the congregations and pastors how they interact and conduct ministry. How the pastors interact with their congregation and the ministries established will be critical to any type of turnaround and future stability (Sensing 147).

Quantitative research methods focus on objectivity. Qualitative research collects subjective data, often through interviews, to explain a problem in-depth from the viewpoints of the individual participants (Creswell 213).

The assumption in this study was that without an intentional, purposeful plan to grow the church, its leadership would not be focused on the phenomenon of church decline.

Through the collection of quantitative data, the researcher was able to learn the demographics about the participants who participated in the pastoral interviews. By asking the right questions and subsequent follow-up questions, he was able to gather first-hand information from those closest to the necessary information. The resulting analysis will give direction to providing appropriate and helpful information to interested parties who are facing church decline or stalled growth.

Summary of Literature

The church does not exist for the purpose of a pastor or members to lead at their own pleasure but rather to fulfill the mission of God. God's will is to reconcile man back to Himself and to awaken them spiritually to His amazing grace and redeeming blood. The church is not a building. As many fail to realize, the building is a temple, and the people who have embraced Christ as Lord represent the church. The church then is to serve as the hands, eyes, ears, and legs of God in the earthly realm.

The success of the church is measured by how well its members serve the community, grow in number, spiritually mature, and adhere to biblical principles. By having faith in the word, the church can carry out the mandate to preach the gospel abroad. The spiritual health of the church and vitality of the ministry can be linked to how well the church is growing or whether the attendance has stalled. It is not uncommon for churches to believe they are successful, yet fail to understand how important it really is to add numbers to their membership. In order to show evidence of outreach and growth new members must join the local church. People are inclined to join a body of people that have a stake in them.

Churches that do not experience growth will need to revisit their efforts in the community and take a second look at the call of God in scripture to witness to the lost and unsaved.

Churches in and of themselves have no transformative power and must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform one's heart.

The researcher intended to discover why some churches have success at adding new members while others have had very little influx over the years. The goal was to identify factors and key themes so that pastors and members can better understand the seriousness of the problem of church decline. God always desires to see the church healthy and prospering so there will always be an opportunity for a turnaround.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter explains the research methodology exercised to gather data, and then analyze it to learn the common patterns and contributing factors of the studied churches on attendance decline. The identification of themes and common occurrences in declining churches reveal patterns that are being addressed by Biblical application of the gospel. The research methodology was surveys and interviews used to understand why decline was occurring and to learn how the data collected would aide to turn things around.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the research is to determine why rural Christian churches in Virginia are losing congregants and attendance each week is so inconsistent. This research will be conducted by interviews, focus groups and surveys within churches around the state in an effort to limit loss of membership and provide tools that will increase sustainability by minimizing decline and enhancing revitalization of the church membership.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study. The questions focused on how pastors and members can identify problems within the church leading to decline and how using that data can help correct the shrinking church membership.

Research Question #1

What happened in the church to contribute to the visible decline of membership and attendance?

This research question, asked to pastors during an interview hoped to identify common patterns of churches with declining attendance that may provide valuable insights that could be transferable to other churches seeking a way to turnaround.

Research Question #2

What are some of the things the church is actively doing in the community that can be visible by those who are not members of the local church congregation?

This data was gathered through interviewing pastors. The question hoped to gain insight into what are some things that churches are doing well to attract and keep members coming back.

Research Question #3

What are the common themes that can be observed within the local churches that are experiencing decline?

This research question was asked to lay persons who are members of a local church. The question hoped to gather data that could connect common themes, if there were any, that contributed to decline.

Research Question #4

What methods in the church have contributed to health and growth?

This research question was asked to pastors during an interview and to lay persons in a survey. It was important to collect information showing methods and means that contribute to growth and vitality.

Ministry Context

Four of the five churches are in rural or suburban areas with populations of 2,000-40,000 people. These churches are Baptist and belong to local Baptist associations. They are well

established in the community and each has been in existence for at least 100 years. The lone non-denominational church is in a city of 50,000.

Participants

Five pastors were the primary participants because they see the congregation each week and have varied interactions with the members. They happened to all be thirty-five years of age or older and are African American.

Current and former church members were also participants because they are the most familiar with the church context and culture. These people were at least eighteen years of age and attended worship services at least twice a month.

The pastors selected for this research are men the researcher knows personally and have varied backgrounds, experiences, and congregations. The researcher sat down with each pastor and asked each a series of questions that related to church activities and attendance. The majority of the pastors were from the Baptist context, but one pastors a non-denominational church. It is important to have perspective from the pulpit to the pew so there was also a survey by way of SurveyMonkey for members of their congregations to complete.

Criteria for Selection

In the Baptist tradition, pastors are usually highly revered and held in high esteem. The pastors selected who pastor Baptist churches have good healthy relationships with their congregations. They all have at least bachelor's degrees, and one has a doctorate of ministry. As Baptists are autonomous there is no minimum age to pastor, but each pastor interviewed was at least 35 years of age. All but one of the pastors interviewed are married. The lone pastor who is not currently married is a widower.

The Baptist churches are at least 100 years old and have many elderly members in their congregations with long-time commitments to the church.

The researcher chose these pastors because he knows them personally and knew they would be willing participants who would graciously share their wealth of knowledge. He selected them also because he felt they would be willing to help with this project and would be timely getting back with all necessary information.

Description of Participants

The participant pastors were all black males under the age of fifty-five. Each has been a pastor a minimum of five years. They all have some college education and attend conferences at least once a year.

The laity who participated in the survey are at least eighteen years of age. They participated of their own free will and did so anonymously. These people attend church at a minimum of two Sundays per month.

Ethical Considerations

All data collected remained confidential during the entire research process and was not shared with anyone outside the research team. Conversations were recorded and transcribed, and the device was coded to protect confidentiality. Each pastor interviewed for this research was given a pseudo name to protect his or her privacy. No personal information such as email address, church location, telephone number, or name was stored or used in the research work.

Instrumentation

The project used two instruments. One instrument used was the interview process of pastors. The researcher asked each pastor several questions and documented the answers. The questions asked in person and online addressed practices and theological behaviors of the churches that have experienced church decline.

The other instrument used was the survey method. SurveyMonkey was used to collect information from laypersons. The researcher paid for this service for several months and those who agreed to take the survey did so anonymously. The survey took three to five minutes to complete and asked basic questions about church attendance.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

The quantitative data was gathered through an online survey, and the qualitative data was gathered through interviews with pastors. The goal of the data analysis was to provide information that could draw conclusions on how to turnaround the decline.

Matching patterns and comparing the data from the five churches collected from laity was used to strengthen the validity of the study (Yin 143). Analyzation of the data was done using methods taught by Robert Yin's mode of viewing studies in terms of what to analyze and why (132).

This research can be duplicated as the protocols used were simple and easy to interpret. SurveyMonkey, a professional survey company, collected data for the study and provided statistical measures for that data according to established research methods. Open-ended questions allowed participants to give answers based on their experiences. Themes that were common emerged from these participants allowing the researcher to form generalizations.

Data Collection

This study was an exploratory, mixed-methods design. Pastors and church members from various parts of Virginia participated in this research. Each pastor had a minimum of five years of pastoral experience. Those pastors who participated in the study are people the researcher knows personally, although personal connection did not have to be a requirement. After receiving approval from the IRB board, he scheduled a time to meet with each pastor. The meetings were all identical in that the researcher would ask several questions and record each answer by both written notes and by voice recorder.

Each interview began with an explanation of confidentiality and security of the interview data. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form. The researcher transcribed each of the recordings after they were completed to give himself a better visual aid. Consent forms, notes, recordings and transcripts in print and on a flash-drive were kept securely in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. He secured all computer work through a password on his personal laptop.

I contracted with SurveyMonkey to design and send surveys or have it accessible by those who were willing to complete it. Participants had thirty days to complete the survey. A reminder was sent to anyone who had not completed the survey after fifteen days. SurveyMonkey provided statistical measures, graphs and charts based on the imputed information from participants.

Data Analysis

The researcher made a chart of the data collected through the interview process and shared the information with his dissertation mentor. He paid attention to all of the data, noting common or unique responses. He have reviewed this information thoroughly in order to consider any implications from the findings.

SurveyMonkey compiled information completed on the site into an easy to read self-explanatory set of descriptive statistics. The researcher did not do an in-depth analysis on the data. The survey conducted was the only method used to obtain information from laity. The researcher used this stand-alone data and analyzed it upon completion for its results.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Church decline is a very real issue and concern for many ministries that are struggling to stay afloat. Pastors are always looking at ways to grow and add members to their congregations. There are many reasons attendance may be down, and it would be beneficial to know if there were any common recurring themes within each church. This research revealed there are common patterns between the churches studied and contributing factors that were similar.

The purpose of this project was to determine why rural Christian churches in Virginia are losing congregants and attendance each week is so inconsistent. The information within this study has been obtained by interviewing pastors and church members responding to questions contained in a survey.

Participants

The participants in this study are a convenience sample of five pastors whom the researcher knew personally. They will be identified by abbreviations. Church members of each pastor who participated in a survey shall also remain anonymous. According to SurveyMonkey 47 people participated anonymously in the church decline survey. The pastors were each asked the same questions and given an opportunity to respond as they saw fit.

Churches	Membership	Average Attendance	Setting	Date Established	Age of Current Pastor	Tenure of Current Pastor
Church JJ	140	55	Rural	1880	53	2 years
Church AS	174	65	Rural	1860	46	8 years
Church RW	155	50	Rural	1866	38	3 years
Church CJ	2150	1450	City	2012	35	8 years
Church PF	90	50	Suburban	1870	53	11 years

Pastor JJ is the pastor of a 140-year-old Baptist church with 50-95 active members. It is located in a city of 2000 people. The pastor is just over fifty and unmarried but, by his own admission, is young at heart. He is a recent graduate of a Doctorate of Ministry program and has many great ideas to grow and enhance the ministry. For a small town the church has a committed group so the attendance is consistent weekly, though not necessarily the same people every Sunday. The church has certain Sundays set aside for the youth to sing in the choir. These particular Sundays seem to have a larger number of young people attend. Having them sing gives a few of them a reason to attend church so they can be a part of something. Pastor JJ knows that the community is small, and growth will be minimal but wants to have some activities in place outside of just preaching on Sunday. He has been the pastor for two years and has seen that a few people have joined during his tenure. Pastor JJ said, "I want to see the church grow, I really do, but I need for them to understand we will need to break with business as usual." In explaining

this statement, he said that the church would have to do more than Sunday service and Bible study because people today have more options and are more time sensitive than ever.

Pastor AS is the pastor of a 160-year-old Baptist church that has an active membership of 50-90 people. It is located in a community of close to 20,000. The pastor does not have a college degree and is younger than 50. He is married and has several children. When he became the pastor eight years ago, the church was not in a good place financially and the attendance was much lower than it is now. Pastor AS worked with the leaders and choir to change the ebb and flow of Sunday service. 2019 was a trying year for the church as the pastor and leadership began to have many differences of opinion. In one meeting pastor AS had with the leadership team, he said, “we need money earmarked for community work. We as a church cannot focus solely on our members and not show love out in the community.” The leadership team pushed back with pessimistic comments about where the money would come from and who would do the work. The pastor and leaders will have to find a way to overcome obstacles in order for the ministry to grow.

The first six years of his pastorate, the church grew in number and the finances were in the black. Unfortunately, over the last two years the church has experienced a high number of deaths, and low numbers for new members. The weekly attendance is higher than what it was eight years ago but has leveled off, and it began to stall in 2019.

Pastor RW is the pastor of a 154-year-old Baptist church with 50-100 active members located in a community of less than 10,000 people. The congregation is 100% African American. Seventy percent of the congregation is over the age of sixty. When the young pastor, who is under 40, arrived three years ago, he had high hopes of growing the church and expanding its current ministries.

After experiencing some growth in the first year, numbers have slowed drastically, and because of death and inconsistent attendance. Sunday services are close to the same numbers today as they were three years ago. During the interview, he said, “you know how it is, when the new guy is in town people want to come and see what the fuss is all about. After awhile the novelty fades and things return back to the way they were.”

Upon first arriving at the church, pastor RW held meetings on a regular basis to address leadership about his vision and desire to grow. By his second year, the pastor noticed that he was not getting a lot of support. Most of the things he desired were not getting the attention they needed, and he backed away from pushing towards growth.

Pastor CJ is the pastor of an 8-year-old non-denominational church that has 1000 plus active members and is located in a city of 50,000 people. The pastor is in his mid-thirties, married, and has young children. He is the youngest of those interviewed yet has the largest congregation. Given the energy, time, and commitment to his church, it is no wonder the church is thriving. He detailed the number of hours he spends in planning and preparation each week with his paid and unpaid staff. Of the pastors interviewed Pastor CJ was the only one who has a presence at local colleges and has ministries in place for all age groups. His church has a large children's church in place during worship times on Sunday.

The church has many people who join on a monthly basis, and the pastor admitted he would like to know more about those who may not come weekly or have left the ministry all together. Pastor CJ shared that, “given the size of our church I often ponder what I could implement to monitor participation by those listed on the roll and who attends on a consistent basis as opposed to those who do not.”

Pastor PF is the pastor of a 150-year-old Baptist church with 75-100 active members which is located in an area of close to 40,000 people. Although the area is currently in a growth phase. The church is located in a part of the city that is older and miles away from all of the building and growth. As he was answering a question about growth, he said, “let’s be realistic if you have a choice to stay on the main road or come off the beaten path to us miles from a main road, where would you go.” He expressed a certain dejection of the church at a standstill with growth.

While this pastor is close to fifty years of age, many in the congregation are sixty-five and older. Given the age and location of the congregation there are not many ministry activities going on. The pastor desires to have different ministries but does not feel he has the man-power to execute them. He has been the pastor for ten years and has seen people join in small numbers over the years but has maintained mostly the same core group of members. The older members who have sustained the church are aging, and he is concerned about how the ministry will maintain what they are currently able to do in the community.

Church Attendance Survey

The survey, Church Attendance in 2019, was administered to members of each pastor’s church. Survey results showed the following results:

- 0% reported attending church every Sunday
- 50% reported 25-39% attend church weekly
- 31% lost membership by 10% or more over five years
- 11% increased membership by 5% over five years
- Youth ministry existed in 50% of the churches
- Males over 18 accounted for 25-29% of attendance

- Females over 18 accounted for 70-84% of attendance

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

In these questions, pastors were asked what might have happened in the church that could have contributed to decline in membership. Pastor RW has personally seen decline in his church since he became the pastor. After experiencing growth as a new pastor in the area, he noticed attendance leveled off and peaked around the second year of his pastorate. His best estimation is that a good percentage of the members are only coming on Sundays when they are participating in the service by way of ushering or singing for example.

Pastor PF sees that overall church attendance is down from when he first became the pastor ten years ago. He cites a few reasons for people not coming to church as much as they used to. He feels that the youth are given options on whether to attend or not and that church is no longer a priority at the top of the list for parents either. While 2020 services have decent audiences, the numbers are much lower than what he experienced in 2010. Although the numbers are down, he is excited that in recent months people have joined his congregation. He has noticed that members like to come more often when they are actually participating in the service. For example, certain members only come when they usher twice a month.

Pastor AS stated that because of death his membership is down by quite a few members. He said that in the past two years, ten people have died, and no one has joined. He also commented that the youth and young adults seem uninterested and are very inconsistent in their attendance. The pastor felt that attendance increased on Sundays when it was a special occasion such as youth Sunday or communion Sunday.

Pastor CJ has not seen decline in his church but has experienced significant growth. Being well connected in the community, he expressed that he is aware that many of his colleagues in ministry have been experiencing a decline in membership.

Pastor JJ does not expect much growth because of where his ministry is located. He attributes the lack of new members to the community being older and lack of jobs in the area. Given these challenges, he feels the church is limited and blessed to just maintain a decent core membership.

Data collected through SurveyMonkey reveals that membership has declined over the last five years for 32 out of 36 people who answered the question. Common in churches today is a large presence of women as opposed to men. This is very evident from the research as women made up 75% of most congregations compared to 25% of men. The church will have to find a way to attract more men to come and be an integral part of their mission.

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

The next questions asked the pastors about their churches' activity or lack thereof in the community. Pastor AS has a heart to want to do outreach but could not garner the support of his church leaders or members. There was a desire, but nothing put into practice.

Pastor PF has stagnant programs in place. He feels the personnel are not there to push the ministry forward as much of the congregation is close to age seventy or older.

Pastor RW said that there is no evangelism team in place and currently nothing in the works. He preaches the importance of spreading the word but does not have any proof that the members are in the community sharing the gospel.

Pastor CJ does not have a specified team set aside but states the core of his ministry is to do outreach in the community. He is currently satisfied with what his members are doing on an individual basis.

Pastor JJ would like to see more community involvement by his members but understands many are elderly and probably not up to the task. Most churches in the area are doing also doing very little to evangelize the area. Churches are having plenty of services, but nothing specifically geared to bring in new converts.

Given the importance of having young people become members of the church for the sake of continuity, it is surprising that there is not more emphasis on youth ministry in these churches. Fifty percent is far too low of a number for youth ministry participation. Anything less than 100% of churches having ministries focusing on the youth is unacceptable. Young people need to be involved and engaged within the church and groomed for areas in the ministry. Having them involved will give them a sense of purpose and longing.

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

What are the common themes that can be observed within the local churches that are experiencing decline? Pastor JJ meets quarterly with other pastors in the area, but rarely do they discuss what is going on in their individual churches. They usually talk about hot topics of the day, including politics. They also discuss things that might be used for a good message to preach on Sunday. Some of the area pastors enjoy going to an occasional conference together, but very little of the information brought back is helpful to their church.

Pastor AS would attend local association groups, and the majority of the churches in the area are losing members. There was no talk of collectively looking into why churches were declining or what could be done to help curb the decline.

Pastor CJ belongs to a very progressive association, and they discuss how to grow their local congregations on a quarterly basis. The leaders of the organization encourage and push the importance of evangelism to all the churches they govern. Pastor CJ takes the tips and information learned from the meetings and works to implement them in his church.

Pastor PF is not pleased with the efforts by area churches to work together, and he feels the local association does not do nearly enough to help teach growth in its membership. While he himself has encouraged other pastors on the local level to do more to grow their churches he feels his efforts has fallen on death ears. The area churches just do not work in harmony together.

Pastor RW has met with area pastors for informal meetings such as luncheons and they talk about what could be done to grow their churches. The pastors in the community have casual conversations with each other but the association does little to equip or train area pastors to evangelize. Several of the churches hardly participate at the scheduled meetings.

Research Question #4: Description of Evidence

What methods in the church have contributed to health and growth?

Pastor JJ believes that viewing mega church preachers online has become a trendy thing to do. He admits to watching services online himself but never in lieu of local worship. He is a huge proponent of attending a local church so that there can be a connection with the pastor and people. His church does not live stream and has no immediate plans to do so. He does believe that there are those who chose to view online so they do not have to leave home. While this percentage may be small, he feels, one or two missing church services can make a difference.

Pastor RW responded with an emphatic yes when asked if people are choosing more frequently to stay home. He equipped his church with TVs in the sanctuary for a better technological experience and appreciates technology being used for ministerial purposes. The

issues he has is that this technology was meant to enhance the service, not remove members from it. He feels there are those who stay home and watch because it is convenient. His church does have a website and goes live during the hour of preaching.

Pastor CJ uses online streams to get the gospel message out to his membership and hopes others may view it as well. A large percentage of his congregation attends college, and they are very active on the internet so it serves him well to post live messages. He uses a tracker to count viewership and knows that the videos are being viewed regularly. In his opinion, he feels that many attend church and view online so he does not view it as a threat to attendance.

Pastor AS said online streaming has made people lazy. He believes online streaming is a great benefit for those who work odd hours and cannot attend church or would like additional services, but it should not replace attending church physically. Pastor AS believes it would be difficult to teach proper discipleship if online services became the thing of the future. Human interaction is a key to fellowship and growing a ministry.

Pastor PF mentioned not having his church online and they are not in a hurry to do so. He personally feels that TV evangelism has come at the expense of lower attendance in churches. His position on why his church has not grown as much as he would like has more to do with location rather than competition from online streaming.

The recent pandemic outbreak of the virus Covid-19 has exposed the lack of preparation some churches have had in the area of being able to stream services and having alternative means to collect funds outside of an offering plate. The national mandate to keep gatherings under ten people has forced churches to look to various means to share their sermons with the church membership. It is very common now to see many churches streaming online Sunday sermons.

These same churches did not have an online presence just weeks ago. The pastors interviewed all agreed that streaming would be more important in the future. The future seems to be now.

Summary of Major Findings

Common Patterns

- The pastors interviewed do not have dedicated evangelism ministries.
- Those who attend church mostly do so with irregularity.
- Witnessing does not seem to be a major theme of the churches.
- The local churches do not seem to have local support by other area churches.
- There has been limited community visibility by way of outreach ministry.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents five major findings that were present in the churches researched. The insights helped identify behaviors that may contribute to church decline and behaviors that may lead them to growth and consistency. Throughout this study, the researcher has asked many questions, conducted surveys and read extensively on the subject of church decline. Five pastors were interviewed and most shared information revealing the lack of evangelism efforts in their ministries. Members of their churches have become very inconsistent with attending services on a weekly basis. The lack of attendance contributes to the overall deficiencies churches suffer from in terms of volunteer man- power.

This research work focused on learning from possible common trends in churches that could potentially show a similar pattern happening across the board. Many pastors are in denial that they need to address the issue of growth and that their churches are in a precarious situation in terms of maintaining attendance.

Pastors and church members continue to seek ways to get the message of Christ into the community and witness to the lost. It is clear that the problem of church attendance declining is very real and that many pastors are not directly addressing the issue. There is significant data available to conclude that fewer Americans attend church now than in decades past. After reviewing all the information and compiling it together, I believe there are ways the decline can be corrected. Given the opportunity to educate leaders on my findings, I believe strides can be made to curb the decline. When the Word of God is preached and put into practice, it has to encompass evangelism and missionary work.

This research focused on learning from turnaround churches the theology and systems that have contributed to their turnaround success. The research also focused on identifying common patterns across turnaround churches that had an increase in attendance in at least the past five years. These common patterns were analyzed to identify the theological and system factors and behaviors that contributed to the turnaround. Witnessing and spreading the gospel is a fundamental core truth of the Bible and local churches must do all they can to practice it and make disciples to duplicate the process.

Major Findings

First Finding

A major finding was that none of the five pastors interviewed has ministries or teams specifically designated to evangelistic ministry. Of the five pastors, only one stated that they have small groups that will speak on witnessing to others regularly. The other pastors mentioned having desires to grow the church but admitted to not having an intentional plan to carry out the work.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch believe that the missional-incarnational church will make Christian teaching attractive by living it under the very noses of those who have not yet embraced it (Hammond and Cronshaw 44). The Christian life is one that must be lived out in the world so that those who do not know Christ can see His love and peace up close.

Thom Rainer on his website gives nine reasons Christians fail to evangelize in an article dated August 7, 2019, he states:

1. Many don't know what "evangelism" is.
2. We have few evangelistic role models.
3. Some church members aren't convinced about lostness.

4. Some churches have provided no evangelism training.
5. Fear of the unknown halts our efforts.
6. We've "gotten over" our salvation.
7. Pastors aren't taking the lead in evangelism.
8. We don't really know many lost people anyway.
9. We don't care about non-believers.

It seemed that the churches were not actively witnessing or canvassing their neighborhoods, and this was confirmed in the interviews. Pastor CJ is the only pastor who has a presence in the community outside of his local church location. His ministry is intentional in having a presence on several college campuses in the area. Far too many of the pastors are missing the centrality of the universal church. The word of God gives many references to witnessing. For example Matthew 28:19 "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." If this small pool of pastors is in any way indicative of a much larger problem of witnessing being non-existent then the church has a major problem.

All the pastors had great willingness and openness to share specifics pertaining to their church, even if the details were not favorable. They were able to have honest dialogue through healthy discussion.

A common pattern that all the pastors shared was they each loved to preach about Jesus but, with the exception of one, had yet to focus on witnessing. The interview confirmed suspicions that local churches have a heavy focus on in-reach and very little outreach happens in the community. While Jesus Christ is being preached from the pulpit four out of five of the

pastors interviewed have not implemented any ministries or teams to spread His name beyond the edifice walls.

The initial point made in the literature review indicated extensive proof of church decline. It is apparent by the majority of those interviewed that there is no focus on growing their churches. The idea that a church will maintain its membership or grow simply because of the preached word is preposterous. One pastor indicated his church loss fifteen members to death over the last eighteen months and no one joined during that same timeframe. Using this church as an example indicates a decline in membership by at least fifteen people during said time-period. For a small rural church, this is a significant number of people to lose.

The Biblical and theological framework of this research concluded that the church is in existence to advance the message of Christ and in so doing embodies Matthew chapter twenty-five. This chapter, teaches people to spread the message of love by being about the work of God. They are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty. When all a church does is preach to its members and fellowship amongst themselves this objective fails miserably. The ultimate evidence of the mission of Christ is when there is fruit. Evidence of bearing fruit is when action can be put behind the words of church leadership. Action in this instance would be reaching out to those in the community and sharing how good God is to someone.

Second Finding

A second major finding was that many who attend church no longer attend with regularity or consistency. Four of the pastors mentioned they are noticing that many members only seem to attend when they are serving in one capacity or other. They are stating that if a

person is not ushering, singing in the choir, or teaching a group or something similar they will not attend.

Carey Nieuwhof discusses show when a person church surfs, they bounce around from church to church with no real commitment to the ministry. It can be compared to dating with no commitment, engagement or investment. The lack of commitment contributes little to nothing to the mission of the church (Nieuwhof). Without commitment and loyalty from enough people, a church is in a difficult position when it comes to preparing a budget to do outreach or ministry at any level.

Far too many people only come to church if they are supporting someone who is doing something on the church program, or they are participating in an event themselves. The society we live in today is less focused and concerned on church being the main activity on Sunday.

The literature review revealed that the largest growing religion in America is those who do not believe in God at all. If this statement is indeed true, then it confirms why church attendance is decreasing. Those who do not believe in Christ would have no desire to congregate with those who do.

Hebrews 10:24-25, “and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” These Biblical statements encourage the saints of God to fellowship together. In a world of me, me, me and independence, the Bible teaches people to come together and lift each other up.

Third Finding

A third major finding was that there seems to be a disconnection between the pastor and church members getting the word out into the community.

The literature review observed accountability is in question in terms of the connection between the pastor and the members. A pastor or preacher can have integrity, model stability, and be a paradigm of responsibility yet create empty seats because their preaching is not filling the people. When people attend church week after week but go home feeling empty, they will leave the ministry (Wise 167)

Members cannot be expected to witness in the community when the church leadership is not teaching that it is necessary or providing instruction on how to proceed. Four of the five pastors admitted to having thoughts and desires of wanting to see their churches grow but have yet to implement anything substantial that could possibly thwart the decline of losing current members or grow their ministry numerically. Until this topic becomes a real discussion it is doubtful that conditions at the church will change.

Fourth Finding

Upon review of the data collected from the interviews with pastors, It was clear that there is not a strong connection between the churches in the same area. The pastors are not interacting and collaborating with local churches to do ministry in any significant way. The only time these churches partner with each other is when they call another local church to come fellowship with them for an afternoon service or an evening revival. Churches are experiencing many similar if not the same issues, yet they are not banding together to rectify the situation. While it is understood Baptist churches are autonomous it is unfortunate that they cannot come together to collectively impact the neighborhood.

Associations at their core are designed to unify local churches and provide support for them to operate in a healthy manner. One of the main associations in Virginia states that they are connected to 1075 rural, suburban, and urban congregations as well as almost 30 local

associations. They have a goal of being involved in the vitality of worship, fellowship, evangelism, missions and discipleship. Given this is the mission of the association it would be beneficial if the churches interviewed would connect with them and become more involved.

The traditional outreach programs of churches have begun to shift to more organic forms of cultural engagement. Ministries are doing free car washes, food giveaways, paying for gas at the pump, and other events or methods. At the heart of this is the desire to go into the world as Jesus commanded. This is what outreach looks like today. Ministries must do what will attract people to listen to their message. Then the church can tell those attracted about Jesus in hopes that someone may come to know Him in a more personal way. Outreach and evangelism go hand in hand, and sometimes the words are used interchangeably. The older more traditional churches are not engaging the community or active within their local association and would do well to learn from the non-denominational ministry and mimic some of its trainings and efforts. It is a Biblical mandate to witness the gospel and every church must find a way to preach the gospel abroad.

In recent years, a strategic shift has begun to take place from the programs and events of traditional outreach to more organic forms of cultural engagement. At the heart of this movement is a desire to heed Jesus' command to go into the world (Toal).

CJ is the only pastor of those interviewed that has a church growing in number. His church is a part of a thriving association that supplies resources and training to its members. His association emphasizes witnessing and teaches about discipleship. The growth that his church is experiencing is in part because of his efforts, but the training of the association has benefited him as well.

One of the five churches discussed is experiencing significant growth. The four churches that have become stagnant could benefit from some of the things Pastor CJ is doing well. Having the youth active and very involved is something Pastor CJ does well. This is not something done on a special Sunday like youth Sunday but on a weekly basis. Children's church and activities are set up for the smaller kids. The separation of the adults and children during church time gives the kids something to keep their minds occupied and they are learning about Christ at the same time.

While there is no guarantee of growth by way of numbers for a church because a particular activity or ministry is implemented, it is evident that without certain happenings growth should not be expected. The current generation must be willing to embrace the fact that ministry and the way church services are conducted is changing. The older more traditional churches are operating in a similar fashion and are getting similar results. Pastor CJ functions in a way that is different from the others and it is working for him. Beyond just the numbers he was the only one interviewed that did not show visible signs of frustration in his face when discussing the future of the church and its direction.

Fifth Finding

Salvation is free, but ministry has a cost. The churches that were not growing had not set designated money aside for outreach or earmarked any for witnessing in the community. People

today want to see where the church is spending money and hold them accountable beyond just budgeted payroll. When a church is busy or visible in the community, people are attracted to ministries that are active. Whether it is sponsoring a family friend's day with food, buying flyers, creating a website or hosting an event, money will be necessary. Once people frequent a church, they are likely to join and become a part of the ministry.

Thom Rainer believes that people desire and long to be a part of a church making a difference. People now want to be part of active churches with groups, Sunday school, and other ministry opportunities. They want to participate in ministries with a clear-cut vision and direction. They desire to be part of a church that expects something from them and will likely be more committed to the ministry that first offered them Christ (Rainer, Seven Keys 4).

Pastor CJ has the one church that is thriving and the only church that is well connected with an association. He attends several trainings and has conference calls with his conference each year. During these times, they discuss ways to do church better and to grow the ministry. The ministry is well organized and is accountable to one another at the local church and to the association. Having a holistic ministry that focuses on the church mission, supportive relationships and empowering structures can be credited for its success (Sider 4244, para).

Ministry Implications of the Findings

The implications of the findings of this research will serve as a contribution to further study and understanding of the factors contributing to church decline. The data is available, and the numbers reveal that the decline is very real and present. There appears to be a greater danger of decline in the rural areas as people are migrating back to the cities. Another important issue is to address congregations that have reached their plateau, and attendance has leveled off.

These findings can aid in facilitating conversations to challenge behaviors of churches that do not have discipleship and community witnessing practices in place. This research work and study aim to understand contributing factors that have led to the drop in attendance. The goal of this work is to potentially serve as an encouragement and ground-work for turning around churches losing members or not growing.

This work includes scriptures and many reasons for each church having a mission for spreading the gospel. It also covers many reasons for the decline and how many in church leadership fail to admit it is really an issue. Once leaders are able to understand the factors contributing to the decline then it can be addressed properly.

The argument of this study is that a turnaround can happen, but it will take discipline and commitment from church leaders and members working in concert together. Jesus Christ must be the center of the message while the Holy Spirit serves as the guide of the church throughout this about-face.

Examining the contrast of the churches that have peaked juxtaposed against the one that is growing reveals facts that are beneficial in pointing out methods that are working and areas in need of improvement. Pastoral leadership at the churches in decline was relaxed and very casual. They talked as if they were defeated in their efforts. The pastor of the growing church is still looking at ways to grow more and be a better minister to those attending regularly.

These pastors, although they admit their churches have stalled, are not aggressive in their desires for church growth. The four pastors repeated the theme of not gaining support from the leadership. Tim Keller mentions a few don'ts of a missional church and one of them is to avoid talking as if those who do not believe were not present. Speak as though the saved and unsaved are in the room and eventually more neighbors will find their way to the church, or at least be

invited (Keller 2). They will have to exhibit more faith in their conversation and practice what is being preached in the church out in the community.

Pastor CJ understands growth is essential to sustainment, as he knows members will leave for whatever reason and possibly at any time. This pastor also understands he cannot do the work alone and has a trusted dedicated leadership team. The team understands the mission of the church and is committed to putting in the work.

.Limitations of the Study

The research work for this study included an online survey and interviews with several pastors. The online survey was sent to members of the interviewed pastors via email and announcement. The researcher had absolutely no control or knowledge of who took it or if anyone would participate. Those who did take the survey did so anonymously so there could be no follow-up or questions asked about the way they answered. Having no control over if or when people would participate is a limitation.

The researcher was only able to interview five pastors. While he was able to determine a few trends and notice a few common similarities the number is far too low to really know how common this type of behavior is for the majority. In addition, those interviewed were solely located in Virginia. It is not uncommon for trends to exist within the same state. It would be beneficial to have interviewed a group of pastors from another state as well. Another limitation was that the five pastors were all black males. More information could have been gathered had other races or ethnicities had been interviewed. Women and men typical have different styles so it would have been intriguing to hear how women lead and provide vision to their congregation.

As the researcher attempted to investigate if there was any local unity among the churches, it would have benefited him to interview the local church associations. The moderators

could have provided insight into how often churches are asked to meet and what are some of the efforts they are seeking to do in the community.

Unexpected Observations

An unexpected observation of this study is that four of the pastors did not have a viable plan in place to evangelize locally. This is disheartening because it felt as though they were not really interested in growing the church as much as they are with preaching to a local congregation on Sunday. Given the fact they can see the empty pews and realize it takes members to operate a church, it was shocking that there were not efforts to address the decline and lack of growth. Each of these churches held afternoon services that were steeped in tradition. When asked why these services existed the repeated response was “we do this every year.” The time and energy to hold a service for no apparent reason other than to have a service is unfortunate when that energy can be used to spread the gospel and possibly bring newcomers in.

Another surprise was the willingness the participants of this study demonstrated. The researcher only had difficulty making an appointment with one pastor. The pastors spoke openly and candidly about a subject that is often overlooked and avoided by church leaders. They shared experiences and obstacles they faced. It was humbling to witness a few show their emotions about goals they had and ministry work that did not always come to fruition. They each asked to see the completed work.

It was surprising at how many pastors are clueless about church decline. There were those who were insistent that the data was insufficient and the observations were in error. It is mind-boggling to me how many will claim faith and yet deny obvious facts and live in denial of the truth.

Recommendations

This study has information that can help churches understand that decline in attendance across the country is very real. It can help church leaders with recognizing and understanding areas that may need stronger teaching and more emphasis. The hope is that every church will implement a missionary team. This team will be in place to assist the pastor with carrying out the gospel and love of Christ within the community.

After this research work, it is necessary to study how churches can openly and honestly discuss why members have left and, continue to leave and why people are not joining at the rate they once did. Changes could be made to how church leaders care for their members and pay closer attention to empty seats and faces they have not seen in attendance. It can help end the idea that just because the church doors are open that people will come.

People have many options on Sunday, and for many, church is an afterthought. Church leaders and pastors must be intentional in spreading the gospel and inviting non-believers to church. Churches should include a sentence in their mission statement that declares how committed they are to drawing others to the saving grace of Jesus the Christ.

Local associations should develop training materials that focus on evangelism. The associations will also need to offer training and development of the local pastors and leaders. The churches need to have a team set aside that will contact members when they have not been present for a period of time. The team also needs to periodically connect with and contact members who attend church regularly just so they will know someone from the ministry cares and views them as more than a number.

Church members must take a more active role in witnessing in the community. Hopefully, they will understand that face-to-face and one-on-one ministry is the most effective.

The goal of this research is for people who love Christ to be vocal about it and willing to tell someone else about Him.

This research can be used as a beginning point to develop other studies.

Postscript

The responsibility of sharing the gospel to the masses is something we can no longer take lightly. The numbers do not lie. People are embracing the Christian faith less and less, and people are opting out of attending church on a weekly basis more and more.

I was baptized at eight years old. There is no time in my life I have recollection of not being in the church. I was not only in attendance at an early age but actively involved during worship services and events. As I reflect back over my life, I would have had it no other way.

It saddens me that there will be many children who will not enjoy the church experiences I had. Kids today are given the option not to attend church or participate in related activities. So much of what shaped me as a Christian and as a leader was formed in my earlier years of church participation. Being active in church afforded me many opportunities to not only learn but to speak publicly and be groomed for leadership.

By the time I was 19 I was hearing the call of God on my life to preach the gospel. It was during this time that I was still acting out some mischievous ways while sorting out the voice of God from my own. I was able to heed to the call on my life and reach those who were my age at the time and much older. I learned a deep understanding of sharing the word with others. In those days, the legendary preacher Billy Graham would occasionally come on regular TV to preach a word. This was unheard of and even to this present day I do not see this being done or the number of people gathering in such massive numbers to hear a preached word. It was such a sight to see so many come to accept Christ as their Savior. I cannot say this was the moment

when I first got the itch to want to see more do the same but it certainly reaffirmed my love of the gospel.

My own sense of peace has been strengthened by doing this study. I have been able to shed some light on a topic I consider captivating, yet few are speaking about. While the lack of conversation is frustrating, I take pride and joy in knowing that I have offered a contribution to the efforts of shifting the decline of those who chose not to attend church. It is not only my prayer, but also my sincere hope that those who love God will commit themselves to ensuring at least one person will know about Jesus either through their life or their words or both.

Appendixes:

Appendix A

Church Attendance Questionnaire

Church Attendance

Participating in the survey implies you give permission to add the responses to an aggregate database. This survey is part of a study being conducted to better understand church attendance.

Q1. Do you agree to your personal data being processed as detailed above, you must click yes in order to continue with the survey? As a participant, you are free to withdraw at any time, as this survey is voluntary. This study addresses the decline of church membership, and attendance especially in the rural community. Various factors have resulted in this downward spiral. This study seeks to enlighten the body of faith as to the reality of Christian church membership decreasing. My personal email is sdan2032@gmail.com. Yes or No

Q2. What is the official church membership of your location?

1-49 50-99 100-199 200-399 400+

Q3. In the last five years, how has your membership changed?

Lost membership by 1-5%

Lost membership by 6-10%

Lost membership by 11%+

Gained membership by 1-5%

Gained membership by 6-10%

Gained membership by 11%+

Q4. Of the membership on the roll how many actually attend services weekly?

85-100% of members attend weekly

70-84% of members attend weekly

55-69% of members attend weekly

40-54% of members attend weekly

25-39% of members attend weekly

Attendance is so sporadic it is difficult to gauge

Q5. What is the percentage of males in attendance over 18?

85-100%

70-84%

55-69%

40-54%

25-39%

Q6. What is the percentage of females in attendance over 18?

85-100%

70-84%

55-69%

40-54%

25-39%

Q7. How many people have joined your church in the last 12 months by letter, baptism or Christian experience?

Q8. How many people have exited your ministry in the last 12 months?

Q9. Do you have a varying range of ministries for all age groups such as?

Youth ministry	Senior Ministry	Couples Ministry
Singles Ministry	Women's Ministry	Men's Ministry

Q10. Of the ministries listed in Q9, which has the highest level of attendance?

Q11. What is the age of the senior pastor?

18-30 31-45 46-60 61-75 76+

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Pastors Concerning Church Attendance

1. Have you seen a shift in church attendance over the last 5 years? If so please give me details, increase/decrease?
 - a. Have you seen a shift in worshippers not attending as much in times past, for example Ms. Jones may come on 2nd and 4th Sunday but no longer every week?
 - b. Do you believe online broadcasting of services has lowered attendance at your location? This broadcasting can be from your church or other ministries. What happens to discipleship in a virtual movement?
2. Do you have evangelism ministries in place? Is there a concerted effort by your ministry to grow the church?
 - a. Do you have ministries designed to address various audiences such as youth, men, women, etc?
3. Have you ever organized a committee or group to address church fluctuation in attendance? If so, tell me about what that looks like?
 - a. What methods if any do you use to follow up with members you have not seen in some time? Is there any level of accountability on both sides, meaning the church and the member accountable to one another?
 - b. Have you consulted with area pastors or local associations to discuss church decline/growth? Has there been consideration to use different forms of preaching styles or ways of engagement seen to work at other locations such as contemporary music, stage props, video screens, etc?

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO PASTOR CONCERNING MEMBERS

Church Decline

You have already been invited to and authorized your consent to be in a research study that is being done by Shawn Dandridge from the Asbury Theological Seminary. My email address is sdan2032@gmail.com. This additional consent is so that a few of your members may participate in the study as well by way of survey.

The survey will be found of Survey Monkey and, as always, all information will remain confidential.

If you agree to include your members in the study, they will be asked to answer various questions that are related to church growth and decline.

If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want. You may contact Shawn Dandridge with questions at any time and about anything in this study. Signing this consent form means that you have read this form or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the form. Participating in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this form or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been informed about this study, why it is being done and how to participate.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

Appendix D

Dear Pastor,

I am currently doing a dissertation research project with Asbury Theological Seminary about church decline. You have already been invited to and authorized your consent to be in a research study that is being done by Shawn Dandridge. This additional consent is so that a few of your members may participate in the study as well by way of survey.

The survey will be found on SurveyMonkey and, as always, all information will remain confidential.

If you agree to include your members in the study, they will be asked to answer various questions that are related to church growth and decline.

If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want.

You may contact Shawn Dandridge with questions at any time and about anything in this study.

Signing this consent form means that you have read this form or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the form. Participating in the study is voluntary. You agree that you have been informed about this study, why it is being done and how to participate.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

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