

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

PREDICTING AND PREVENTING INACTIVE CHURCH MEMBERS

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By

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ABSTRACT

PREDICTING AND PREVENTING INACTIVE CHURCH MEMBERS

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Most churches have many members classified as inactive. The purpose of this project is to discover if there are any common characteristics among those who have become inactive that can be used to identify and prevent others from becoming inactive members. Based on surveys and questionnaires sent to pastors, active, and inactive members from several churches in the Cabarrus Baptist Association, the project seeks to identify patterns among members who have become inactive. It then reviews the information to propose strategies to identify possible methods for preventing members from becoming inactive in the future.

Abstract length: 94 words

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

According to the Barna Research Group, church attendance in America continues to decline. Their research indicates that on any Sunday, only about 15 percent of adults will attend Sunday School, which is a decrease of 8 percent in the last twenty years. Worship attendance by adults has also decreased from 49 percent in 1991 to 40 percent in 2011.

The most substantial change in the last twenty years has been in the sector noted as “unchurched.” These are those who have not attended any church service other than a special event such as a wedding or funeral in the previous six months. This number has increased from 24 percent in 1991 to 37 percent in 2011.¹

These numbers indicate that only one out of three adults in America regularly attend church. Those numbers continue to decline annually. The latest information shows that, “A new Gallup report found that only half of Americans say they belong to a church or other religious body, down from 69% two decades earlier.”²

“No one seems sure regarding the number of unchurched people in this country. Studies vary in their estimates from about 60 million to over 100 million.”³ While those numbers are

1. The Barna Group Online, “Barna Examines Trends in 14 Religious Factors over 20 Years (1991 to 2011),” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/504-barna-examines-trends-in-14-religious-factors-over-20-years-1991-to-2011#.UgKTi6zAaSo> (accessed June 23, 2013).

2. Bob Smietana. “Gallup: Number of Americans who belong to a church or house of worship plummets,” “Religion New Service posted April 18, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/04/18/gallup-number-of-americans-who-belong-to-a-church-or-house-of-worship-plummets/>, (accessed august 22, 2020).

3. Herbert W Byrne, *Reclaiming Inactive Church Members* (Victoria, B. C., Trafford Publishing, 2003), 11.

shocking enough, the truly discouraging part of those numbers is how many of the unchurched are more accurately described as dechurched. These are those who were once involved in a church body, but for whatever reason have become disconnected from the fellowship of believers.

One of the most surprising aspects of this research is the large number of church members, those who claim to be Christians, who are also inactive or irregular in their church attendance. Eighty-four percent of American adults consider themselves Christian.⁴ Barna states, “If the minority of unchurched adults who are born again were connected to a church, the resulting increase would be nearly 13 million new people, more than have joined the nation’s churches in the past decade combined.”⁵

The Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest protestant denomination in the United States and of which the author is a member, compiles and releases attendance and other data annually. The 2012 report reveals that, “Although the number of SBC-affiliated congregations grew, reported membership of those churches declined by more than 100,000 down 0.7 percent to 15.9 million members. Primary worship attendance declined 3.1 percent to 5.97 million Sunday worshippers.”⁶

It is important to remember that to become a member of a Southern Baptist Church, one must either already state that he or she is a Christian and move his or her membership from

4. Byrne, 11.

5. The Barna Group Online, “Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991,” <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/5-barna-update/140-number-of-unchurched-adults-has-nearly-doubled-since-199#.UgKf-6zAaSo> (accessed July 1, 2013).

6. Alex Murashko, “Overall Declining Numbers for Southern Baptists Heartbreaking, Says Leader,” <http://www.christianpost.com/news/overall-declining-numbers-for-southern-baptists-heartbreaking-says-leader-97396/> (accessed June 12, 2013).

another church or ask to join the church after accepting Christ. This means that the 15.9 million cited as Southern Baptists have at some point claimed Christ as Savior, yet slightly over one-third of those professing Christians attend church.

Even when these numbers are narrowed down to what is traditionally considered a Bible belt state, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina reported a 2012 total membership of 976,761 and an average morning worship attendance of 401,673 or barely 3 percent above the national figure.⁷

These numbers reveal that the average Southern Baptist Church has over twice as many members enrolled as they have actively involved in the ministry of the church. This fact should be a major concern for the leadership of the local church as well as the denomination. However, a perusal of available seminars, denominational literature, the available Christian book list, and others, will reveal that there is a great indifference to this situation. The emphasis is on church planting and evangelism, all excellent pursuits and Biblical mandates, but to allow well over half of those who have professed Christ and joined our churches to disappear is unconscionable.

This author has been called on for hospital visitation and even to preach funerals for those who were supposed members of his church, even though after serving as pastor for over twenty-five years he had never met them or observed them participating in any church activity. “The New Testament knows nothing of Christian experience practiced independently and in isolation from other Christians.”⁸ Still, churches routinely report over half of those recorded membership as inactive. Formerly involved church members seemingly think nothing of no longer being involved with their church.

7. Russell Schwab, interview by author, Kannapolis, NC. August 7, 2013.

8. Donald F. Ackland, *Joy In Church Membership*, (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1956), 4.

Why are so many people slipping through the cracks? Could we have predicted their change in attendance? This project seeks to address these issues by surveying pastors regarding their practices involving inactive members, as well as asking church members about their church attendance habits and opinions.

Statement of the Problem

Personal observation throughout the author's ministry, conversations with other pastors and church leaders, along with data from the Annual Church Profile compiled by the Southern Baptist Convention indicate that inactive members are a serious problem in most churches. The membership rolls of most churches are divided into active and inactive members with the stipulation that the inactive roll is ineligible to vote in church affairs. This problem has extended to the denominational level as the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina has a similar process for labeling churches as inactive and unable to participate in the business of the convention.

While the author is most familiar with the work of the Southern Baptist Convention, he has found this to be a problem in all denominations. The communications department of the United Methodists has distributed an eight-step plan to "re-energize" inactive members.⁹ A Google search of the term "inactive member" resulted in 12,500,000 results. A quick scan revealed videos, articles, books, and conferences all aimed at dealing with this issue.

Even in churches where there is a genuine attempt to reclaim the inactive member, numerous problems arise. One of the major issues is that no matter how delicately the church approaches the topic, they are often seen as bullying or trying to push the person out of the

9. "8 tips to re-energize inactive members," <http://www.umcom.org/learn/8-tips-to-re-energize-inactive-members>, United Methodist Communications, (Accessed August 2, 2020).

church. Hershel York, professor of preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says, “Certainly churches need to take special care that their goal is restoration and that they communicate that clearly, but when someone contributes nothing to the life of the church for a period of years it’s disingenuous to pretend they are in any real sense a part of the body.”¹⁰

One might think that the threat of domestic terrorism, military, and nuclear threats around the globe, along with the current economic conditions would encourage church attendance, especially among those who are already church members. Unfortunately, “[c]ontrary to recent media reports suggesting that the country’s economic troubles have led to higher levels of church attendance, a Pew Forum analysis of polls by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press finds that while the Dow Jones Industrial Average has shed over half its value since October 2007, there has been no increase in weekly worship service attendance during the same time period.”¹¹

Going back further in history shows that while world or national events may stimulate a brief rise in church attendance, it is normally short lived. Barna reports that “although there was an intense surge in religious activity and expression in the weeks immediately following 9/11 the faith of Americans is virtually indistinguishable today compared to pre-attack conditions.”¹² Barna is quoted as said of his findings, “I was among those who fully expected to see an intense spiritual reaction to the terrorist attacks. The fact that we saw no lasting impact from the most

10. Aaron Earls, “Is Your Church Membership Roll Out of Date?. ” Facts and Trends, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/07/24/when-church-membership-goes-viral/>, (Accessed August 4, 2020)

11. The Pew Forum, “Is a Bad Economy Good for Church Attendance?,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/03/12/is-a-bad-economy-good-for-church-attendance>, (accessed August 1, 2013).

12. The Barna Group Online, “Five Years Later: 9/11 Attacks Show No Lasting Influence On American’s Faith,” <https://www.barna.com/research/five-years-later-911-attacks-show-no-lasting-influence-on-americans-faith/>, (accessed September 27, 2016).

significant act of war against our country on our own soil says something about the spiritual complacency of the American public.”¹³

What is this thing called an inactive church member? Most churches have their own definition of the term. It usually involves a person’s attendance and financial giving practices. Mark S. Jones defines this term as, “An inactive member is a resident member of the church who has ceased to participate in the life and work of the church as evidenced by a lack of attendance and financial support or has shown a marked decrease in such participation to the point that this participation is minimal.”¹⁴ Sadly, it appears that over half of Baptist church members fit into this category.

Unfortunately, the situation may be worse than believed. Most research indicates a steady decline in church attendance. A common statistic given by researchers reports, “Approximately 40 percent of the population of the United States is said to attend church weekly.”¹⁵ However, some research indicates a much bleaker situation:

Characterizations of religious life in the United States typically reference poll data on church attendance. Consistently high levels of participation reported in these data suggest an exceptionally religious population, little affected by secularizing trends. This picture of vitality, however, contradicts other empirical evidence indicating declining strength among many religious institutions. Using a variety of data sources and data collection procedures, we estimate that church attendance rates for Protestants and Catholics are, in fact, approximately one-half the generally accepted levels.¹⁶

13. BP Press, “Sept 11 Attacks Hardly Influenced American’s Spirituality,” <http://bpnews.net/14156/sept-11-attacks-hardly-influenced-americans-spirituality-study-says>, (accessed September 27, 2016).

14. Mark S. Jones, *Reclaiming Inactive Church Members* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 76.

15. C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, Mark Chaves, “What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (Dec., 1993), 741-752. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095948> (accessed February 6, 2010).

16. Ibid.

Considering the large numbers on the membership rosters of just the major denominations, obviously, many of these who are not involved in church were once active members. The goal of this project is to discover the reasons why those people who claim Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and have made a commitment to become a member of a Southern Baptist church do not regularly attend that church. The method will be to either mail a survey to these inactive members or to reach them by an internet survey. Church pastors will be asked to complete a secondary survey to discover their opinions regarding inactive members and their methods of preventing or reclaiming such members.

It is the desire of the author that pastors and church members will fall in love with each other again, and with their church. That they would recognize the importance of being a church attender, not just a church member. In 1 Corinthians twelve through fourteen, Paul uses the analogy of the body to stress the important roll each person plays in the church. “The Bible explains ‘members’ differently than secular culture. For example, look at 1 Corinthians 12:27-28. ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has placed these in the church.’”¹⁷

The results of this project will be shared with pastors and churches to better equip them to reach those who do not regularly attend and hopefully identify and prevent members from becoming inactive. It is the author’s belief that this project will provide an understanding of inactive members and their motives so that churches can begin the work of reclaiming inactive members.

17. Thom Rainer, *I Am A Church Member* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), 12.

Statement of Limitations

This project has several limitations. First, the very nature of the project relies on inactive members giving their honest opinions. It has been the experience of this author, over almost thirty years of ministry, that people often will not disclose the true reason for no longer being actively involved in the local church.

Second, this project will be focused on a small demographic and geographic region. Most of the survey respondents will be from the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The author also expects almost all of the survey respondents to be from Southern Baptist churches. It is conceivable that different denominations, demographic groups, or geographical regions could render different results to the same questions.

Third, this project makes no attempt to discover the reasons for not attending church of the unchurched population, only those who were formerly involved in a local church and who have now become inactive. The possibility does exist for the results to be slightly skewed by those who take the survey incorrectly; those who are actually unchurched or even actively involved in church. It is the opinion of the author that the reasons for those who were once actively involved in a church and then becoming inactive are quite different from those who have never been involved in a local church.

Fourth, this project does not intend to be critical of those who are unable to attend church due to physical or other limitations. However, it is likely that in surveying the inactive lists of cooperating churches along with those who participate via internet that there will be a small percentage of respondents who do fall into this category. The author acknowledges that many in this group sincerely desire to be regularly involved in their church but may unfortunately be labeled as an inactive member. Experience has shown the author that most people, regardless of

their attendance patterns, do not consider themselves inactive. They typically will believe that they are just not as active as some.

Further exacerbating this issue is that because of their lack of frequent involvement with their church, the church itself has lost contact with the member and often has incorrect contact information or no information. This problem is made even worse by the churches who do not keep an inactive membership roll but will on occasion go through their membership roster and remove the names of those who have not attended in a designated length of time.

Perhaps the largest hurdle or limitation to overcome in preparing this project is the actual identification of inactive members. Primarily the issue will be that they will be required to self-identify.

Finally, while the aim of the project is to provide some practical solutions to preventing and reclaiming the inactive church member, there is no guarantee of their effectiveness. Due to geographic and other limitations and the multitude of circumstances in the life of each church and her members, there are many variables that bear on the reclamation of inactive members. As there are very few “one size fits all” solutions in the church, each church and pastor will be required to adapt all conclusions to their individual situation.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis for this project is the belief that Scripture clearly connects a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior with the attendance and involvement in a local church. To a lesser degree, but still of valid importance is the doctrine of the church and the historical practices of the church.

These three, Scripture, church doctrine, and historical practice all describe a clear relationship between one’s personal declaration of faith in Christ and the regular attendance and

involvement in the local church. When one studies these three areas, there is a clear connection between salvation and church attendance. Not to say that salvation is dependent upon church attendance, but that when one is truly saved, he or she will become a part and stay involved with a body of believers.

In Scripture, the pattern and expectations are clear throughout the New Testament that believers will become involved and attend a local church. In fact, there is no indication of anyone who became a believer in the New Testament era who did not involve themselves with the church. Throughout the Book of Acts, in the seminal days of the early church, despite and during the persecution of believers, one reads of the gathering of the church. There are two important arguments for church attendance in Scripture: the words used to describe the church and the numerous examples of the church gathering.

Following the arrest and release of Peter and John for their preaching after the healing of the lame man outside the temple we read that they “went to their own company.”¹⁸ This passage indicates that almost immediately following the ascension of Christ, the believers were gathering together for prayer and worship.

Later in Acts, we read that Paul and Barnabas returned from one of their missionary journeys and, “gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.”¹⁹ Even in the face of opposition and persecution, the New Testament believers are seen gathering, praying, and worshiping together.

Even before the crucifixion, the Gospels reveal that those who were following Jesus Christ had a practice of gathering together. This practice continues with those who were

18. Acts 4:23 KJV

19. Acts 14:27 KJV

following Jesus Christ through the ministry of Peter shortly after the ascension as Luke records, “And all that believed were together, and had all things common.”²⁰

The New Testament epistles are repeatedly addressed to the *ekklesia*, or the church. Paul and John both use phrases like, “to the church at Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1). Paul uses this same introduction in each of his letters, only changing the name of the recipient city. John wrote the Book of Revelation to the seven churches (Rev. 1-3). Each of these authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, address his writing to the church or the *ekklesia*. Erickson defines the church, or *ekklesia*, by writing that, “The meaning of the New Testament concept must be seen against two backgrounds, that of classical Greek and that of the Old Testament.”²¹

As far back as the fifth century B.C., classical Greek has used *ekklesia* to refer to an assembly of the citizens of the city at frequent intervals. In the worldly application of the word, it “refers simply to a gathering or assembly of persons, a meaning which is still to be found in Acts 19:32,39, 41.”²² This gathering of the citizens was not for all those who lived in the city, it was only for the citizens. When the herald sounded the summons, only the citizens would come and gather to discuss and vote on the affairs of the city.²³ Thus, this understanding of the word helps ones to see that the church is to be a gathering of people of like mind, those with a personal relationship with Christ.

20. Acts 2:44 KJV

21. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 1031.

22. Ibid.

23. Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1989), 617.

Towns adds that, “The word ecclesia comes from the Greek preposition out and the Greek verb to call. Hence, the church is made up of those who are called out.”²⁴ “The ‘called-out ones’ were those summoned to attend these gatherings. Then the term passed over into the New Testament documents and designated the assembly of those gathered together for public worship, or those called out to assemble for Christian purposes.”²⁵ Towns concludes by writing that this means they are called out of the world and their previous lifestyle and “they are called together for a purpose.”²⁶

When a general word is used in a special way, it becomes technical. As such, the word church is used in a technical way in the Scripture. The word church was a deliberate choice by Christ. He chose the common word for assembly and gave it special content or theological meaning. “The Assembly” to which He referred was to be His assembly.²⁷

While some will read 1 Corinthians 14 and focus on the discussion of the proper use of spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, the chapter also includes many references to the church as a gathering place of believers. This is particularly the case in verse 23, “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?”²⁸

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from Paul’s words. First, the church is made up of born-again, regenerate believers. Second, the unbelievers are part of a different group. Finally, the believers are to gather in one place for worship.

24. Towns, 611.

25. William M. Stevens, *Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1967), 300.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 617.

28. 1 Cor. 14:23 KJV

Erickson also connects the New Testament use of *ekklesia* with the Old Testament words *qahal* and *'edah*. “The former term, perhaps derived from the word for ‘voice’, refers to a summons to an assembly and the act of assembling. It is not so much a specification of the members of the assembly as a designation of the occurrence of assembling.”²⁹ Writing of the latter Hebrew term *'edah*, he says “It refers to the people, particularly as gathered before the tent of meeting.”³⁰

At times the word *ekklesia* is used to address the gathering of believers in a home church, as when Paul writes to the church at Cenchrea, including Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:5) and to those in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15). There are also times when the term is used to identify the church as a body in particular areas (Acts 9:31). Paul uses the word *ekklesia* more than any other and most of his writings are to gatherings in the individual cities. “The local sense of the church is evidently intended in the vast majority of occurrences of the word *ekklesia*.”³¹

The repeated use of the term *ekklesia* by Paul and others, emphasizes the gathering of Christians for worship. While we often state that we are all the church, Erickson states, “We should note that the individual congregation, or group of believers in a specific place is never regarded as only a part or component of the whole church. The church is not a sum or composite of the individual local groups. Instead, the whole is found in each place[.]”³² While the New Testament stresses the importance of the individual relationship with Christ, it also notes the importance of followers of Christ gathering together.

29. Erickson, 1031.

30. Ibid., 1032.

31. Ibid., 1033.

32. Ibid.

There appears to be a new model in religion, “believing without belonging.”³³ Barna “discovered that almost one out of five unchurched adults – 18% – born-again Christian.”³⁴ Barna’s research also indicated that those who are unchurched, 70% label themselves “Christian.” Of that group of unchurched, “31% call themselves Christians and say they are ‘not at all committed.’”³⁵ The author is personally aware of some churches that have eliminated the practice of even tracking church membership. This relationship with the church is a direct contradiction to the Scriptures description of *ekklesia*.

There are several teachings of Christ that show the importance of both the believers’ relationship with Him and with each other. In John 15, Jesus gives the lesson of the vine and the branches. “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.”³⁶ While this passage has many implications, it shows the importance of the branch’s relationship to the vine and each other.

Another important passage that reveals the proper attitude of the church toward the inactive member is the parable of the lost sheep found in Matthew 18 and Luke 15. In this story the shepherd is seen leaving the flock behind to go and locate one of his sheep that has become separated from the others. The church should learn from this example and make every attempt necessary to reclaim and restore the inactive member.

33. Carl Dudley, *Where Have All Our People Gone*, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 15.

34. George Barna, *Re-Churching the Unchurched*, (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000), 69.

35. *Ibid.*, 68.

36. John 15:5 KJV

There are also several passages which point out that the believers are the body of Christ and that He is the head:

- 1 Corinthians 12:12, “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.”
- 1 Corinthians 12:25, “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.”
- 1 Corinthians 12:27, “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”
- Colossians 1:18, “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”

The image of the believers as the body is a powerful argument for the importance of unity and gathering together. Just as one would not want his own body to be divided and scattered, the body of Christ should be gathered together. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:25, there should be no “schism” or division in the body. It is difficult to imagine how the members can “have the same care one for another” when they are not gathering on a regular basis.

From a negative aspect, Paul also gives directions for putting someone out of the fellowship of believers.³⁷ If the practice of the early church was not to gather, then there would be no necessity for such instruction. He also addresses the Corinthian church regarding immorality in their company. He does not direct them to disband in response to the sin, but to address the sin for the continued well-being of the body.

These Biblical labels for the church along with the aforementioned and other Scripture passages present a solid foundation for the belief that Christians are expected to be actively involved in a local church. The church is to be a gathering or fellowship of those who have come together out of their shared faith in the resurrected Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Of less authority, but still of great importance are the doctrinal and historical practices of the church. This project will examine portions of both these practices. In view of most of the

37. 2 Thess. 3:6,14

New Testament doctrines, it is difficult to see them being practiced in solitude. Baptism, edification, The Lord's Supper, forgiveness, and the utilization of various spiritual gifts are just a few of the doctrines that come to mind. These doctrines, and many others, by their very design require that believers be gathered together for fellowship, worship, and teaching.

These doctrines of the church naturally lead to an examination of the historical practices of the church. Traditionally, "membership in a church is a covenant relationship between Christ and the individual and between the church and the individual member. It is the relationship of a retained community in covenant with Christ."³⁸ This project seeks to show the relationship between being a follower of Jesus Christ and being actively involved with a local body of believers.

Whether it is the Jew of the Old Testament gathering on the Sabbath, the early believers in the Book of Acts gathering in their homes, or later gatherings in facilities specifically designated for worship, history teaches that God's followers gather together. Throughout the history of the church, documents have been written that declared the importance of the gathering of believers. Some are called covenants while others are called confessions, but each emphasizes the importance of the church.

Beginning with the founding of the church in the Book of Acts, through times of intense persecution, until today, followers of Christ have believed that part of their responsibility as a believer was to gather together to worship and for encouragement. The author contends that this history along with Scripture and doctrine demand that believers gather regularly and that churches take seriously their responsibility to reclaim those who have left the fold.

38. Earl Waldrup, *New Church Member Orientation Manual* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1965), 22.

Statement of Methodology

The idea for this project was birthed many years ago when the author first met Dr. John Savage. Savage was leading a workshop based on his book *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*, which came out of his doctoral project. In the early 1970s, while pastoring a Methodist congregation in New York, Savage became aware of the large number of church members who were no longer engaged with his congregation.

With the cooperation of his denomination, Savage trained a group of pastors to meet and interview his inactive members. From these interviews, he developed a set of listening skills to be used in interaction with inactive members and communication in general. His objective in teaching these skills today is to help churches to recognize the verbal clues one may give before separating from the church life.

This author had intended to duplicate Savage's work to determine if his findings are still valid forty years later. After several conversations with Savage, it was determined that duplicating his project in the Baptist church would be extremely difficult without a district leader directing the cooperation of other pastors and churches. However, there is still a desire to identify any indicators from the members or practices within the church that signal or precipitate a member becoming inactive.

The methodology of this project will be to research existing resources dealing with the topic of inactive members and compare their findings with surveys of pastors and those who are no longer regularly involved in their church. The surveys will seek to find the common denominators among these members that led to their inactivity, if any. There will also be an attempt to discover any commonality among the churches with inactive members and the methods churches are using to reclaim these members.

Ultimately, this project seeks to provide insights and suggestions to pastors and churches to prevent their members from becoming inactive and to reclaim those who are now inactive. These suggestions may involve improvements to existing methods and ministries, or the creation of new ministries. There will also be an examination of the existing assimilation methods and recommendations for improvement so that inactivity may be prevented initially. A major emphasis of the project will be to help churches to realize that ignoring the problem of inactivity is failing to show the love Christ demanded.

Chapter one of this project will serve as an introduction and overview of the topic. It will provide a limited review of the applicable Scripture, doctrines, and church history that show the importance of church attendance. This chapter will also present a survey of the available literature and resources dealing with church attendance, trends, and inactivity.

Chapter two will examine Scripture, doctrines, creeds, covenants, and church history that emphasize the regular gathering of the church. The contention of the author is that these items emphasize the relationship of regular church attendance and involvement to a healthy spiritual life for the believer. This chapter will serve as the theological basis for the entire project.

This chapter will evaluate the historical practices and documents of the church regarding church attendance. While the history of the church has been to emphasize the importance of being involved with a local church, the reality, in this author's opinion, is that in practice that emphasis has been on reaching new members with little or no emphasis on retaining and reclaiming the inactive. This chapter will lay the Scriptural and historical foundation for the importance of regular church attendance.

Chapter three will present the author's conclusions along with the research and analysis. This information will also be compared with others who have done similar work to identify any

trends or major disparities. The positive trends and practices identified that are currently being utilized to predict and prevent inactivity, along with the negative aspects, will be presented.

There will also be a discussion of the church member's perceptions regarding their inactivity and the reasons for it.

The final chapter will be a presentation of the desired outcomes and suggestions that will hopefully help churches deal with this problem. The author recognizes that due to various factors at work in different churches, these suggestions may not be universally effective. The desired outcome would be to call attention to the issue and provide pastors with some resources that will help prevent church members from becoming inactive. It is also the desire of the author to encourage churches and pastors to involve themselves in the ministry of reclamation just as the shepherd sought the one that was lost, not content to have the ninety and nine.

Review of Literature

Following is a description of the many resources available including journal articles, internet resources, and books dealing with the issue of people who are not regularly involved in a local church. These resources evaluate the problem from many angles including, the theology, history, and current trends.

Many of the varied resources address the issue of general declining church attendance, not specifically the issue of the previously churched who are no longer involved. Most of these items can still be mined for information as many of those who are listed as unchurched are those who were once regular church attenders.

As the reader will notice, there is not an abundance of literature available addressing the issue of inactive church members. Even those that do address the topic typically are more concerned with reclaiming those who have become inactive than actually preventing inactivity.

The reclamation of inactive members is obviously of great importance, but it has been this author's experience that this type ministry is one of the most difficult. The author's desire is to discover means whereby inactivity can be avoided.

Doctrine and Theology

*Layman's Library of Christian Doctrine*³⁹ was written by Lavonn D. Brown in 1987 and is meant to be a general overview of the doctrine of the church. Throughout each chapter he lays out the priority of community and the fellowship of the believers in the church. This is critical to this author's argument for regular church attendance. Brown provides no real solutions for any of the issues dealt with in this paper but lays out a biblical description of what the church is to look like and how it is to function.

*Theology for Today*⁴⁰ by Dr. Elmer Towns is included for his excellent treatment of the doctrine of ecclesiology. Towns deals extensively with the word "church" and traces its usage throughout Scripture. This will be an important part of this author's argument of the meaning of church as a gathering or body of believers. Towns also provides a well-delineated presentation regarding the New Testament church and the Old Testament practices. Theology is a major point of this author's argument for an active church body proving that being actively involved in a local church is a biblical mandate not just a preference.

39. Lavonn D. Brown, *Layman's Library of Christian Doctrine: The Life of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987).

40. Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1989).

*Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine From the Bible to the Present*⁴¹

by John H. Leith is an exhaustive listing of the creeds that have been formed by the church throughout its history. This project will base a portion of its argument on the fact that the early church did not even consider the idea of an inactive church member. Leith's work not only records the creeds themselves but provides much background into their writing. This book helps the reader to have a better understanding of the creeds and confessions that were especially foundational in the early church.

*Early Christian Creeds*⁴² by J.N.D. Kelly examines the creeds of the early church with particular attention to their relationship to the New Testament. His examination of not only the creeds but how they were formed will lend authority to the creeds and their use in this project as a basis for church attendance. As a theologian, Kelly also discusses the theological basis for the creeds and how they helped shaped the practices of the church.

*The Baptist Faith and Message*⁴³ by Herschel W. Hobbs serves as a commentary on the Baptist Faith and Message. Hobbs has taken each of the articles and provided detailed explanation and Scripture cross references to support them. This book will help explain the traditional Baptist stance on the church and The Lord's Day. It provides both biblical and historical evidence for the importance of church attendance and the position that inactive church members were not a consideration of the early Christians. This book was written before the

41. John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine From the Bible to the Present* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982).

42. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh Gate, England, Longman Group Limited, 1972).

43. Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1996).

current BF&M was adopted in 2000, however the pertinent articles for this project remain largely unchanged.

General Church

*The American Church in Crisis*⁴⁴ was written by David T. Olsen who relies on his experience as a pastor to give a complete overview of the church's present situation. His information is well-sourced and supplemented by his knowledge from serving in the ministry and denominational work. Olsen observes that church growth is at best stagnant while the American population continues to grow at a rapid pace. Of particular interest for this project is his section regarding church attendance and the four types of church members. Olsen's primary purpose is not the prevention of inactive members; however, his description of the landscape of the church in general provides important foundational material. Much of his data is also broken down by denomination, which should prove important for this project as the majority of those surveyed will be Baptists.

*Opening the Front Door: Worship and Church Growth*⁴⁵ written by James Emery White deals specifically with bringing people into the church, particularly the unchurched. The examples he shares should provide valuable insight into the steps necessary to keep existing members from walking away from the church as well. They also can serve as guidance to assist in reacclimating those who have become inactive back into the church. Throughout the book, he

44. David T. Olsen, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 2008).

45. James Emery White, *Opening the Front Door: Worship and Church Growth* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1992).

challenges church leaders to question the status quo. White also provides several self-examination tools to assist the church in evaluating her current situation.

*New Church Member Orientation Manual*⁴⁶ by Earl Waldrup is an older book that addresses the new member assimilation process. Waldrup lays out more than just a process, he provides Scriptural support and explanation for the necessity of assimilation. This book provides excellent information regarding laying out expectations of the church and the new member. One of the real strengths of this book is that it presents a balanced approach to church membership between the church and the member. He explores the church's responsibility to examine herself and make the necessary adjustments to train and maintain members while still expressing the expectation that the new member will be a contributing part of the body of Christ.

Finding The, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church,⁴⁷ by Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin addresses the important second step in evangelism, assimilation. This book is divided equally on the two main functions of the church, evangelism and assimilation. Of particular relevance to this project are their directions concerning assimilation and their insistence on the church adopting a strategy of assimilation. The true strength of this book is the author's desire to lead the church from the early stages of forming a relationship that leads to evangelism all the way to working the new convert into the fabric of the church. The desire is to bring people not only to a saving knowledge of Christ, but to bring them into a deeper walk with Christ through the church.

46. Earl Waldrup, *New Church Member Orientation Manual* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1965).

47. Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding The, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992).

*Church for the UnChurched*⁴⁸ by George G. Hunter III is primarily a book written to teach the church how to evangelize the unchurched. It is the belief of this author that many of Hunter's tools can be utilized by the church to assist in evangelizing inside of the church as well. It is conceivable to believe that many of those who become inactive church members are actually unregenerate, therefore one method the church can use to eliminate inactivity is evangelism efforts within its own membership.

*The Bonsai Theory of Church Growth*⁴⁹ by Ken Hemphill, former President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes of the many ways that churches unwittingly keep themselves small. Hemphill devotes one chapter of his book to how churches treat their new members. He believes they are "pinched off" by the church. The way new members are brought into the church will be one of the main discussions of this project. It is believed that properly training and assimilating new members will prove to be an effective method for lowering the predominance of inactive members.

*Revitalizing the 20th Century Church*⁵⁰ by Lloyd M. Perry and Norman Shawchuck presents the necessity of and the requirements for church revitalization. While this project's focus is the inactive member, it is apparent that a church that has lost approximately half its membership to inactivity needs to examine itself as well. Of particular interest is the authors' addressing the mission of the church. By examining her mission in light of the New Testament, the church should find impetus to prevent and reclaim their inactive members.

48. George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

49. Ken Hemphill, *Bonsai Theory of Church Growth: Grow Your Church to its Natural God-Given Size*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1991)..

50. Lloyd M. Perry, and Norman Shawchuck, *Revitalizing the 20th Century Church* (Chicago: Moddy Press, 1982).

*Purpose Driven Church*⁵¹ by Rick Warren correlates with the idea the church must become more efficient and effective at carrying out her mission to attract and keep new members. Warren describes his vision for the New Testament church has living on purpose. He outlines a five-fold approach to the purpose of the church and then gives explanation as to how a church can achieve these standards. While not addressing the issue of inactivity directly, this book does provide tools that will help the average church live out her New Testament calling and thereby retain more of her members.

*The Kingdom Focused Church: A Compelling Image of an Achievable Future*⁵² by Gene Mims prescribes a holistic approach to discipleship in the local church. The approach recommended permeates all aspects of the local church building disciples at all times. The author connects every aspect of his program back to the New Testament description of who the church is to be. By building stronger disciples the church should be able to minimize the numbers who become inactive.

*Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*⁵³ by Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger is the result of Geiger's doctoral research into what made some churches more effective than others. He discovered effective churches have a laser-like approach to discipleship. This effort begins at the entrance point to the church with the new member's class and continues

51. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

52. Gene Mims, *The Kingdom Focused Church: A Compelling Image of an Achievable Future* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003).

53. Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2011).

through the person's time in the church. Of particular interest in this project is their work regarding the importance of the new member's class.

Inactive Members

*The Apathetic and Bored Church Member: Psychological and Theological Implications*⁵⁴ by John S. Savage is the result of Dr. Savage's own experience as a pastor, realizing the large number of inactive members in his own congregation. It is the seed from which this author's work sprung. Savage attempted to locate inactive members and through active listening skills, determined a reason for their inactivity and secured their return to the fellowship. His research is well-documented and presented. However, it is contended here that a better method will be to prevent the inactivity rather than work to reclaim them after the fact.

*Caring for Inactive Members. How to Make God's House a Home*⁵⁵ by Kenneth C. Haugk is actually more of a training manual than a standalone book. The majority of Haugk's material, as the title implies, is the reclamation of those who are already inactive. He does devote some time to preventing the inactive member, specifically describing the four stages of church involvement. Of particular interest is his conversation regarding the legitimate reasons for inactivity. Haugk also describes the early stages of inactivity, giving credence to this author's belief that there are ways to prevent inactive members.

54. John S. Savage, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member: Psychological and Theological Implications* (Pittsford, NY: LEAD Consultants, n.d., 1976).

55. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Caring for Inactive Members. How to Make God's House a Home* (St. Louis, MO: Tebunah Ministries, 1995).

*Re-Churching the Unchurched*⁵⁶ by George Barna is not specifically aimed at the inactive member but rather the unchurched. But the principles Barna records could prove to be effective means to reclaim the inactive. Along with reclaiming the inactive, a better understanding of the unchurched should prove beneficial to the church in preventing inactivity as well. As with most Barna books, this one is filled with statistics and research that provides a great deal of insight into the thought process of those who are outside the church.

*Reclaiming Inactive Church Members*⁵⁷ by Herbert W. Byrne is a very detailed examination of the inactive member and an explanation of the issues. Byrne addresses the most common causes of the inactive member from his research, along with many suggestions for reactivating these members. There are a number of case studies from various churches that add credence to his presentation. The final section of the book is a detailed program for the church to adapt for her use in reaching out to the inactive member.

*What Can We Do About Church Dropouts?*⁵⁸ by C. Kirk Hardaway is one of the few books that has been located that primarily focuses is on the prevention of inactive members. Hardaway considers the thought process of a member who is moving toward inactivity. He works to break through some of the stereotypes that the typical church members have developed that contributes to inactivity and prevents their return to the church.

This review of literature reveals that declining church attendance is a chronic problem in the American church. It also shows that a major component of this decline in attendance are

56. George Barna, *Re-Churching the Unchurched* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000).

57. Herbert W. Byrne, *Reclaiming Inactive Members* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2003)

58. C. Kirk Hardaway, *What Can We Do About Church Dropouts?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

those who were formerly involved in the local church that have now left the church. This problem is contrary to the plan of Christ revealed in the text of the New Testament, the doctrines, and the historical practices of the church. Churches must be strategic and intentional in developing plans for bringing these inactive members back into regular fellowship with the body. It is also pivotal for churches and their leaders to teach the importance of being actively involved to their existing members.

CHAPTER TWO - BASIS FOR CHURCH ATTENDANCE

It is apparent from a review of current statistics, the average believer has little value for church attendance. This has led to spiritually immature Christians and struggling churches. When believers under the age of thirty-five were asked why they left the church by The Pew Research Center, their response is frightening. In this study, many said “they no longer *identified* with a religious group because they no longer *believed it was true*. When asked *why* they did not believe, many said their views about God had ‘evolved’ and some reported having a ‘crisis of faith.’⁵⁹

For the church to adequately deal with the issue of large portions of her membership leaving the church and becoming uninvolved, inactive, it would seem that she needs to go back to teaching the historic, personal, and Scriptural importance of church attendance. Studying the history of the church reveals that the church has regularly gathered for worship. Whether that be examples in the pages of the New Testament or in extra-biblical accounts. The creeds and confessions of the church also show that regular church attendance was not only expected but considered a measurement of a person’s devotion to Christ.

59. J. Warner Wallace, “Young Christians are leaving the church – Here’s why,”: *FOX News Network* (Sept. 2018), <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/young-christians-are-leaving-the-church-heres-why>, (accessed: December 16, 2018).

A large portion of the Apostle Paul's writings were directed to or written about the church. His emphasis on the structure and importance of the church are unavoidable. The early recipients of his epistles would have certainly recognized the importance of the church and attendance through the concern that Paul expressed for the church and the care he took in defining its structure and leadership. The nature of the epistles themselves and the limits of communication would have required that one be in attendance to hear them read.

The importance of corporate worship and gathering is revealed by the practice of the church of meeting on the first day of the week, which is described beginning in the Book of Acts. The primary function of this worship service was "to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the promises of which that resurrection was a seal."⁶⁰ Erickson observes, "The early church came together to worship on a regular schedule, a practice commanded and commended by the apostle Paul."⁶¹

The Word *ekklesia*

"The English word 'church' derives from the late Greek word *kyriakon*, the Lord's house, a church building. In the NT, the word translates the Greek word *ekklesia*. In secular Greek *ekklesia* designated a public assembly and the meaning is still retained in the NT,"⁶² The word *ekklesia*, Greek for assembly or gathering, is an important concept for a correct understanding of the biblical importance of church attendance.

60. Justo L Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 20.

61. Erickson, 1056.

62. Walter L. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 231.

The word *ekklesia* has clear connections to the Greek language and the Roman practice of the people of a city or area gathering for the purpose of conducting business. “But the prototype of the NT *ekklesia* lies not in the Greco-Roman history but in the assembly of God’s people in the OT (cf. Acts 7:38), which developed into the Jewish synagogue as the gathering of the community of God. In these gatherings the great stories of salvation history were regularly rehearsed and the wonderful promises of God to Israel recounted (cf. Num. 14:7-9).”⁶³

The word *qahal* is used in the Hebrew OT to describe the gathering of God’s people. “The Greek translation of the OT translated this word with both *ekklesia* and *synagoge*. Even in the NT *ekklesia* may signify the assembly of the Israelites (Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12); but apart from these exceptions, the word *ekklesia* in the NT designates the Christian church.”⁶⁴

This word was not originated by Jesus but had been in use for many years prior to His teaching. By studying these uses, it helps shed light on Jesus’s use of the word regarding the church. It was a word commonly used in ordinary conversation and not exclusively used to speak of the church. It was used to describe public gatherings by the residents of a city. “It was a common term for a congregation of the *ekkletoi* (n.f.), the called people, or those called out or assembled in the public affairs of a free state, the body of free citizens called together by a herald.”⁶⁵

Commenting on the use of the word *ekklesia* in Matthew 16:18, Barclay writes:

The second point to be made is the very word *Church* (ἐκκλησία) in this passage conveys something of a wrong impression. When we hear the word

63. William D. Mounce, gen. editor, *Mounce’s Complete expository Dictionary of Old & New testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 110.

64. Ibid.

65. Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 541.

church we are apt to think of our own church; or we are apt to think of the church as an institution and an organization with buildings and offices, and services and meetings, and organizations and all kinds of activities. Now the word that Jesus almost certainly used was *quahal*, which is the word the Old Testament uses for the congregation of Israel, the gathering of the people of the Lord.⁶⁶

The use of the word *ekklesia* to describe the church is obviously not accidental. The use of this word designates the church a group of “called out ones.” “The word *ecclesia* comes from the Greek preposition out and the verb to call. Hence the church is made up of those who are called out.”⁶⁷ There are two purposes for the calling out, the church is called out to live a different life than the world and they are called *together* so that they might better carry out the Great Commission.⁶⁸

Jesus’s use of the word *Church*, taken in context, seems to be a clear indication of the importance He was placing on the act of gathering together as a body of believers. The instructions in Scripture regarding the church are difficult, if not impossible, to interpret as anything other than a body of believers. Whether it be in view of the Lord’s Supper, baptism, preaching, or even church discipline, it is apparent that these directions were intended for the corporate body of believers, not individuals.

It is clearly important that the church teach the importance of *ekklesia* to believers. *Gathering* was obviously a critical component of Jesus’s teaching regarding the church during His ministry. His teaching was followed and built upon by the actions of the early church and the preaching of Paul and the other disciples.

66. William F. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, Vol. 2: The Gospel of Matthew, 2nd ed.* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1958), 156.

67. Towns, 610.

68. *Ibid.*

This expectation of a gathering can be observed in the nature of many of Paul's letters. He writes to the church at Philippi, Galatia, Ephesus, Corinth, etc. In these letters, he mentions individuals, but he primarily addresses the gathered church – he expects the believers to be united in one place when they receive and read his letter.

For example, in his introductory words to the Philippian church he writes, “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, [a]lways in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, [f]or your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now[.]”⁶⁹ Paul's affection for the congregation is evident in his words. The *gathering* at Philippi had supported Paul in his work. His gratitude and prayers are directed to the church as a group, not an individual in Philippi.

There are no New Testament examples of believers who operated independently. Two of the most familiar illustrations of the church is that of a body and the relationship of the branches to the vine. Both lessons from Jesus demonstrate the interconnectedness of all the parts for the benefit of the whole. When Paul would go out onto his missionary journeys, he would come back and give a report to the church body, recognizing that he was a part of something far bigger than himself.

While Jesus and His twelve disciples may not constitute a church, they do provide a model of the way Christ works with and invests in His followers. This model teaches us that Christ works through His people when they are gathered. This is so important to Him that He warns His followers that the world is allowed to measure our love for Him by our love for each other. What better place for that love to be displayed than when God's people gather for regular meeting?

69. Philippians 1:3-5 KJV

Through the disciples' continual exposure to who he was, what he did and said, Jesus intended them to discern and absorb his vision, mindset and mode of operation. He desired them to become so saturated with the influences arising from his example and teaching, his attitudes, actions and anointing, that every single area of their lives would be impacted towards greater likeness to himself. The approach he decided on was simple and informal, practical and wholistic. The totality of shared life experiences made up the disciples' classroom, and their teacher's words merely needed to further elucidate the lessons already gained from his life.⁷⁰

After delivering His message regarding the vine and the branches, Jesus then told His disciples to "continue in my love."⁷¹ This command was followed shortly by His words, "Love one another, as I have loved you."⁷² Jesus was describing both a horizontal and a vertical relationship. The branches were to love each other and to love Him. There was to be a unity among them as they proclaimed the kingdom of God together.

As a further example of the expectation from Christ that believers would function together and not independently is His repeated description of believers as "sheep." Sheep by their very nature are animals that flock together. They have no claws or sharp fangs with which to defend themselves, so a lone sheep is in constant danger of attack. In one of His final appearances of His earthly ministry, Jesus instructed Peter to "feed my sheep."⁷³ Jesus was obviously referring to more than one animal that needs food, He was referring to a group or gathering of sheep.

While it is uncommon in the modern church, the practice of church discipline described in Matthew 18 is emblematic of a gathered church and not individual believers. While the purpose of the author is not to debate the issue of church discipline, it is difficult if not

70. Günter Krallman, *Mentoring For Mission* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2002), 53.

71. John 15:9 KJV

72. John 15:12 KJV

73. John 21:17 KJV

impossible to comprehend a manner in which church discipline could be carried out in any setting other than a gathered church. Matthew 18:17 describes a situation where the issue of an unrepentant brother would be brought before the church body and if necessary, the gathered body would act.

Paul addresses a similar issue as he writes 1 Corinthians 5:4-5. While the action taken is much harder for many to read, the opening words again point to a gathered church: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, [t]o deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Again, this verse makes it clear that Paul has every expectation that the church will be gathered together.

There are even New Testament examples of the Baptist practice of requesting and granting letters of membership for believers who move from one congregation to another. In the Book of Romans, Paul recommends Phoebe to the church at Rome and encourages them to take her into their fellowship. The reverse is true in the life of Paul who is being rejected by the members of the Church of Jerusalem who would not allow him into their fellowship due to their fear of his past actions. Barnabas steps forward to give his recommendation and then the church accepts Paul into their gathering.

Even a casual reading of the New Testament makes it nearly impossible for a believer to deny that the intent of Christ and the foundation of Christianity was a gathering of believers for the edifying, strengthening, support, and even discipline of each other. It was especially important for them to come together for worship as a body of believers. Along with the passages previously examined, there are numerous other Biblical examples that can be studied that make it clear to this author that the idea of an inactive church member is not biblical.

Confessions and Creeds

In the area of confessions, creeds, and covenants, the author readily acknowledges an unfamiliarity with these documents. Baptists have traditionally avoided such documents maintaining instead to be people of the Bible. The first article of the Baptist Faith and Message of 2000 states, “all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.”⁷⁴

It is an interesting observation that when one goes back to the oldest of creeds, there is no mention of church attendance. It seems the authors did not feel this needed to be stressed. The oldest creeds deal with doctrinal issues such as the Trinity and salvation; it was not necessary to address the issue of church attendance. The earliest reference to the topic discovered by this author was in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 – a Lutheran Confession. In Article VIII, entitled “What the Church Is” we read, “Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints[.]”⁷⁵

While the author, like most Baptists, does not utilize creeds or confessions, he recognizes that they do give us insight into the past practices of the church. Their inclusion in this project does not indicate that these documents hold authority and dictate church involvement, but they do reveal in previous generations believers were expected to be in attendance in their church.

74. Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message, 2000,” <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp> (accessed January 24, 2019).

75. John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader In Christian Doctrine From the Bible To The Present*, 3rd Ed. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 70.

They serve to highlight the dramatic shift in the opinions of professing believers in our current society and can be used to teach the seminal beliefs and practices of the church.

A fundamental component of Baptist doctrine is the priesthood of the believer; thus, no creed or confession will have authority over a believer. But throughout time, the church has put into writing their beliefs as churches and groups of churches. The period after the Reformation saw many confessions penned and as late as 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention authorized an update to the Baptist Faith and Message, which defines their core beliefs. Most of these confessions and creeds adopted by Baptists acknowledge the importance of believers coming together for corporate worship.

Following is a brief synopsis of several of these documents from different eras that will highlight the vast difference of opinion regarding church attendance in the current church age.

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

“Of the many confessions of faith that Baptists have produced – and they have produced a goodly number – none has been more influential than *the Second London Confession*, popularly known as the *1689 Confession*.”⁷⁶ This confession was accepted by the majority of English Baptists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and would be later (1742) used as the foundation in America for the *Philadelphia Baptist Confession*. Southern Baptists would use the document to guide their creation of *The Charleston Confession (1767)* and the *Abstract of Principles* for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁷⁷

76. Stan. Reeves, *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith: In Modern English* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), 5.

77. Ibid.

In the twenty-sixth article, titled “The Church,” there are several sections that describe the founding of the church and provide a definition of a believer. These sections are followed by several descriptions of the actual role of a believer as a church member. Section 26:6 states, “The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly displaying and demonstrating in and by their profession and life their obedience to the call of Christ. They willingly agree to live together according to Christ’s instructions, giving themselves to the Lord and to one another[.]”⁷⁸

This author especially appreciates the insertion of the word “willingly.” It is reminiscent of the words of the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.”⁷⁹ “Willingly” indicates that the authors of the *1689 Confession* believed that a follower of Christ should look forward to the opportunity to gather with like-minded people for the purpose of worshipping God. Like the Psalmist, they should be glad, not searching for an excuse to avoid coming together.

Should there be any question regarding their high esteem for the gathered church, they include additional writings on the topic. Section 26:7 reads, “To each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind, declared in his word, he hath given all that (o) power and authority, which is any way needful, for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands, and rules[.]”⁸⁰ Again the small details of this great confession come through as the authors share their belief that the power of God is demonstrated through the *gathered* believers.

78. Reeves, 50.

79. Psalm 122:1 KJV

80. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/the-second-london-confession.pdf>, (accessed May 7, 2019).

The following section, 26:8, describes the believers as “gathered and completely organized.” The article then lists the officers of a gathered church.

8. A particular Church gathered, and compleatly Organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of Officers, and Members; And the Officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church (so called and gathered) for the peculiar Administration of Ordinances, and Execution of Power, or Duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the World are (p) Bishops or Elders and Deacons.⁸¹

Several similar statements in section nine regarding the selection and election of officers also indicate a body of believers gathered. Speaking of the pastor, “He must be chosen by the collective vote of the church itself.”⁸² Regarding his installation, “The body of elders of the church must lay hands only if there are any already in place.”⁸³ The article concludes, “A deacon must be chosen by the same kind of vote and set apart by prayer and laying on of hands.”⁸⁴

While the referenced sections are only a small part of the twenty-sixth article titled, “*The Church*,” reading through the entire section, along with the other thirty-one sections, one will find no indication that there was any expectation other than those who believe in Christ will gather for church. Surely in a document this detailed the authors would have made some mention of the proper response to a believer who had become “inactive” if they had even conceived of this being an issue.

To the contrary, this confession, along with its successors was written with the full expectation that believers would be gathered on the Lord’s Day for worship. This expectation was

81. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/the-second-london-confession.pdf>, (accessed May 7, 2019).

82. Reeves, 51.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

obviously founded on their understanding of other creeds and confessions at their disposal, but mainly on their understanding of the model and command of Scripture. This is quite the contrast to the modern church where there is more of an expectation that members will be absent rather than present

The Philadelphia Confession of Faith

This confession comes from the year 1742. Prior to this, the London Confession of 1689 had been utilized in the first Baptist Association in America. When the Association gathered in 1742, they called for a rewriting of the London Confession that resulted in The Philadelphia Confession of Faith.⁸⁵

Chapter twenty-two, “Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day” contains several articles that dictate their position. One article that is particularly relevant to the discussion reads:

5. The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord's supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear; moreover, solemn humiliation, with fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.⁸⁶

One will notice that the elements of worship that are described in the article are the components of a corporate worship experience. While actual church attendance is not mentioned in the article, it is clear that gathering for worship was expected of the early members of the Philadelphia Association.

85. Timothy and Denise George, ed., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 10.

86. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/philadelphia-confession.pdf>, (accessed March 24, 2019).

6. Neither prayer nor any other part of religious worship, is now under the gospel, tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly nor wilfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God by his word or providence calleth thereunto.⁸⁷

The confession describes a very important aspect of worship for the believer, the ability and responsibility to worship everywhere and anytime. However, it makes an important distinction and emphasis, “so more solemnly in the public assemblies.”⁸⁸ It is obvious that the expectation of the believer was that he would be involved in corporate worship with his local congregation, and that gathering was of the highest importance.

If there was any question regarding the authors’ view of corporate worship, article eight then defines the Sabbath:

8. The sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs aforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all day, from their own works, words and thoughts, about their worldly employment and recreations, but are also taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.⁸⁹

Article eight specifically states that Sunday is not a day that man may use as he sees fit, but along with rest, it is a day for public worship. The author has often heard professing believers declare that Sunday is the only day they have to do what they want. Considering the previously examined Scripture and other passages, the framers of this confession express that Sunday is the only day that does have a design and the activities of the other six days are for man’s choosing.

87. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/philadelphia-confession.pdf>, (accessed March 24, 2019).

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

Chapter twenty-seven removes one of the favorite excuses of many inactive members when it addresses the proper response to disagreements among members. Article thirteen reads:

13. No church members, upon any offence taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb any church-order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offence at any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ, in the further proceeding of the church.⁹⁰

Even when there exists conflict between members, no member is to be absent from the gathering of the church. The practice of this article alone could arguably eliminate most of the inactive rolls of our churches.

There are other statements throughout the Philadelphia Confession that speak to the importance of church attendance in the early days of the Baptist church in America. From corporate singing, praying, discipleship, and more, it is clear that all believers were expected in their local church on a regular basis and the inactive membership roll did not exist.

Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association

The Sandy Creek Association is the third oldest Baptist association in America and the oldest in North Carolina. In 1755, Shubal Stearns of Boston, Massachusetts moved to the Sandy Creek area with eight families who built themselves a church before building their own homes. Stearns' desire was to plant additional churches, and in 1758 the Sandy Creek Association was founded.⁹¹

90. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/philadelphia-confession.pdf>, (accessed March 24, 2019).

As part of their founding, they adopted the Principles of Faith of the Sandy Creek Association. Article six of their principles states, “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful persons, who have obtained fellowship with each other, and have given themselves up to the Lord and one another; having agreed to keep up a godly discipline, according to the rules of the Gospel.”⁹²

It is practically impossible to read their description of “a congregation of faithful persons” and “fellowship with each other” and argue for anything other than a gathering of believers for worship. Most Southern Baptists, particularly in North Carolina, look very favorably upon the work and history of the Sandy Creek Association. Certainly, in view of the current inactive member crisis, the church needs to consider a return to this principle of the faith.

The New Hampshire Confession of Faith

“The New Hampshire Baptist Convention appointed a committee on June 24, 1830 to prepare a statement of faith, which was published by the Board of the Convention in 1833.”⁹³ The New Hampshire Confession benefitted from being published “with some revision by J Newton Brown, editorial secretary of the American Baptist Publication Society.”⁹⁴ In 1925, this confession would become the basis for the Baptist Faith and Message.⁹⁵ The long-term usage and acceptance of this confession serves to confirm its validity as a source of information regarding

91. Sandy Creek Baptist Association: History, <http://www.sandycreekba.com/838494>, (accessed May 6, 2019).

92. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/principles-of-faith-of-the-sandy-creek-association.pdf>, (accessed May 5, 2019).

93. Leith, 334.

94. Ibid.

95. Leon H. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Publishers, 1987), 571.

the practices, doctrines, and expectations of the church. Article thirteen specifically addresses the church:

Article XIII. Of a Gospel Church We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word; that its only scriptural officers are bishops or pastors and deacons whose qualifications, claims and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.⁹⁶

While to some it may seem insignificant, the grammar of the first statement is plural not singular. The article speaks of a “congregation of baptized believers.” This indicates that the authors expected believers to gather together in a congregational setting, not to operate as individuals. Further, the description of the officers of the church can only indicate a group of believers.

An important feature of this confession is the lengthy section of Scriptural support for each article, including article thirteen. These references emphasize that these are not merely the opinions of a church committee but are based on biblical truth. One example of the Scripture referenced is:

And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord. Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.⁹⁷

96. Baptist Studies Online, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/the-new-hampshire-confession-of-faith.pdf>, (accessed April 15, 2019).

97. Acts 11:21-23 KJV

There can be no doubt that this passage of Scripture is speaking of a group of believers gathered for the purpose of worship. As previously noted, Scripture always identifies a church as a group gathered. They may have gathered in a home, a temple, a church, or some other location, but they gathered. The New Hampshire Confession, as the others, does not dictate some new teaching to the church, but reinforces what has been expected of believers from the beginning of the church.

Baptist Faith and Message 2000

The Southern Baptists first adopted a document called the Baptist Faith and Message in 1925. This document would stand until 1963 when it was updated. The document was updated again in 2000, largely to address the modern challenges to the biblical definition of family and marriage. The document has served to codify Baptist doctrine into one document. It was never intended to be a replacement for Scripture; in fact, the first article of the document declares that Scripture is Southern Baptists' ultimate authority on all matters.

As with previous confessions, the 2000 edition contains a section addressing the church.

Article six reads:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.⁹⁸

98. Southern Baptist Convention, "Baptist Faith and Message 2000," <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp> (accessed April 30, 2019).

Commenting on the Baptist Faith and Message of 1963, which has almost the same statement on the church, Herschel Hobbs discusses the Greek word *ekklesia*, translated as “church.” “Ephesus was granted the privilege of self-rule, but within the framework of the laws of the Roman Empire. In this sense an *ekklesia* was a local assembly operating through democratic processes under the laws of the Empire.”⁹⁹

All three editions of the Baptist Faith and Message, penned over a seventy-five year span and all based on the New Hampshire Confession from the early 1800s, leave little doubt that the expectation of the authors and those who affirmed the documents was that believers did not become inactive in their church involvement. Along with numerous other confessions and creeds from almost four centuries of church writings, the teaching is clear that born again believers are consistently and regularly involved in a local congregation.

Stressing the importance of each member to the greater good of the church, Dr. Danny Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary gave a series of lectures on the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) to the Wake Cross Roads Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Regarding Article VI, “The Church,” Akin said, “All the members jointly have responsibility to do everything that Christ commanded the churches to do and should govern the church by his laws.”¹⁰⁰

Akin continued later by describing the covenant church members make to come together for the furtherance of the Gospel: “Believers become a church of Jesus Christ

99. Herschel W. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message, rev. edition* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1971), 64.

100. Danny Akin, *Baptist Faith & Message (2000) Series*, Danny Akin: President Southeastern Seminary, <https://www.danielakin.com/category/theological-and-practical-issues/baptist-faith-and-message-2000-series/page/3/>, (Accessed August 4, 2020).

when they jointly pledge to be a church of Jesus Christ. Implicitly or explicitly (it ought to be explicit), they covenant together in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. To covenant in the faith includes teaching and upholding the truths of the gospel.”¹⁰¹

In addition to Article VI, Article VIII entitled The Lord’s Day, lays out further direction for the observance of corporate worship. The article says, “It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private.”¹⁰² Further research will show that this statement has been present in the two previous versions of the Baptist Faith and Message as well. The expectation that church members would gather publicly has been written into all their guiding documents.

While Baptists pride themselves on their autonomous nature, we have traditionally agreed that the Baptist Faith and Message would represent our standard of beliefs subordinate of Scripture in all cases. With that, it is clear from reading Article VI and VIII, the writers believed Scripture to teach that believers are called on to unite together in the regular act of corporate worship.

Church History

Scripture alone should be enough evidence for followers of Christ to understand the importance of being in a committed, active relationship with their church. In addition to Scripture, the church has attempted to crystallize her beliefs throughout history into confessions

101. Danny Akin, *Baptist Faith & Message (2000) Series*, Danny Akin: President Southeastern Seminary, <https://www.danielakin.com/category/theological-and-practical-issues/baptist-faith-and-message-2000-series/page/3/>, (Accessed August 4, 2020).

102. Danny Akin, “*Baptist Faith & Message (2000) Series*,” Danny Akin: President Southeastern Seminary, <https://www.danielakin.com/the-lords-day-bfm-series-2000-part-13/>, (Accessed: August 11, 2020).

and creeds. As final evidence for the basis of a belief in active church attendance, we will take a brief look at how these two elements have been practiced throughout church history.

The argument could be made that confessions and creeds were the works of a small group or that they were not actually practiced in the daily life of the believer. It is conceivable one could say Scripture was being misinterpreted or intentionally twisted for the benefit of the pastor or the church. So, a reliable method of validation would be to analyze the history of the church and the attendance of her members.

Obviously, a major portion of church history is recorded in Scripture. As previously explored, the Book of Acts is filled with instances of the church gathered, and Paul's numerous epistles were addressed to a gathered church. Early in the Book of Acts, we read of the gathered church. "It was apparently the standard procedure for the believer to become part of the fellowship (Acts 2:47). We should therefore emphasize the importance of every believer becoming an integral part of a group of believers and making a firm commitment to it. Christianity is a corporate matter; and the Christian life can be fully realized only in a relationship to others."¹⁰³

Early Christians

Extra-biblical sources confirm that from the beginning, believers have found ways to gather. "The earliest church of which traces remain is a normal Syrian courtyard house which has been adapted for the purpose. Two rooms were put together for the celebration of the Lord's Supper."¹⁰⁴ Other areas of the house had been converted for other uses in the church such as

103. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 1047-1048.

104. Tim Dowley ed., *Eerdmans' Handbook To Christian History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans' Publishing, 1977), 38.

baptisms and an area for group instruction.¹⁰⁵ “Wealthy Christians in Rome likewise adapted parts of their houses for worship.”¹⁰⁶

The Bible records numerous incidents of Christians gathered in homes for the purpose of worship, prayer, and edification. The following list provides evidence of their practice:

- Acts 2:46 – “house to house”
- Acts 5:42 – “house to house”
- Acts 8:3 – “house to house”
- Acts 10:2 – “Cornelius’ house”
- Acts 12:12 – “Mary’s house”
- Acts 16:32 – “jailer’s house”
- Acts 16:40 – “Lydia’s house”
- Acts 18:7 – “Titius Justus’ house”
- Acts 20:20 – “house to house”
- Romans 16:5 – “Priscilla and Aquila’s house”
- 1 Corinthians 16:19 – “Priscilla and Aquila’s house”
- Colossians 4:15 – “Nympha’s house”
- Philemon 1:2 – “Philemon’s house”

The repeated use of the word “house” (*oikos*) in these passages is an indication of their practice. “It can refer to the ‘family’ of God (Heb. 3:2-6; 10:21; 1 Pet.4:17) and is explicitly linked with the church (1 Tim. 3:15). This is partially because the earliest and most basic unit of Christian *groups* (italics mine) met in private homes.”¹⁰⁷ “The description of the group as being together should not be taken to mean that they were in one place all the time (Acts 2:46), but rather that they met together for a purpose.”¹⁰⁸

105. Dowley, 38.

106. Ibid.

107. Mounce, 345.

108. Tokunboh Adeyemo, gen. editor, Africa Bible Commentary: “*A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1331.

This gathering in a “house” is an important distinction for the New Testament Christians. It indicates that they had taken the model of their Old Testament practice of gathering at the temple and now instituted regular gatherings of the believers in homes. These early “house” meetings would be foundational for the future worship gatherings of the church. “But they also regularly came together in a *private house* (κατ’ οἶκον), where they formed a distinctly defined company of their own, and where the intimate relations which existed among the members, could be freely manifested; and it was precisely to such private assemblies that the development, in the course of time, of their peculiar Christian worship is to be traced”¹⁰⁹

Persecution

In Bithynia, Christians “are known to have suffered under Pliny and his imperial master Trajan.”¹¹⁰ “One of the new governor’s first acts was to issue an edict forbidding all clubs.”¹¹¹ This ruling included gatherings of Christians. Many were brought before Pliny accused of being Christian. This accusation would often lead to their execution even though, “Pliny could find them guilty of no obvious crime, for they declared that all they did was to meet on a fixed day to worship Christ, then later to eat together.”¹¹²

It is not within the scope or purpose of this research to examine all the instances of persecution in the early church. However, this, and others that could be cited, is merely an

109. J.P. Lange, P. Schaff, V.L. Gotthard, C. Gerok., & C.F. Schaeffer. “*A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Acts*,” (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 57.

110. J.G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church, A History of Its First Five Centuries* (Ann Arbor, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), 39.

111. *Ibid.*, 76.

112. *Ibid.*, 77.

example of the dedication these believers had to their gathering. Despite the threat of persecution and even death, the believers did not waver from their commitment to worship their Savior.

American History

One obvious piece of evidence for the importance of the church through American history is the spread of the church itself. From her humble beginnings in homes through New England, over forty-six thousand churches and almost sixteen million members are now in the Southern Baptist Convention alone. This expansion has taken place as believers were led to share the Gospel and expand the kingdom. This led to the planting and construction of new churches where the new believers could gather for worship.

Scripture

“Throughout Scripture God’s redemptive plan has involved a covenant people that would abide in fellowship with him and serve as a testimony of his glory and grace to the rest of creation.”¹¹³ The main argument for regular church attendance is found in Scripture itself. While creeds, confessions, and church history speak clearly to the importance of attending one’s place of worship, there is admittedly room for argument. It is even acknowledged that many will still seek scriptural “loopholes” in this area. Such statements as, “I can get my church on television or the internet,” or “There is no commandment in the Bible that says you have to go to church” are sometimes offered as a defense for irregular attendance.

While it is true technology has made it much easier to hear the Gospel and there is no clear verse that declares a person must be a faithful church member to be a Christian, there is

113. Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who A Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2017), 140.

abundant Scripture making clear the Bible's position. Even a casual scan of Scripture will reveal God's love for the church, His purpose for the church, and His desire for born again believers to be faithful attenders of the body for which His Son gave His life. Scripture reveals that there was never the intent for believers to function independently, but inside of the body: "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."¹¹⁴

The early church's example in the Book of Acts, where we read of numerous occasions where the church was gathered together, serves as a reminder that coming together in worship has always been an integral part of the church. The believers are routinely mentioned as being in unity or gathered. For example, this verse states, "And all that believed were together, and had all things common."¹¹⁵ Examining Scripture will reveal that God never intended for Christians to function independently, but to be part of the body of Christ, the church.

Meeting together, referenced in Acts 2:44, was not simply a ritual or a formality. When one continues to read the chapter the purpose of their gathering is revealed: "And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart."¹¹⁶ Their gathering resulted in needs being met, unity in the body of Christ, fellowship, and exhortation of the body. In view of current culture, these are all needs of man that can only be met by the Spirit in corporate worship.

114. 1 Corinthians 12:26-27 KJV

115. Acts 2:44 KJV

116. Acts 2:45-46 KJV

One verse that would be very difficult for the inactive and irregular church member to refute is found in the book of Hebrews: “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.”¹¹⁷ With even a superficial reading, it is apparent that the writer is stating, “we are to assemble together often and never to forsake our coming together. Genuine believers need each other—the presence, fellowship, strength, encouragement, care, and love of each other.”¹¹⁸ A study of the preceding verse and a word study of several of the key passages in chapter ten of Hebrews will reveal the obvious intent of the author.

Leading into the familiar passage in verse twenty-five is a verse that often goes overlooked. The author encourages readers to “consider one another,” an obvious reference to the gathered church. The author points to “the *duty of love* toward the members of the church[.]”¹¹⁹ As with the creeds and confessions, Scripture does not regard the issue of church attendance as an optional activity for the believer. M. R. Vincent explains the phrase, “Let us consider one another (κατανοῶμεν ἀλλήλους). Take careful note of each other’s spiritual welfare. It denotes *attentive, continuous care*.”¹²⁰ There is a duty and obligation to each other that can only be fulfilled by gathering.

117. Hebrews 10:24-25 KJV

118. _____, *Hebrew, James*, (Chattanooga: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “B. The Way to Secure the New and Living Faith, 10:22-25”

119. J.P. Lange, P. Schaff, C.B. Moll, & A.C. Kendrick. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Hebrews* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 175.

120. M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 4* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 502.

There are three main phrases that require analysis in verse twenty-five: “not forsaking,” “assembling,” and “exhort.” Not forsaking is from “*enkataleipo*: to leave behind, to desert.”¹²¹ Only that which one has previously been part of or involved in, such as gathering together, could be left behind, or deserted. By stating that his readers should not desert the notion of assembling together, the author of Hebrews is declaring that it has been the practice of the Jewish Christians to assemble.

The crux of this discussion then comes to the question, “what are the readers being directed to not leave behind or desert?” What is “assembling” to the writer? Lünemann asserts that this word “implies an often recurring act on the part of the same persons.”¹²² Spiros Zodhiates states that it represents “the assembling for corporate worship, not as a solitary or occasional act, but as customary action.”¹²³

The importance of “gathering together” is further emphasized by the only other use of the word in the New Testament (2 Thessalonians 2:1). In the passage in Hebrews, it speaks of “the gathering together of believers on earth; there it refers to the gathering together of believers in the air. That gathering is no more important, no more momentous, no more thrilling than the gathering together of believers for fellowship and exhortation on earth. Both are of equal, vital importance in God's plans for His people in a cold, hostile world.”¹²⁴

“It is interesting to note that the emphasis here is not on what a believer *gets from* the assembly, but rather on what he can *contribute to* the assembly. Faithfulness in church

121. Zodhiates, 25.

122. Vincent, M. R., 502.

123. Zodhiates, 905.

124. John Phillips, *Exploring Hebrews: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book, 130.

attendance encourages others and provokes them to love and good works. One of the strong motives for faithfulness is the soon coming of Jesus Christ.”¹²⁵ Earlier, in Hebrews 3:13, the writer stated, “But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Ignatius says, “When ye frequently, and in numbers meet together, the powers of Satan are overthrown, and his mischief is neutralized by your like mindedness in the faith.”¹²⁶

The second phrase that requires attention in Hebrews 10:25 is “assembling.” What qualifies as an assembly? In the past, those who chose not to attend their local church were prone to use television as an excuse. Many were likely to claim that they were able to receive preaching on their television. Today the options are far greater. Covid-19 has only reinforced this with many churches being forced to utilize livestreaming, Zoom, and other technologies to deliver their messages. When one examines the word “assemble,” it is readily apparent that the author had no such alternate methods in view.

“Assembling of ourselves together” is actually one word in the Greek. It is rendered as *episunagoge*, meaning “to gather together, to collect.”¹²⁷ Strong further explains the meaning as, “a complete *collection*; specially a Christian *meeting* (for worship): assembling (gathering) together.”¹²⁸ Thayer says simply it is, “a gathering together in one place or the religious

125. W. W. Wiersbe. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 315.

126. R. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, & D. Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.), 468.

127. Zodiates, 905.

128. James Strong, *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary* (Austin, TX: WORDsearch Corp., 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "1997".

assembly of Christians.”¹²⁹ Clearly, the directive is to not eliminate the traditional gathering of the church as a collective body.

Finally, the word “exhorting” also brings clarity to the author’s intent. “It may be necessary to anticipate the question ‘Encourage them to do what?’ In this case, ‘give one another courage,’ ‘strengthen one another,’ ‘cause one another to have courage,’ or ‘cause one another to have strong faith’ are possible translations.”¹³⁰ It would prove to be quite difficult to exhort one another without actually being gathered in some form.

The main word used to describe this gathering of believers, “church,” also brings support for the notion of a coming together of a group of believers as the Scripturally-accepted format. The word *ekklesia* appears, depending on translation, one hundred fifteen times and is almost always translated as “church.”

A verse that is not referring to the church, Acts 19:39, but uses the same word translated “church” in other locations, *ekklesia*, provides a great example: “But if ye enquire anything concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly (*ekklesia*). This “assembly” is described as, “called out or forth, and this from *εκκαλεω*); properly, a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly; so used. Among the Greeks from Thucydides (cf. Herodotus 3, 142) down, an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating.”¹³¹

129. Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon (Abridged) Electronic Database*, (Biblesoft, Inc.), Under: NT:1997.

130. P. Ellingsworth and E.A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews*, (United Bible Societies, New York, 1983), Under Hebrews 10:25.

131. J. H. Thayer, trans., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), s.v. “;” *WORDsearch CROSS* e-book, under G1557.

Vines states that the word *ekklesia*, “was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens "gathered" to discuss the affairs of state, Acts 19:39. In the Septuagint it is used to designate the "gathering" of Israel, summoned for any definite purpose, or a "gathering" regarded as representative of the whole nation.”¹³² As this same word, *ekklesia* is translated as “church” in over one hundred locations, (ex. Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22; 1 Timothy 3:15), there is the obvious implication Christians gathered as the citizens gathered for the business of the city.

It is vitally important to remember that passages such as Hebrews 10:25 are likely not referring to a gathering of believers such as we would have today. Even today, there is great variety in the nature of the gathered church from one culture to the next, or from one geographic area to another. “Our notion as to Christians assembling themselves together is that which has been fixed in our minds by our custom, an old custom now, of attending church on Sundays. The truth is, however -- and it is a point which has not received all the consideration to which it is entitled -- meetings of Christians in those early times were not exactly of the same character as ours.”¹³³

No right-thinking person would argue that the gatherings of the early church would have looked very similar to the average church service today. Further, most would acknowledge that our gatherings have changed dramatically in just the last few years. The addition of lights, cameras, fog machines, and constantly changing musical styles have led to huge shifts in the gathering of the church. While all this is true, it also must be realized that the believer is still

132. William E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1940), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Assembly".

133. Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator* (Ages Software, Inc. and BibleSoft, Inc., 2006), Under: Hebrews 10:25.

called and expected to gather on a regular basis with a local body of believers for the purpose of worship and edification.

Conclusion

For many observers, the decline in church loyalty and attendance in America began in the 1960s or early 1970s. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact time or cause. In Southern Baptist life, some point to a shift away from the traditional emphasis on evangelism in the early 1970s, others to a lack of discipleship, and some just simply say it is a sign of the times.

Regardless of the time or reason, it is obvious when one looks at Scripture related to the church, our confessions and creeds, and our history, there has definitely been a change in the church. One can only wonder what would happen to the modern church if she faced the persecution of Rome. Scripture is adamant that believers come together for the purpose of “exhorting” and “edifying” each other. The following chapters will seek to analyze what is currently being done to prevent members from becoming inactive and what methods, if any, are being utilized to reclaim those members.

CHAPTER THREE – SURVEYS & ANALYSIS

Preliminary Findings

Perhaps a great deal can be discovered regarding the inactive member by the author's preliminary discoveries. While attempting to gather information about inactive members, church policies and procedures, and pastoral attitudes, it became increasingly clearer that there is no standard practice among churches regarding the issue of inactive members. For the purposes of this project, only Southern Baptist churches were surveyed. Other denominational groups may function differently, but the autonomous nature of SBC churches leads to a wide variety of opinions and practices.

This lack of standard policies and procedures leaves each church to determine its own definition of an inactive member. This is extended further to each member who may have a different opinion of what qualifies as active or inactive than the church to which they belong. In fact, as the data is examined, it shows that there is even a noticeable difference of opinion between males and females of what level of attendance makes a person an active member.

With no clear standard, there can be little doubt that many church members would consider themselves as an active member of their church body, while their church considers them inactive. Also, since there is generally no clear, measurable standard, the author believes that this leads to a sense of complacency and disregard toward the issue of inactive members in the local church.

Methodology

Approximately fifty pastors were contacted either personally, through email, mail, or phone and asked to participate in this project. These pastors represented churches from Cabarrus, Rowan, and Mecklenburg counties in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Each of these pastors were provided a cover letter explaining the nature and purpose of the project and asking for their cooperation by providing access to their roster of inactive members. They were each also provided with a copy of the questions that would be presented to these inactive members. Further, they were each asked to respond to a survey themselves that would be utilized to study the attitudes and actions our churches are taking to prevent and/or reclaim those who reside on their inactive rolls.

As noted previously, the response was minimal to all attempts to gather this information other than by email or personal contact. This was viewed as a foreboding sign of the average church's view of the inactive member by the author. In consultation with the project mentor and the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University, it was determined to add an online survey along with a social media campaign to gather further response. This was supplemented with a financially sponsored and targeted add campaign on Facebook to locate and survey inactive members. Corresponding with this effort, an online pastor's survey was also prepared and the researcher's contacts were personally tagged and asked for their cooperation.

The survey was created at [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) and was distributed through their website. This website allowed the research to not only be distributed by the author and his personal contacts and social media accounts, but by choosing a target demographic and purchasing distribution. It is believed that this aids in providing validity to the research as it brings in data from those outside this author's personal sphere of influence.

Through this process, informal interviews were conducted with pastors to gauge their opinion and response to the question of inactive members. All the pastors admitted to having a large number of those that they would classify as inactive. The author did not locate a single church across the three-county area of research that had instituted any form of targeted effort to reclaim these “lost sheep.” Church researcher Thom Rainer notes the same trend. In an article entitled, “Seven Trends in the Way Churches Are Responding to Inactive Members,” number one on his list is, “The majority of churches do nothing.”¹³⁴ His research also reported that, “Few churches are actually intentional about connecting with inactive members. Those that are attempting to connect with inactive members report, for the most part, anemic responses. They thus become discouraged to pursue the task.”¹³⁵

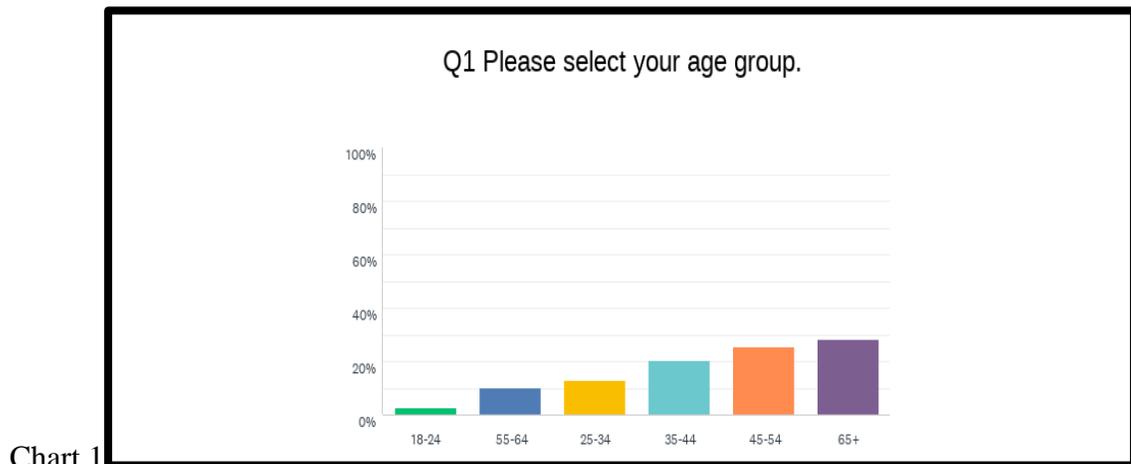
In requesting the information from churches, it was also discovered that many churches were simply dropping the names of those that had been labeled inactive. The author did not compile exact numbers on these churches as it is outside the parameters of this project. However, it was noted that this practice is contributing to the number of inactive members. Once their names are dropped from all record keeping, there is no effort being made to reclaim them to active status. Similarly, when an inactive membership roster was available, they were often missing any type of contact information – another indication that no attempts were being made to reclaim them.

134. Thom Rainer, “*Seven Trends in the Way Churches Are Responding to Inactive Members*,” Church Answers Featuring Thom Rainer, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/seven-trends-in-the-way-churches-are-responding-to-inactive-members/>, (accessed August 1, 2020).

135. Ibid.

Overview of Church Member Responses

After removing the errant survey responses, there were thirty-nine completed surveys regarding church membership. The demographic breakdown of the respondents shows that 74 percent were from females and 26 percent from males. Their age breakdown was across a wide spectrum. The youngest age group represented was 18-24, with only 2.5 percent responding. The oldest group was over 65 and the largest group responding with 28 percent of the respondents. Other groups and their corresponding percentages were: 55-64 at 10 percent; 25-34 at 13 percent; 35-44 at 21 percent; and 45-54 at 26 percent. (See Chart 1)



For this author, it was not surprising to learn that only 23 percent considered themselves as an inactive member, leaving 67 percent to claim active status. However, other data suggests otherwise. According to the 2019 Annual Church Profile, a compilation of membership information by the Southern Baptist Convention, 36.1 percent of Southern Baptists are in church

on any given Sunday. That translates into 5,250,230 people in church, but some of that 5.2 million are guests, and children not actually members, so 36.1 percent is actually high.¹³⁶ This statement further illustrates the difficulty in tracking and reporting on the issue.

These preliminary findings begin to shed light on the nature and magnitude of the problem. It is difficult to reclaim that which does not know or believe it is lost by a church who also does not realize what is lost. In an unrelated matter, the author began to ask everyone he met, “How many Sundays per year does a person need to go to church to be considered an active member?” The answers ranged from the extreme of fifty-two, all the way down to four, once every three months. Strangely, in this informal polling, females set the highest bar with their average answer being forty-eight, while pastors were content with twenty per year.

This same disparity is seen in the actual survey results where 69 percent said they attend almost every Sunday, or forty-five or more per year. At first glance this seems like a rather large and impressive percentage, and perhaps to many it is. However, when one begins to look at the breakdown of the other answers, they are somewhat discouraging. Those who reported attending on special occasions, or less than five Sundays per year, were tied for the second largest group at almost 8 percent. While spread fairly evenly across the other options, in total, 23 percent reported going to church less than half the year. (Chart 2)

136. Allen Nelson IV, *A Book of Numbers: What the 2019 SBC Annual Church Profile Data Tells Us About the Southern Baptist Convention*, Things Above, <https://thingsabove.us/a-book-of-numbers-what-the-2019-sbc-annual-church-profile-data-tells-us-about-the-southern-baptist-convention/>, (accessed August 1, 2020).

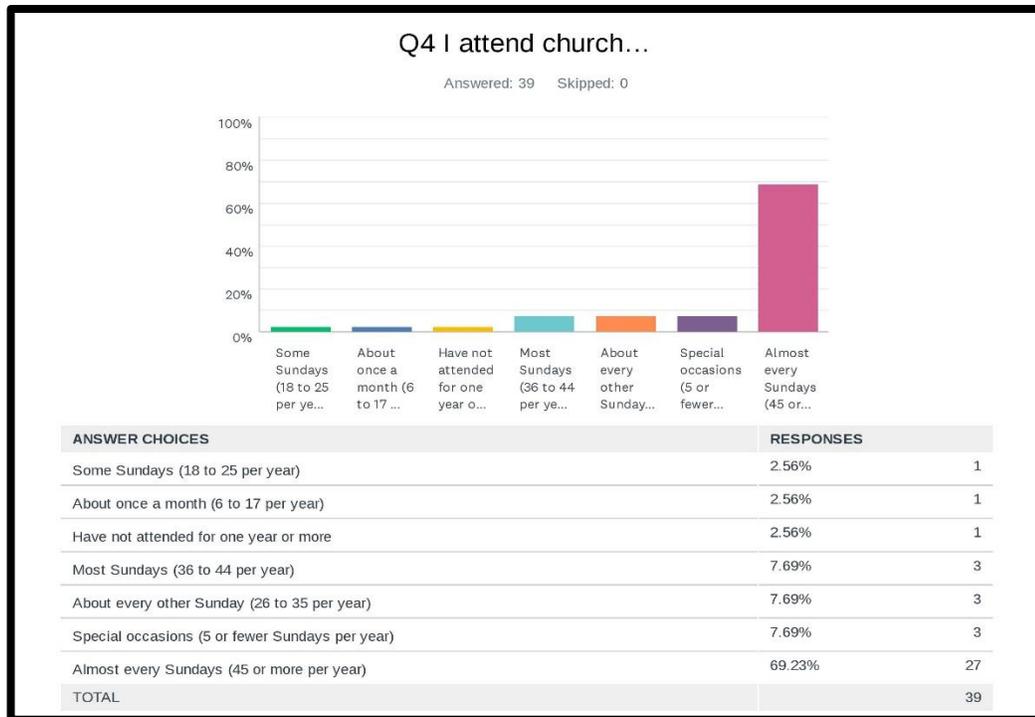


Chart 2

Combine these findings with the ninth question on the survey: “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being ‘Very Important’ and 5 being ‘Very Unimportant,’ How important do you think regular church attendance is?” To this question 14 percent responded, “Very unimportant.” Based on the numbers of those who said they attend half of the Sundays or more, this would indicate that at least a portion of those who are attending church find it “very unimportant.” This response should be troubling to those who value the church as it seems to point toward a strong possibility of an even greater percentage of inactive church members in the very near future.

The survey also asked what originally led them to become a part of their chosen church. This question allowed them to choose all that applied and/or specify another reason than the ones provided. It should not come as a revelation that the main reason for choosing their church was

because they had family there already. Forty-four percent of the time, family was their main influence in church decision followed closely by the pastor at 38 percent.

Curiously, considering all that has been written and the large number of workshops on the topic, the style of worship was a distant third with only 28 percent of positive responses. One of the most surprising results of the survey was that only 17 percent of the time was having friends in the church considered.

Fifteen percent of those who completed the survey chose to write a response to this question. None of the answers provided were unusual and several could have been combined into the provided selections. Of the valid “other” responses, there were replies of, correct administration of the Word, children’s program, proximity to home, preaching, and outreach.

When asked to provide their top three reasons for not attending church, we will begin by looking at what was not an issue. Of the available choices (see survey question in appendix, question 6), nobody chose worship style, church was boring, services not relevant, could not relate to other members, or work as their number one choice. In fact, none of these issues were even represented in the top five reasons to any notable measure.

Two choices were tied for the number one reason respondents had stopped coming to church: “Church doesn’t offer programs that meet my family’s needs” and “got out of the habit.” It would require more in depth research than this project is capable of, but to the author it would seem appropriate to make a simple connection between these two issues. When church does not offer programs that meet the family’s needs, it becomes very easy to get out of the habit of attendance.

In similar fashion, not meeting family’s needs was the second largest choice as well with distance to church being the second most chosen answer. Again, there would appear to be a

logical connection that if the family's needs were being met, the family would be more willing to drive a greater distance to attend. This opinion is reinforced by the fact that the average commute in the three counties involved in this survey is twenty-five minutes.^{137 138 139}

An interesting method of compiling and analyzing these responses is to add up all the votes for each of the eleven choices. When scored in this average answer manner, "distance to church" is the number one with a 9.7 score, offended by someone is 9.44, church doesn't offer programs for our family is 9.08, got out of the habit is 8.64, worship style is 8, health issues is 6, church is boring is 5, service not relevant is 4.6, other is 3.92, difficult time relating is 3.91, and work is 3.83.

When the selections are sorted by the number of people who chose a particular item at any level, got out of the habit has the most selections, other is second, church doesn't offer the programs that meet the family's needs is third. So, anyway the data is sorted and analyzed two reasons for inactivity continue to rise to the top: church does not meet the needs of the family and got out of the habit.

"In the light of the above factors, we must conclude, therefore, that no one single factor is responsible for inactive church members. Instead, apparently, it takes a complexity of internal and external dynamics at work setting the stage for one's choice to be inactive."¹⁴⁰ This discovery will be extremely important in building a strategy to prevent and reclaim inactive

137. Ben Williamson, "How long does it take to get to work? The average may surprise you, WBTV: On Your Side, <https://www.wbtv.com/2018/10/04/how-long-does-it-take-get-work-average-may-surprise-you/>, (accessed August 1, 2020)

138. "RowanEDC," Community Profile: A Snapshot of Rowan County, <https://rowanedc.com/community-profile/>, (accessed August 1, 2020).

139. "DataUSA: Cabarrus County, NC," About, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/cabarrus-county-nc>, (accessed August 1, 2020).

140. Byrne, 18.

members. The variance in the stated reasons for inactivity leads us to the conclusion that there will not be a “one size fits all” answer.

One of the common beliefs in many churches is that enough is not being done by the pastor and/or other leadership to reclaim inactive members. However, 79 percent of those surveyed reported that someone had encouraged them to become more active in the church. This too would seem reasonable considering the previous question. If the church is not meeting the needs of my family, no amount of encouragement to return to that setting would be likely to entice the inactive member.

Participants were also asked about their regular Sunday school or small group attendance. The response was almost evenly divided at 53 percent, yes, and 47 percent, no. One of the common drumbeats of those in the church growth business is that churches must get their people involved in some type of small group to keep them engaged. Once again, the answer points to the idea of “quality over quantity.” For small groups of any type to be effective, apparently, they must meet some felt need of those involved and not just be a gathering for gathering’s sake.

When asked what would encourage them to attend more regularly, an email or letter from the pastor or member, a phone call from a pastor or member, a visit from a pastor or member were relatively equal. Contrary to the practice in most churches, a visit was reported as the least likely to be successful. Actually, more people wrote in a response to this question than any of the provided choices. One replied, “None. All would make me feel guilty.” Other responses included, “unsure,” “a more welcoming church,” “health improvement,” and “a church that teaches from the Bible.”

A response that flew in the face of conventional wisdom and the author’s preconceived notion as well came in reply to the question regarding the number of close friends in the church.

Fifty-seven percent replied that they had more than five close friends in the church when they were attending regularly. The author suspects that if a follow-up survey was done of regular church attenders and they were asked why people became inactive, the common answer would be some variant of “They never really got involved” or “They didn’t really know anyone here.”

This opinion seems highly unlikely considering over 40 percent of the people said they came the first time because they had family in the church and 72 percent reported having more than four close friends in their church family. Frankly, this response from the church seems to be a coverup or worse, an excuse to keep from having to face the reality that the church itself may be doing or failing to do those things which attract and keep members.

Summary of Member Responses

Analysis of the church members’ responses does not reveal a “eureka” moment. The survey allowed the opportunity to rank eleven selections in order for the main reason they had become less active in church. Six of the eleven were chosen as number one. Eight of the selections were chosen as first or second and only “church was boring” received no top three selections. This disparity in the responses indicates the enormity of the task of preventing and reclaiming these members.

Another challenge is found when reviewing the individual responses. At this level, one discovers no correlation between answer, age, or gender; the most frequent answer provided for a reason for inactivity was that they had simply “gotten out of the habit.” It is the author’s opinion that this is only a surface level answer. One does not typically “get out of the habit” of something he enjoys or feels is life changing. While the solution is not clear at this point, it is believed that comparing and contrasting the pastors’ answers with the answers of the inactive members is where the fruit lies.

Overview of Pastor Responses

A survey was also prepared for pastors. The intent of this survey was to gauge the attitude of the pastors toward inactive members and to determine what, if anything, was being attempted to prevent and/or reclaim inactive members. The attempt to gather solid information on this topic was hindered by the fact that each church classifies inactive members in a different way. As Thom Rainer reported in his article, *“Seven Trends in the Way Churches Are Responding to Inactive Members,”* some have even removed the inactive category from their church. “They rightly see the phrase, ‘inactive member,’ as an oxymoron. They understand fully Paul’s teaching of the one word, ‘member,’ in 1 Corinthians 12. A member is someone who is functioning for the greater good of the body.”¹⁴¹

As with the survey of members, it was very difficult to get pastors to respond to this type survey. The author began calling inactive membership the “dirty little secret” of the church. It appeared that pastors did not want to admit that a large portion of their membership rolls were actually “missing in action.” It was also considered by the researcher that some pastors may have feared giving out their inactive information, concerned that another church may attempt to reach them.

Each pastor was provided with a cover letter explaining the nature and intent of the project, along with a copy of the survey that would be sent to inactive members, and the survey for pastors. It was discovered that the pastors responded much better when they were tagged in a social media post with a link to the information for their completion. In total, there were thirty-five pastors who completed the survey.

141. Rainer, “Seven Trends in the Way Churches Are Responding to Inactive Members.”

Of the thirty-five pastors that responded, the average church age was sixty-seven. The youngest church was barely one-year old and three were founded in the late 1800s. There was at least one church from each decade from the 1880s to 2010, except for the periods of 1890-1899, 1900-1909, and 2000-2010. Seven of the churches were founded in the 1930s, making it the largest segment, followed by the period from 2010-2019. While the survey was anonymous, the basic demographic information did allow the researcher to see that there was data from a variety of churches.

The pastors were also asked to report their church membership along with their estimated number of inactive members. The average membership of the 35 churches was 399, however there was one outlier that listed 4,500 as their membership total. When this church is removed, it drops the average membership to 278.

Much like the various age churches, there were churches across all size distinctions. All four common categories of churches were represented, small, medium large, and mega church. The smallest church to respond had 23 members while the largest had 4,500 members.

Only thirty-four of the thirty-five church responses are used in analyzing the data. One of the pastors utilized a sarcastic remark rather than reporting their actual inactive numbers. There were 13,389 total members reported in the previous question and the pastors considered 3,891 of them to be inactive, or 29 percent. Removing the one church that reported a membership of 4,500 as an outlier from the group lowers the numbers to 9,464 total membership and 2,841 considered inactive. When the outlier is removed, the percentage of inactive members rises to 38 percent.

The one pastor that did not give a number for his inactive membership used the area to comment, "All of them, they just sit there like bumps on a log." The author was very distressed

by this answer as it shows a high level of frustration on the part of the pastor. Most likely there are many issues contributing to this pastor's disgusted response: the number of inactive members in his church, his inability to prevent or reclaim them, and the possibility that he is actually dealing with a church body that is not responsive to his leadership.

Pastors were also asked about the inclusion of a new members class. Sixty-five percent of the respondents offer a new members class with 47 percent of the pastors reporting that the class was mandatory before church membership. When these individual answers were looked at alone, there are some interesting findings.

Numerous books and conference speakers, such as Thom Rainer and others, tout the importance of a new members class for the health of the church and to assist in assimilation of new members, thereby lowering the number of inactive members. For example, one website with a wealth of church resources writes, "New members classes are extremely important as you strive to weave new people into the fabric of your church body. Do not take the responsibility of educating them and encouraging them to get plugged in lightly. The more you pour into new members, the greater the chance you have of seeing them bear solid fruit in one or more ministries of your church body."¹⁴²

Among the thirty-five pastors that responded, one was removed from the following calculations due to an error in their reporting. The average age of the churches surveyed was sixty-nine. Twenty-two, or 65 percent, of the churches reported that they offer a new members class with 73 percent of those who offer a new members class making it a requirement for membership. The churches that offer a new members class have a 24 percent inactive rate, which

142. Marvin Owen, "New Member Classes: Starting off on the Right Foot," ACS Technologies, <https://ministry.acst.com/new-member-classes-starting-off-right-foot/>, (Accessed: August 4, 2020).

is 5 percent below the average of the entire group of thirty-four churches. Further, the churches that do not provide a class for new members have a 52 percent inactive rate.

When this data is broken down even further, it indicates not only the importance of offering a new members class, but of making the class mandatory. The churches that provide the class on an optional basis report a 36 percent inactive rate. This rate is still seven percentage points higher than the thirty-four church average. The attention grabbing statistic is the churches that require attendance in their new-members class only report a 21 percent inactive rate – 15 percent lower than those that offer an optional class, 7 percent less than the whole group, and a staggering 30 percent below those who offer no class at all.

Certainly, there are most likely other factors at work in each of these situations; however, a twenty-eight-percentage point improvement cannot be ignored. In the following chapter the nature and purpose of the new members class will be discussed. One observation that should be made at this point when considering this type of class: all surveyed churches, from 50 to 4,500 members, all provided a new members class. (Chart 3).

As stated earlier, anywhere from 14 to 73 percent of the members of the thirty-five churches surveyed are considered to be inactive. That is a significant number of members who are deemed inactive in our churches. One would think that having approximately one-third of her members missing would spur the church to action, yet only eight, or 23 percent of the churches surveyed reported having any type of ministry directed toward reclaiming their missing members.

There were some mildly surprising findings when the pastors were asked to give their opinion of what classified an active member. The answers were scattered from two Sundays per year all the way to fifty-two Sundays per year. This author considered the fact that perhaps some had misread the question and intended to be replying two Sundays per month. The largest response was 20 percent who felt that attendance of forty Sundays per year was needed to be considered active. The number then dropped to twenty-six Sundays per year from 17 percent of

Chart 3

| New Members Class | New Members Class Required | Membership | Inactive | Age | % Inactive |
|-------------------|----------------------------|------------|----------------|-----|------------|
| Y | Y | 900 | 500 | 29 | 55.6% |
| Y | N | 250 | 125 | 90 | 50.0% |
| Y | Y | 250 | 120 | 69 | 48.0% |
| Y | N | 345 | 150 | 70 | 43.5% |
| Y | Y | 175 | 75 | 85 | 42.9% |
| Y | Y | 120 | 50 | 60 | 41.7% |
| Y | Y | 125 | 50 | 109 | 40.0% |
| Y | Y | 50 | 20 | 34 | 40.0% |
| Y | N | 200 | 75 | 43 | 37.5% |
| Y | N | 1200 | 400 | 71 | 33.3% |
| Y | Y | 80 | 25 | 4 | 31.3% |
| Y | Y | 65 | 20 | 88 | 30.8% |
| Y | Y | 630 | 155 | 112 | 24.6% |
| Y | Y | 1050 | 250 | 80 | 23.8% |
| Y | N | 65 | 15 | 4 | 23.1% |
| Y | N | 100 | 20 | 9 | 20.0% |
| Y | Y | 100 | 20 | 1 | 20.0% |
| Y | Y | 130 | 25 | 101 | 19.2% |
| Y | Y | 50 | 6 | 2 | 12.0% |
| Y | Y | 450 | 50 | 138 | 11.1% |
| Y | Y | 4500 | 500 | 62 | 11.1% |
| Y | Y | 200 | 10 | 90 | 5.0% |
| N | N | 150 | 110 | 26 | 73.3% |
| N | N | 650 | 400 | 134 | 61.5% |
| N | N | 130 | 80 | 81 | 61.5% |
| N | N | 101 | 60 | 81 | 59.4% |
| N | N | 250 | 125 | 135 | 50.0% |
| N | N | 100 | 50 | 103 | 50.0% |
| N | N | 300 | 150 | 83 | 50.0% |
| N | N | 95 | 45 | 46 | 47.4% |
| N | N | 65 | 30 | 62 | 46.2% |
| N | N | 350 | 160 | 57 | 45.7% |
| N | N | 140 | 20 | 95 | 14.3% |
| N | N | 23 | 0 | 78 | 0.0% |
| | | | Average | 69 | 29.1% |

the pastors. The remainder of the results were as follows: 45 – 14 percent; 35 – 9 percent; 36 – 6 percent; 42 – 6 percent. The remainder were scattered from two Sundays up to fifty-two at 1 percent each.

The average response was that a member should be present thirty-one Sundays per year to be considered active. Some would surely say that this was a high expectation, but in reality, it is just over half, or 60 percent attendance rate.

It is highly unlikely that the same attendance rate would be acceptable in secular employment or school attendance. This leads to another issue that is beyond the scope of this work – whether attendance alone makes one an active member. This survey did not include questions regarding the financial support of the church, involvement in other church activities, offices held, and the like. The only determining factor for inactivity was frequency of attendance.

Thirty-five Southern pastors from a three-county region gave sixteen different answers to the question of what qualified a person as an active church member. As stated, this confusion appears to be one of the underlying issues of the inactive member. When there is no set standard, there is no doubt many would consider themselves active members of their church and would be offended at any insinuation otherwise; meanwhile, the church has them classified as inactive.

When the pastors were asked why they thought people became inactive, the definitive answer was “a lack of spirituality.” The pastors were so convinced of this answer that it received over three times the number of responses of any other answer. In fact, no other two answers combined received as many responses as “lack of spirituality.” This was the response of slightly over 54 percent of the pastors, “got out of the habit” was a distant second, and “church does not offer programs that meets family needs” was third.

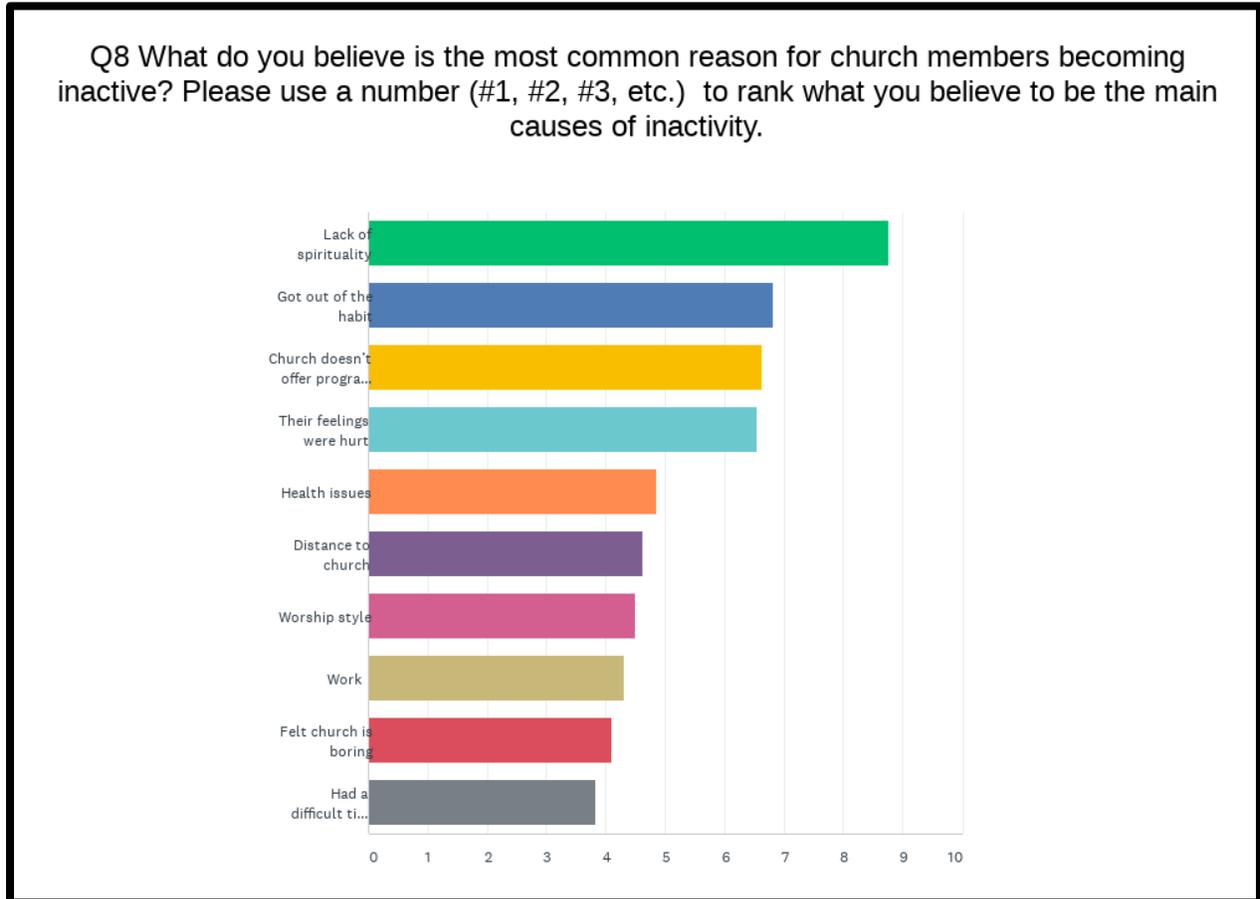
A genuine indication that the church and her leaders have little understanding of the problem and cause of inactive membership is how relatively even the answers were spread (chart 4) across the other nine options. Just as there is no consensus on the description of an inactive member, there is no consensus on the cause of inactivity.

While a lack of spirituality is no doubt an issue in many professing believers' lives, possibly leading to inactivity among some, the contrast between the inactive members' responses to this question and the pastors' responses is striking. Recall that the inactive members' responses were largely that the church did not offer programs that appealed to their families, while the pastors' most frequent responses were a lack of spirituality.

In other words, the pastors appear to be placing blame on the inactive members for their lack of spirituality, while the members place all the responsibility on the church for failing to offer the appropriate activities. Neither party accepts personal responsibility for the problem.

If the inactive member is spiritually weak, do the pastors and their churches not bear part of the responsibility for said weakness? Is it not their job to train up the weak? However, one can almost hear the pastors lamenting the old proverb, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink." Conversely, if the church is comprised of her members and the proper programs are not being provided, does not the member bear some of that responsibility to ensure desirable programs are being offered? The conflict between the answers from these two groups highlight the complexity of the inactive member problem.

Chart 4



The final question was open-ended and asked the pastors what they felt could be done to prevent church members from becoming inactive. Analysis of their open-ended answer revealed continuity with their previous response (a lack of spirituality is the driving force behind inactivity) and provides interesting insights. It is also interesting to read through the list of pastors' responses while remembering that the inactive members' main response was that the church did not offer programs that fit their families' needs.

This list highlights some of the pastors' responses that are most disconnected from the response of the members.

- Personal accountability among church members
- Preach the whole counsel of God in an interesting and exciting manner
- In reach efforts, such as SS or small group staying in close contact with attendees, having attendees register each week via the bulletin. (Basically, taking attendance) and then checking on people who miss 3 Sunday's in a row.
- Get church in touch with immediate community that has changed over the years.
- Minister in times of need, develop relationships, try to give a responsibility, treat people fairly on consistent basis or don't show favoritism, create a prayer base
- Great Follow Up
- Give them opportunities to lead
- Make new members class mandatory. We hope to accomplish this within next year
- We have tried everything. They just will not endure tough preaching.
- Real relationships with Jesus Christ and others are their only hope. Even then some will fall away.
- A moving of the Holy Spirit. People need to feel committed to service.
- More Communication
- Loving church discipline

Twelve of the pastors responded with answers that in some way indicated that their beliefs were some form of discipleship or small group ministry would prevent inactivity. These type answers are most congruent, in the broadest sense, with the inactive members' desire for programs that meet their families' needs. The other answers demonstrate a complete lack of understanding by the pastors of the desires of the inactive member. Perhaps the most honest and revealing answer of all was the one pastor who simply replied, "Don't know."

Summary of Pastor Responses

It is the opinion of the author that neither the pastors' nor the inactive members' responses should be taken in a vacuum. Their answers should be compared and contrasted with each other. The author once heard a wise man say, "There are four views of every problem. Your view. My view. Other's view. But most important is God's view."

Experience shows pastors often respond with hurt feelings when a member leaves his church. The survey results and experience also teach us that many who leave the church have been emotionally hurt in some way. These factors influence the opinions of all involved and must be considered when analyzing the data.

The surveyed pastors' major contention is that an inactive member must be deficient spiritually in some area to cause the inactivity. Certainly, there is some validity to this opinion. Even if one's feelings were hurt, the church did not offer appropriate programming, the drive was too far, or some other reason, if one chooses to leave a church, there is no reason to be inactive. There are other churches to be involved with.

“No one seems sure regarding the number of unchurched people in this country. Studies vary in their estimates from 60 million to over 100 million[.]”¹⁴³ Obviously a problem of this magnitude has a variety of driving factors. It is vitally important for the future of the church and the spiritual wellbeing of the people that the church does not turn a blind eye to the problem and simply pass it off as an individual's spiritual problem.

In the following pages, an attempt will be made to sift through the data even closer and look for solutions to this growing issue of inactivity on the part of the church members and lack of attention on the part of the church. The belief is while there is no magic bullet that will heal all the ails of the church and the inactive member, steps can and should be taken to reclaim those who have left the church. Responsibility and action steps must be taken by all those involved. As far back as 1978, George Gallup reported that a minimum of 61 million Americans were not

143. Byrne, 11.

members of any church.¹⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, that estimate has now ballooned to over 100 million.

In the remaining pages, conclusions and recommendations will be made based on the previous research to assist the local church in dealing with the issue of inactive members or the dechurched. While there is no expectation of 100 percent reclamation, even the great Apostle Paul mentions Demas who had abandoned him for the world,¹⁴⁵ certainly we can do better than a 51 percent inactive rate. The model of the Great Shepherd demands we try!

144. Byrne.

145. 2 Timothy 4:10

CHAPTER FOUR - CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The data provided by this research along with the larger body of research on the topic brings one to conclude that there is a need for a two-fold approach to the problem of church member inactivity. The church must continue to research and develop means and methods to detect and prevent this problem. Much of the church's current approach to the inactive member is comparable to the farmer who closes the gate only after his cow's escape.

Based on the pastors' survey responses and the research on ministry experience, reactivating inactive members is far more difficult than initially bringing a person to Christ. With one segment of the churches surveyed reporting a rate of over half their members as inactive, it is highly likely that many of those members will not be reactivated into the church. This is especially true considering the majority of churches report no active program or ministry for reclaiming these members.

Further exacerbating the problem, most churches interviewed reported little or no contact information for their inactive membership. In some cases, these inactive members' names were no longer kept by the church. "The attitudes of active church members are often negative, making it harder, if not impossible, to reach inactive members. Even when attitudes are positive, active members are very likely not trained to reach inactive people effectively."¹⁴⁶

With these thoughts in mind, the author will first present some ideas for preventing such a large portion of the church from becoming inactive. The belief is that the task of preventing inactivity is far less daunting than the task of finding and reclaiming the inactive member. The belief is that the church should be seeking a "vaccine" for inactivity rather than a cure.

146. Byrne, 13.

Preventing Inactivity by Database

The importance of a thorough database cannot be overstated in preventing inactive members and reclaiming them in the future. The writer's attempt to gather inactive membership data directly from the churches demonstrated how poorly the issue of accurate record keeping has been addressed.

A well-kept database of names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, attendance, and group involvement is an invaluable resource for preventing inactivity. One author writes, "members leave because they feel their church doesn't provide enough spiritual engagement. Some want more opportunities to serve, while others look for ways to solve frustrations or doubts. Many even feel church is irrelevant and list the struggle to connect as the primary reason they leave—or never get involved at all."¹⁴⁷

The bare minimum for churches to record, in addition to complete contact information, is giving and attendance. Tracking the changes of these two items will allow church staff to see patterns that might indicate a person is becoming less involved in the church. It is the writer's experience that access to giving information by anyone other than a church treasurer or bookkeeper can be a dangerous proposition, regardless of how valuable the information may be to the overall health of the church.

The author believes that this information is so important that the pastor would be well-served to work within his church structure to gain this information. At minimum, the person responsible for record keeping could do more than just record the data but also analyze it for

147. Matt Engel, "Use Big Data to Engage Your People and Grow Your Church," Gloo Blog, entry posted February 20, 2019, <https://blog.gloo.us/big-data-for-churches-introduction> (accessed August 17, 2020).

variance from the normal pattern. The pastor or a membership team could then be advised so that appropriate ministry could be provided.

Most churches already track giving so that they can produce individual giving statements. “But a change in offering patterns could also indicate a spiritual concern or a change in lifestyle that might necessitate a pastoral visit. Someone who was a faithful giver but suddenly stopped giving may have lost their job and may be afraid to tell others. Someone who is faithfully giving but is no longer attending still may care for the mission of the church, but something may be keeping them from coming to worship.”¹⁴⁸

Along with giving patterns, attendance patterns should be closely tracked. Any major shift in pattern should be investigated. The data previously presented reveals that there is a wide difference in opinion of what constitutes an active church member. Some consider themselves active if they attend a few times a quarter, others a few times a month, while some still think they must attend every service. Attendance patterns have changed, “This means in today’s culture some of the most committed Jesus followers only make it to church three times a month. Over a year this would mean they miss 13 weekends of church.”¹⁴⁹

“Inactive members are identified by their lack of activity, which means their activity must be tracked to know when they’ve stopped participating. This is another example of the necessity and benefit of continued ChMS (Church Management System) maintenance.”¹⁵⁰ Many experts

148. Peter Frank, “Using Your CHMS to Minister to Inactive Members,” Church Tech Today: Technology for Today’s Church, <https://churchtechtoday.com/2018/06/15/using-your-chms-to-minister-to-inactive-members/>, (accessed August 17, 2020).

149. Rob Chadges, “Does God Really Care About My Church Attendance?,” Relevant blog, posted December 4, 2018, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/church/does-god-really-care-about-my-church-attendance/>, (accessed August 17, 2020).

150. Frank.

recommend not only tracking attendance at Sunday School or small groups, and worship, but at other events as a means of gauging overall involvement in the church life.

By diligently tracking attendance to worship, small groups, and other events, even small changes in attendance can be noted. This can open the opportunity for contact with the member, ministry being provided, and possibly prevent further deterioration of their attendance.

Attendance tracking will assist the church in discovering the needs of her members.

The most important piece of data for churches to have access to is contact data. Accurate contact data is what drives all other data. Without accurate contact data, members tend to “fall through the cracks.” Ninety-four percent of the respondents in this project indicated that some type of contact (email, phone call, letter) would encourage them to be more regular in their church attendance. Accurate contact information supports communication and healthy relationships in the church, which helps prevent inactive members and assists in reclaiming those who have become less involved.

In this time of information overload, there is no excuse for a church to not have accurate contact information. There are websites like whitepages.com and simple Google searches that will often provide the latest phone number or address. The author has even used government Global Information Service websites to search tax records to verify or locate inactive members.

Social media is another avenue whereby churches can locate their members. Sites such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and many more provide free accounts and access to the profiles of their members. This information can then be used to contact the member whose attendance is in question.

Dr. John Savage, founder of LEAD Consulting and author of *The Bored and Apathetic Church Member*, has written and taught extensively on the topic of inactive members. He

believes that a “cluster” of life events usually occur before a member becomes inactive. In a 1983 interview, Savage said,

It begins with an active member having a series of personal, anxiety-provoking events. We call these a "cluster of events." They occur privately inside the life of the active member, so the local congregation is not aware of them. For example, a family whom I visited had the following cluster of events happen to them: The father was fired from his job and was out of work for six months; because of the stress related to the loss of income, the wife had a mental break down, and was in a mental hospital for two weeks; their daughter in junior high had been caught smoking marijuana in back of the school, and the son had been caught stealing money in the church. Then the church called them and told them that they were not adequately carrying out their church responsibilities. When I visited them, the couple used that last event as the reason why they left; namely, that someone had called and said they were not adequate leaders. But that wasn't the issue. The issue was the cluster of events building up to that final event, the "straw that breaks the camel's back." Therefore, when you go visit these inactive church members, to deal only with that event is not to deal with the real problem.¹⁵¹

This minister has been through numerous trainings with Savage and does not dispute his “cluster of events” contention. In fact, the research for this project shows that half of the respondents admitted to having a serious family crisis in the year preceding their inactivity. Dr. Savage has worked to perfect his “Listening and Caring Skills” to engage and reclaim those who become inactive. What is proposed here is a diligent effort on the part of the church to continually collect and analyze information that will lead to effective ministry during the “cluster” and before the final event that leads to inactivity.

Once the data is compiled, then the management system’s filters and reporting features can be applied to produce a list of at-risk or inactive members. For example, a filter could be set to show all members who have been absent for more than a fourth of the last six months of

151. J.R. Spangler, ed., “Reactivating the inactive member,” *Ministry International Journal for Pastors*, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1983/05/reactivating-the-inactive-member>, (accessed August 17, 2020).

worship services. Anniversary dates of important or traumatic events, such as the death of a loved one could be reported and a call or visit scheduled accordingly.

It is important that the data be used appropriately. Each church should develop a system based on their staffing ability to assign and track this information. Most modern church management systems such as Realm allow for remote access by multiple users.¹⁵² This format allows for one person to distribute assignments or for the users to customize their own search parameters to identify possible inactive members.

Just as the Good Shepherd knows His sheep, a church and her shepherd should use every tool available to have a better knowledge and understanding of the entrusted flock. The lack of information on inactive members from surveyed churches should be an embarrassment as it shows a lack of concern for building strong relationships with members.

This attention to details and events of our members' lives is not just a matter of building the church or increasing our numbers. The Bible is teeming with instruction encouraging the practice of compassion. Jesus Himself taught, "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me."¹⁵³ Compiling accurate records and utilizing these records correctly not only prevents inactive membership but shows the love of Christ.

Preventing Inactivity by New Members Classes

The primary discovery from the research for this project was the obvious effect of providing a mandatory new members class in the church. Those churches that reported having

152. (ACS Technologies - <https://www.acstechnologies.com/>)

153. Matthew 25:35-36 KJV

such a class reported only a 21 percent inactive rate. This is 15 percent better than those who provide an optional class, 7 percent better than the entire group, and an amazing 30 percent better than the churches who offer no training for new members. Much has been written about new members classes, but the author is unaware of any other data revealing such a wide disparity in the results of these classes.

The importance of the new members class has been taught by many church growth specialists, especially Dr. Thom Rainer. The new members class not only helps close the back door of the church, lowering the number of inactive members, but if done correctly can be a great evangelism tool. One pastor said, “Over half the conversions in our church come through our new member class.”¹⁵⁴

Long before it was labeled a “new members class,” some recognized the importance of training the church’s new members. A Baptist Training Union book from 1958 reads, “Perhaps it should be admitted that a great many people enter upon church membership – as some do upon marriage – without a very clear idea of what is involved.”¹⁵⁵ The author then proceeds to layout information regarding the Southern Baptist denomination, her doctrines, and what is involved in church membership. This sixty-five-year-old book is obviously a precursor to the modern new members class.

Unfortunately, this research was done anonymously so the components of the responding church’s new members class could not be analyzed. Because of that missing data, what follows will be a compilation of best practices to include in these training events. Each pastor/church is encouraged to take these findings and adapt them to fit his/her particular ministry, as there is no

154. Thom S. Rainer. *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 103.

155. Ackland, 5.

one size fits all solution to this, as with any other problem the church faces today. These suggestions will be presented in a question and answer format.

Why A New Members Class?

There is little verifiable evidence as to what makes a new members class effective in lowering inactivity. “Many of the simple and vibrant churches we researched use some type of group for new believers. They either provide a group for new believers or they match individuals up with an existing group.”¹⁵⁶ However, one can hardly argue with the data that shows a 30 percent difference in inactive members in the churches who require a new member class compared to those who did not. Rainer boldly states, “I am now confident of the ‘new discovery.’ One of the key issues in closing the back door was the presence of a new member class as a required entry point for members.”¹⁵⁷

Pastors of effective churches agree that a new members class is vitally important. Effective churches were asked whether they had a process for moving new people into the life of the church. Of those churches, “70 percent strongly agreed or agreed with this statement compared to 38 percent of the comparison church.”¹⁵⁸

Rainer reported that “new Christians who immediately became active in a small group are more likely to remain in the church five years later than those who were active in worship services alone.”¹⁵⁹ While not part of the research done for this project, the author believes further

156. Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2011), 156.

157. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, 104.

158. Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*, 158.

159. Rainer and Geiger, 106-107.

study would reveal that the churches requiring a new members class also have a comprehensive assimilation process.

Barna had similar findings to Rainer in his research. He discovered, “Many of the pastors we interviewed stressed the significance of the assimilation process. Merely getting people to attend services or become members, even make a commitment to Christ was not deemed a sufficient outcome.”¹⁶⁰ “Effective assimilation churches have one primary characteristic that sets them apart from churches that do not keep their members in active involvement. Effective assimilation churches had high expectations of all of their members.”¹⁶¹

Forty-two percent of those surveyed for this project reported that the number one reason for their inactivity was that the church did not offer the appropriate programs for their family. By providing a high expectation new members class, this issue could have been discovered early in the church membership process.

The author heard Dr. John Savage, author of *The Bored and Apathetic Church Member*, tell the following story regarding a conversation in his church’s new members class. In the class, he asked each prospective member to write down what he/she expected of the church. He then wrote each answer on the board and went through them individually. In response to some answers, he told the group that this particular desire would not be met by the church or staff. At others, such as hospital visitation, he explained that the church had expectations too. If one expected a hospital visit, then the church expected to be notified by the member of his/her hospital stay.

160. Barna, “*Re-Churching the Unchurches*,” 141.

161. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, 23.

By setting clear expectations on the front end of membership, disappointment can hopefully be avoided on both sides. Certainly, some may choose not to become part of a particular fellowship of believers. However, if the goal is to eliminate inactive members, it would be best to discover the incompatibility at the earliest point.

Further, the wise pastor and staff may discover a need or ministry in the church body that needs to be addressed. If the potential members expectations cannot or will not be met by the church, then the pastor should remember that his task is to build *the* kingdom, not *his* kingdom and assist the person in locating a church that can meet their needs, if possible.

As alluded to previously, this is also the time for the church to clarify expectations of members. Questions such these should be addressed: What is the theology of the church? What is expected in regard to attendance? What are the financial expectations of the members? Similar to good premarital counseling, the new members class should seek to uncover the possible misalignment of values early in the relationship so any discrepancies can be resolved, or the relationship can be terminated at this point. “It should be made very clear to those who join the church what they can reasonably expect when they join.”¹⁶²

Thom Rainer explained the new members class effect on member retention like this, “In simplest terms, churches tend to receive in commitment what they expect from the members when they join.”¹⁶³ It has been observed after a lifetime in a Southern Baptist church that often a church is so excited to gain a new member that church leadership will do or say practically anything to get a new member’s name on the roll, only to discover that when the new member is

162. Byrne, 54.

163. Ibid., 106.

asked to contribute to the life of the church, he/she resists. An effective new member class can help avoid this scenario.

Often, older members will object to the institution of a new members class, seeing it as an unnecessary barrier to the church seeker. However, it should be remembered that in our current culture, there are orientations for almost everything. Expecting parents are sent to an orientation to prepare them for childbirth; and parents of school children are accustomed to yearly orientations as their children pass through to new grade levels.

Candidates for knee-replacement surgery are usually required to attend some type of pre-surgery training to prepare them for their new knees. If they refuse to go to the training, then the surgeon will not perform the surgery because the candidate is not committed enough to the procedure. If examples such as these are true, then shouldn't something as eternally significant as choosing a place to worship God be worthy of at least the same level of commitment?¹⁶⁴

The church that requires attendance in a new members class is telling the prospect that membership in this church is valuable; it is important. "One prevention measure churches should use is special emphasis on the responsibilities of church membership. Here an emphasis is placed on discipline."¹⁶⁵

This process follows the model of Jesus Himself as He called His disciples to follow Him.

- "And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."¹⁶⁶
- "And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him."¹⁶⁷

164. Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*, 157.

165. Byrne, 54.

166. Matthew 4:19 (KJV)

167. Mark 1:20 (KJV)

- “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”¹⁶⁸
- “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”¹⁶⁹

Jesus made it abundantly clear to those who would follow Him that there were expectations -- following Him required making a commitment. The rich young ruler of Mark 10 is an excellent example. When he was told the requirements, selling all he had and giving it to the poor, the Bible says that he went away, unwilling at that point to make a commitment.

There is abundant evidence provided to support the necessity of requiring a new members class. The statistics from this research project, along with data from Thom Rainer’s work, prove the value. More importantly, the example of Jesus Christ Himself teaches us the necessity of explaining on the front-end the expectations of the follower. How can a church member be held to a standard that he/she does not know?

What Is A New Members Class?

A simple internet search will reveal that there are many different methods for conducting a new members class. There are some churches who spread their class over several sessions, while others choose to have only one session. Content varies broadly as well. Some choose to go into the church’s history, while others focus on the future.

Each church will be required to adapt their class for their particular situation. There are numerous considerations to take into account. The availability of someone to lead the class. A newer church that is meeting in rented facilities may need to consider time and location more

168. Matthew 11:29 (KJV)

169. Matthew 16:24-25 (KJV)

than an older church that has their own facility. However the church chooses to conduct their new member class, they should begin with the end goal in sight – addressing the expectations of both the church and the new member to help eliminate future problems leading to inactivity.

What follows is a description of the key elements that should be included in a new members class. There may be other issues the church wishes to add due to their own experience, however, these listed are viewed by the author as the minimum requirements. “Whatever your strategy is with new believers, have a strategy! Discipleship of new believers does not just happen. It must be intentional.”¹⁷⁰

While there are many different options regarding the content of a new members class, there are several core practices that should be observed regardless. First, the class should be offered on a regular schedule. By placing the class on the church calendar as a regular, recurring event, it relays the emphasis the church places on the class. “It should be a priority of church leadership. Church members and guests alike should clearly hear the importance of the class in the life of the church.”¹⁷¹

To coincide with the overall purpose of the church, the new members class should always include a clear evangelistic presentation. It is the opinion of the author that many of the problems in the church today, along with a large percentage of the inactivity we seek to address, is due to unrepentant, unsaved church members. As shared earlier, one pastor said, “Over half the conversions in our church come through our new member class.”¹⁷²

170. Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples*, 157.

171. Thom S. Rainer, “Six Reasons Your New Member Class Is Not Effective,” Church Answers, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/six-reasons-your-new-member-class-is-not-effective/>, (accessed August 19, 2020).

172. Thom S. Rainer. *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, 103.

It is encouraging to search the topic “new members class” on the internet and see the large number of posts with aids, materials, and advice for conducting such a class. However, it is disturbing to scroll through the various articles and read that almost none of them encourage a presenting of the Gospel at this time. It is simply naïve to believe that everyone who presents himself/herself as a candidate for membership has a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another key principle for the new members class should be the involvement of the pastor. While certainly helpful, it is not necessary for the pastor to lead the entire class. But, he should be involved to some level and lead at least a portion of the class. His involvement helps to support the idea of the importance of the class and church membership. Depending on the size of the church, this is also an opportunity for the pastor to begin building relationships with those who are coming into the church.

An extremely important point to remember, especially in today’s culture, is the value of time. The schedule for the class should be clearly publicized and adhered to. Churches should avoid the temptation to go over every event in church history along with every point of denominational theology. It is the belief of this author that the class should be restricted to a one-day event. The particular day may vary by context. In some situations, it may be wise to offer the class at different days and times to accommodate the different schedules of both the leaders and participants.

There are several broad categories of information that should be included in the class. First, time should be spent discussing the church itself – where the church has been and the vision for the future. The second broad category of information should be to discuss the

commitment that each party is making. Sam Rainer breaks these things into three categories, doctrine, information, and expectations.¹⁷³

The doctrines of the particular church should be outlined. It cannot be assumed that a person coming from a church of the same denomination has the same doctrinal understanding as the new congregation. In 1955, Ackland wrote, “There is an easy-going philosophy in the world today as dangerous as it is prevalent, that it does not matter what a person believes so long as he believes something. An idea closely related to this, and equally erroneous, is that one religion is as good as another.”¹⁷⁴ Imagine what he would think today!

This section does not need to be a systematic theology course but should cover the basic tenets of the faith as taught by the church. Much grief and pain can be eliminated for both sides if this information is dealt with up front rather than have differences come to the surface several years into the relationship. Not only can this help prevent a person from becoming an inactive member, but it can prevent division in the church.

Of particular importance for denominational churches, as part of the doctrinal information, is to cover their denominational distinctives. Many churches today do not include their denomination as part of their name and prospective members may not realize the church’s denominational affiliation.

Each church should then compile a list of general information, such as facilities and ministries of the church, along with an explanation of the governance structure. Other information about the church that is important to share would be budget and financial policies,

173. Sam Rainer, “What I Teach At Our New Members Class,” Church Leaders Blog, entry dated October 19, 2017, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/311598-teach-new-members-class-sam-rainer.html>, (accessed August 19, 2020).

174. Ackland, 18.

information about the church's local and international missions involvement, and the vision/mission statement of the church.

The pastor, if possible, should also be introduced and allowed to share his background information and vision for the church. Other staff members and/or key volunteer leadership should be introduced at this point too. The general leadership structure of the church should be explained, along with the decision-making process of the church.

In the current culture of worship, the worship style of the church could also be explained. It is likely that by this point the prospective member has attended services at the church and is familiar with the worship style. Nevertheless, much of the division in churches today centers around worship style, so it would be wise to explain the current style and any adjustments that are planned for the future.

The final broad category is expectations: "If you choose only one of these topics to cover in a new members class, please let it be this one. It's so important to set clear and realistic expectations for your new church members."¹⁷⁵ In the research for this project, 42 percent of those surveyed said the number one reason for their inactivity was that the church did not offer programs that met their needs, while almost one-fourth ranked the worship style in the top three reasons. These are areas of contention that could have possibly been avoided by properly addressing them in the new members class.

This meeting is also the place to let prospective members know what is expected of them as part of the church family. Many things should be addressed at this point, such as prayer for the leadership of the church, financial support of the church through tithing, and the responsibility each member has for his/her own discipleship and spiritual growth.

175. Scott Magdalein, "8 Topics To Include in Your Membership Class," *Serve HQ Blog*, entry posted April 23, 2018, <https://servehq.church/blog/church-membership-class/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

The author firmly believes that every church should tailor the information provided to best fit the needs and mission of each church. While there are prepackaged new member materials available, these guides will cover areas that are irrelevant to some churches and overlooking issues that may be of great importance to specific congregations.

It is well-understood that there will be some in the church, perhaps even some pastors, who will object to this approach. They will most likely resist the idea of placing any barriers between the new member and church membership. Churches must bear in mind that this study has shown that churches without a required membership class are accruing an inactivity rate of over 50 percent.

This result is supported by larger, well-funded research projects such as reported by Thom Rainer in *High Expectations*. This research has shown that just offering a new member class that is not required lowers inactivity by 25 percent. While the church *may* lose some prospective members by requiring a class, research has shown that they will definitely lose them without a class.

Preventing Inactivity by Assimilation/Discipleship

One glaring difference between the pastors and the church members who replied is their opinion of why people became inactive. Forty-two percent of the church members basically blamed the church by reporting that the church did not offer programs suitable for their needs. The pastors, on the other hand, put the responsibility on the members themselves. Fifty-four percent of the pastors reported the number one reason people became inactive was a lack of spirituality. The other nine choices combined did not get as high a response!

No doubt there is some truth to the pastors' replies. Few would disagree, as a whole, the modern church has declined spiritually. Americans themselves acknowledge their own spiritual

decline. “In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade.”¹⁷⁶

In *Dirt Matters*, Jim Powell writes, “C.S. Lewis wrote on a couple of occasions about the failure of people to see the predictable consequences of putting second things before first things.”¹⁷⁷ In agreement with Powell’s idea, the author believes that 54 percent of pastors decrying a lack of spirituality on the part of inactive members indicates that the church and her members have focused on the wrong things.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Teach is from the Greek word *mathetuo* and can be more accurately stated as “make disciples of.”¹⁷⁸ It is the belief of this author that developing disciples is not only obedience to the command of Christ, but will produce great dividends in the attempt to lower the number of inactive church members on our rolls.

People who are growing in their walk with Christ are far less likely to use excuses such as “got out of the habit,” “it is too far to drive,” or “got offended by someone,” noted by many of those surveyed, to no longer attend church. The church that develops and maintains an active

176. Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> (accessed August 19, 2020).

177. Jim Powell, *Dirt Matters: The Foundation For a Healthy, Vibrant, and Effective Congregation* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2013), 13.

178. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1887), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Matthew 28:19".

discipleship program will not only strengthen the spiritual walk of her members but will strengthen their church as well.

This too is a biblical concept. Jesus said, “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”¹⁷⁹ Part of the fruit of a disciple growing in his/her relationship with Christ will be a desire to fellowship with other believers, a desire to gather together for worship. As discipleship grows in a church, the back door will gradually close.

This discipleship should take place in two ways, in small groups and one-on-one. As part of the new members class described earlier, participants should be taught that one of the expectations of the church is that everyone be involved in a small group for discipleship. It would be a wise decision to assign them to a group at that time rather than leave it to chance. An ideal situation would be that each person in the church has a one-to-one relationship for discipleship as well.

All the suggestions that have been presented thus far can be described as the church’s assimilation process. Most church strategists say that the assimilation process starts the moment the guest pulls in the parking lot. Assimilation is simply a strategy to bring a person into close personal relationships with others in the church.

From the first opportunity, members of the church begin to build relationships with the newcomer, introducing themselves and others, by asking for an opportunity to take them to lunch, or follow up phone calls, cards, or visits. The new members class should focus on building relationships with those in attendance.

Many churches do not realize the importance of an assimilation strategy. “But assimilation, the process through which we forge interpersonal connections, plays a critical role

179. Matthew 7:16 (KJV)

in creating disciples. Assimilation – by fostering intimate relationships and interactions – lays the foundation for meaningful emersion in the church, and subsequently, intentional discipleship.”¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

The church of Jesus Christ cannot continue to sit idly while vast portions of their members disappear. This practice blatantly violates a number of Scripture passages directly and many more on principle. By allowing these large numbers to disappear, over half in some churches who participated in this survey, we are not making disciples, we are not loving others, we are not building the kingdom, and in many cases, we are failing to share the Gospel.

The modern church movement has become enamored with planting more churches, building bigger churches, playing specific worship styles, and the like. All of these certainly deserve attention and effort, but if the church does not move to close her backdoor and stop the exodus of people from her pews, it will not be long before all of these become moot points.

The research presented makes the fact that we continue to ignore the issue even more shocking. With the simple addition of a required new members class, the number of inactive members statistically drops by 30 percent. Obviously, every church will not duplicate these findings in their environment, but even lowering the inactive rate by half would be a major accomplishment.

The truth is that nothing discovered by this research project is ground-breaking. The fact is that the research simply points us back to being the church we are called to be in Scripture. The suggestions outlined take us back to being a church that loves people; as people come into

180. Church Community Builder, “3 Challenges Every Church Faces: Assimilation,” <https://www.churchcommunitybuilder.com/blog/3-challenges-every-church-faces-assimilation> (accessed August 18, 2020).

the church, they are welcomed and brought into the family; they are disciplined according to biblical principles. And, as a result, the church fellowships and grows together as the family of God.

These suggestions come with little or no financial requirements, but instead require the effort and dedication of many in the church. These steps are not as glitzy and attention grabbing as a new building or even some of the other programs churches involve themselves in. However, if the church is looking for a way to improve themselves, strengthen others, and be the church, there is no better way than working to eliminate the need for the classification of the inactive member.

Appendix 1 - Letter to Pastors

Dear Pastor,

I hope you and your congregation are doing well. My name is Jimmy Barrett, pastor of Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Concord. I am in the process of writing my D. Min. thesis for Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. My topic is one that I feel will be very beneficial to the church. I am attempting to identify common trends among the many inactive members that most of our churches have. I would like to accomplish this by using a survey that identifies possible reasons why they do not attend on a regular basis. Before taking the survey, please read the informed consent document in its entirety and contact me if you have any questions. I have also enclosed a simple survey for you to complete regarding your ministry and church. Before completing the survey, please read the informed consent document in its entirety. This survey may be also be taken online at www.tobesetuplater.org and should take less than ten minutes.

A copy of the recruitment letter and survey that will be used is enclosed. The survey will also be made available online. As you can see, there will be no identifying information on the survey that your member returns, so the results will be completely anonymous. All of the answers will be compiled and only the answers reported. I also want to assure you there will be no further contact or attempt to recruit your members.

I would be grateful if you and your church would agree to participate. To accomplish this study, I am asking several of our churches to provide me with a list of 20 or more names and addresses of inactive church members to mail the survey to. I have enclosed a postage paid envelope for you to return this information or you may e-mail the information at pastor@poplargrovebaptist.com

I believe this study will help us understand the inactive member and identify strategies that may prevent our members from becoming inactive in the future.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, I have listed my contact information:

Cell – 704.791-0218

Church – 704.782.0078

Home – 704.932.1167

In His Service,

Rev. Jimmy Barrett

Appendix 2 - Letter to Inactive Members

Dear Church Member,

Greetings! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Rev. Jimmy Barrett, pastor of Poplar Grove Baptist Church in Concord. Like your church, my church is a member of the Cabarrus Baptist Association. I am currently working on my Doctoral degree at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.

I am sure you are aware that on most Sundays only a portion of the average church's members attend worship services. For my thesis project, I am researching the reasons why many choose not to regularly attend church. My goal is to discover what can be done to prevent church members from becoming less involved with their local church. Your response to a simple survey could help me and other churches.

I obtained your name and address from a church that is a member of the Cabarrus Baptist Association. Before taking the survey, please read the informed consent document in its entirety and contact me if you have any questions. I am asking that you help me in this research by completing a short survey and mailing it back to me in the postage paid envelope enclosed. Before completing the survey, please read the informed consent document in its entirety. The survey may also be completed online at www.tobesetuplater.org and should take less than ten minutes to complete.

Let me assure you that your identity will remain completely anonymous. The nature of the survey means even I will not know who responded. Only your answers will be included in the study and there is no identifying marks or numbers on the survey. Your views are very important and will help our churches provide more effective ministry. Again, thank you for your time completing the survey and returning it, as soon as possible, in the postage paid envelope provided or online.

In His Service,

Rev. Jimmy Barrett

Appendix 3 – Pastor’s Survey

What year was your church started? _____

How many Sundays per year should a person attend church to be considered active? _____

What is the total membership of your church? _____

How many of these members would you classify as inactive? _____

Do you have a new member' s class?

Yes

No

If yes, is the class required?

Yes

No

Do you currently have any ministries to work with inactive members?

Yes

No

What do you believe is the most common reason for church members becoming inactive? Please use a number (#1, #2, #3, etc.) to rank what you believe to be the main causes of inactivity.

___Lack of spirituality

___Church does not offer programs that meet family needs

___Distance to church

___Their feelings were hurt

___Worship style

___Got out of the habit

___Felt church is boring

___Health issues

___Had a difficult time relating to other church members and environment

What do you think could be done to help members from becoming less active?

Appendix 4 – Church Member Survey

1. Please select your age group.
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65+
2. What is your sex?
 - Male
 - Female
3. Are you an active member of a church?
 - Yes
 - No
4. I attend church....
 - Almost every Sundays (45 or more per year)
 - Most Sundays (36 to 44 per year)
 - About every other Sunday (26 to 35 per year)
 - Some Sundays (18 to 25 per year)
 - About once a month (6 to 17 per year)
 - Special occasions (5 or fewer Sundays per year)
 - Have not attended for one year or more
5. What originally influenced you to become a member of your church? Check all that apply.
 - Family that attended the church
 - Friends that attended the church
 - The pastor
 - Worship style
 - Other (please specify)

6. Please select the top three reasons from the list below that you do not attend church more frequently? If you would like to select more than three, please do. • Please number them as follows: #1 The main reason you do not attend #2 The second reason #3 The third reason

Church doesn't offer programs that meet family needs

Distance to church

Offended by someone in the church

Worship style

Got out of the habit

Health issues

Church was boring

Services were not relevant

Had a difficult time relating to other church members and environment

Work

Other

7. Has anyone encouraged you to become more active in the church?
- Yes
 - No
8. Were you regularly involved in a Sunday School Class or small group?
- Yes
 - No
9. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Very Important" and 5 being "Very Unimportant," How important do you think regular church attendance is? _____
10. Would any of the following encourage you to attend church more frequently? Select all that apply.
- A letter or email from the pastor or member
 - A phone call from the pastor or member
 - A visit from the pastor or member
 - Other (please specify)

11. Has there been a crisis in your family within the last two years? Example, family, financial, health, etc.
- Yes
 - No
12. When you were more regularly involved in your church, how many close church friends did you have?
- 1-3
 - 4-5
 - more than 5
13. Were other family members from your home involved in the same church?
- Yes
 - No
14. Do you have any comments you would like to make regarding your church attendance?

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VITA

James D. Barrett

Personal:

Born: September 21, 1964

Married: Rhonda E. Barrett

Children: James David Barrett born March 12, 1986

Caleb William Barrett born September 12, 1990

Malia Jean Barrett born May 4, 1995

Tinzee Glynn Barrett born September 28, 2004

Educational:

B.S., Liberty University

M.A.R. Liberty University

M.Div, Liberty University

Ministerial:

Licensed: Lane Street Baptist, Kannapolis, NC, January 1983

Ordained: Victory Baptist, Kannapolis, NC, January 1989

Pastor: Victory Baptist Church, Kannapolis, NC, 1988-1994

Pastor: Poplar Grove Baptist Church, Concord, NC, 1995-present

Director of Missions, Cabarrus Baptist Association, Concord, NC 2015-present

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The Graduate School at Liberty University

May 14, 2013

James David Barrett
IRB Exemption 1586.051413: Predicting and Preventing Inactive Church Members

Dear James,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and that no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101 (b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
- (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
 - (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and that any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption, or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,



Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

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