

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LACK OF BAPTIST
CHURCH PARTICIPATION IN SEMINOLE COUNTY, FLORIDA

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Ismael Melendez

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. The theory guiding this study was Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical framework which focuses on the commonality of experiences. Heidegger believed that to arrive at the essence of a phenomenon a researcher must go through the revisionary process of what Heidegger termed the Hermeneutic Circle. The principal research question in this study explored existing relationship(s) between in-person and online Baptist church leaders and how such relationship(s) contributed to a lack of church participation. The remaining questions explored what understanding of a lack of church participation existed amongst Baptist church leaders, how online Baptist church participation affected in-person Baptist church participation, and what relationship existed between in-person Baptist church members and online Baptist church members. Study data were derived from a qualitative research design which included interviews, a reflective journal, an audio recorder, and observations. Data were analyzed through the use of the NVivo 12 Pro qualitative data analysis computer software program.

Keywords: Attribution, Baptist, church leader, Hermeneutic circle, in-person, online.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Judy Rivera-Melendez, who inspired me to pursue a doctoral degree, encouraged me during times of uncertainty, gave support and insight throughout the entire study process, and has loved me unconditionally since 1976.

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In preparing this study, strength, perseverance, and guidance were found in Scripture and in the chosen knowledge that God is real, that Jesus Christ is God's begotten Son, and that many ancestral and current proclaimers of the Christian faith have made the ultimate sacrifice so that the truth of the gospel will continue to shed light on people's lives while walking a path of righteousness. Additionally, much gratitude is given to Dr. Jason R. Waters, dissertation supervisor, who provided invaluable support and guidance. Gratitude is also extended to Dr. Justin Smith, second reader, for his contribution during the final stages of the dissertation process. Lastly, I would be amiss if I do not acknowledge the four Baptist church leaders, the eight Baptist church members, and the validating church leader who graciously volunteered for the study and provided their valuable time and undeniable wisdom. Without them, this study would have never been possible.

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List of Abbreviations

Attribution Theory (AT)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Emergent Christian Movement (ECM)

Florida Baptist Convention (FBC)

Generation Z (Gen Z)

Hermeneutic Circle (HC)

Interview Questions (IQs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+)

Monkeypox (Mpox)

Research Question (RQ)

Seminole Baptist Association (SBA)

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)

Television (TV)

Universal Serial Bus (USB)

World Wide Web (WWW)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The Christian faith was and is in trouble. Many Christians are disheartened. Future participation seems bleak. Despite Christian leaders' efforts to curtail the continued lack of in-person church participation, believers either kept finding new forms of worshipping God or left the faith altogether. There was a lot of speculation. Some writers argued that Christianity's lack of participation was due to a combination of pluralism and continued persecution (Saiya & Manchanda, 2021). Others claimed it was due to the aging of believers who were not being replaced by Christians with the same biblical worldview (Thumma, 2021). One study showed that weekly in-person church attendance in the United States dropped from 45% to 29% between 1993 and 2020 and that only one out of every four Americans was practicing the Christian faith (Barna, 2020a).

However, while in-person church participation was dropping, online church participation was growing. One quantitative study found that 83% of online American Christians were happy with their online worship practices with 25% saying online worship was helping their spirituality (Pew, 2000). In another study, up-and-coming (emerging) Christians were and are using technology to spread the gospel through music (McDowell, 2018). A third study found that more than 49,000 sermons were delivered via online worship services by over 6,000 participating churches (Pew, 2019c).

With everything going on in the world-styles continually changing, gender identity being questioned, church scandals, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Monkeypox (Mpox) outbreak, challenges against the existence of God, the Emergent Christian Movement (ECM),

and so forth-could this lack of in-person church participation be a continuing trend? According to McDowell (2018, p. 60),

The [ECM] is one of the newest and biggest efforts to break away from the conventional [in-person] congregational model ... Some emerging Christians insist on ‘being the church’ in everyday life and in a way that the rest of society (e.g., non-Christians) can see as loving and peaceful ... Some are prioritizing participatory sermons and small, community-based fellowships in places like pubs, abandoned warehouses, and skate parks. Others are ‘planting’ churches that incorporate new kinds of rituals and music into the worship service or hold meetings that encourage participants to debate Scripture.

In this chapter, we will look at the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the researcher’s relationship to the problem, the purpose statement, research questions, assumptions and delimitations, the definitions of terms, the significance of the study, and a summary of the research design.

Background to the Problem

Congregations in the Christian faith, including Baptists, have generally been of physical presence where believers join together in spirit and truth (Hebrews 10:25; John 4:23-26). In the current world, however, being physically in the here and now to worship appears to be steadily becoming a thing of the past. More and more Christians are finding alternative forms of worshipping God. Many are turning to online churches (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017; *Pew*, 2000; Roach, 2020). Theologically (possibly because of technological advancements, COVID-19, and Mpx), this line of thinking has given rise to discussions about whether a physical church is necessary for the Body of Christ to function as a church.

According to Marcus Walker, a London cleric, a brick-and-mortar church is necessary for the spreading of the gospel as it functions as a center of operation from which missionary work can be organized (McGowan, 2020). On the contrary, pointing out that the church is not a structure but a gathering of believers, Beukes (2020) argued that God’s church will always be a

church regardless of the use of brick-and-mortar structures. This form of logic may, therefore, be contributing to the lack of in-person church participation and the rise of online church participation.

A study on religious experience(s) was conducted involving three online churches: the I-Church, the Church of Fools, and the Life Church. Their case studies presented the pros and cons of online religion (Hutchings, 2007). One of the pros, for example, was that online faith has proven to be a viable avenue through which the gospel reaches a vast amount of people not just domestically but abroad (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017). As such, many online participants have claimed to receive God's saving grace (surrendering one's life to Jesus) via online faith ceremonies (Roach, 2020). In contrast, "It has frequently been argued that an online ritual or religious ceremony could not muster the subjective impact of a face-to-face event" (Hutchings, 2007, p. 253). Despite such views, the number of digital Christians (Christians who worship online) continues to rise. According to available literature, aside from technology, ineffective leadership, diversity, secularization, and pluralism are all possibly contributing to a decrease in in-person church participation (Fowler, Musgrave, & Musgrave, 2020). Further study, however, is needed to determine other possible factors.

Theological

One of the beautiful aspects of the Christian faith is its diversity. Regardless of social status (upper, middle, or lower class), economic standing (wealthy or poor), educational background (academically astute or illiterate), profession (President or unskilled laborer), or cultural upbringing, believers gather as one body (the Body of Christ). Past ridicule, mistreatment, nor persecution has managed to stop the faithful from gathering or from spreading the gospel (Waters, 2020). From the stoning death of the first martyr, Stephen (Acts 7:54-60),

through the killing of Perpetua, Felicita, and their companions (Klein, 2020), to those being persecuted, imprisoned, and killed (Anthony et al., 2021) the Christian faith has continued. Congregating and worshipping in brother and sisterly love is a biblical Christian tradition (Romans 15:6; Hebrews 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 11:2) and one that has been passed from generation to generation. Nothing has been able to change this enduring form of faith practice. Nothing, that is, until the coming of technological advancement which has brought into question how the Christian faith is to be practiced.

Historical

While there were other inventors of radio airwaves before him such as Hans Christian Ørsted (1777-1851), Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) is recognized as the radio's originator (Bathgate, 2020). The invention eventually earned Marconi a Nobel prize (Aranda, 2017, 0:19-0:25/2:58). By 1922 Marconi's ideas had been further explored and radio was born. The use of the invention rapidly spread and soon over 382 radio stations were in operation (Hadden, 1993). Christian leaders quickly captured the radio's significance. While some people argued the radio "would cause a moral corruption of society" (*History Brief*, 2019, 4:48-4:57/5:25), there were those such as Paul Rader (1879-1938), the radio's first preacher, who used the radio airwaves to spread the gospel (Rogers, 2013). Another was Charles Edward Coughlin (1891-1979) known as the radio priest.

In 1926 Coughlin began a radio broadcast offering religious instructions to the children of Catholic families. Many people grasped Coughlin's gospel messages and were eventually dubbed "The Radio League of the Little Flower after his parish church of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan" (Havey, 2013, p. 42). In 1927 television (TV) was invented. This was of

major importance to the Christian faith because putting voice and human form together made the message of the gospel much more impactful and significant (Hilmes, 2020).

Eventually, Fulton Sheen (1895-1979), the first televangelist, began using television to present the word of God (*Time*, 2019) and quickly developed a following “estimated at 30 million” (Havey, 2013, p. 49). By the 1950s, televangelism had become the most common way of hearing and receiving the gospel. Rex Humbard (1919-2007), Oral Roberts (1918-2009), Billy Graham (1918-2018), Jerry Laymon Falwell, Sr (1933-2007), and others helped to create an atmosphere of televised teachings about faith in which in-person forms of gathering and worship were no longer looked upon as an absolute necessity (Smith, 2021a). It was during these times of change that a lack of church participation began to gain momentum. According to Drake (2013, para. 3), “the proportion of Europeans and Americans who [self-identified as] Christian ... dropped from 95% in 1910 to 76% in 2010 in Europe as a whole, and from 96% to 86% in the Americas as a whole.”

As the world continued its never-ending evolution, technological advancements rapidly evolved. In today’s social order technology is so precise that the mere pressing of a computer key almost instantaneously puts one in communication with another person just about anywhere across the globe. This is mainly due to the invention of the online platform (Internet) in 1983 and the introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW) ten years later (1993) giving credence to cyberspace, a term introduced by William Ford Gibson (1948-) in 1982 (Bussell, 2013). According to Mansour (2022, p. 1), “The Internet and cyberspace triggered ... a new phenomenon named digital religion ... Digital religion is a neologism [new word] developed in the last few decades showing how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practices.”

These technological advancements coupled with an ever-growing number of televangelists such as Joyce Meyer (1943-) who claims that in 2021 her ministry brought more than 160,000 people into the Body of Christ worldwide (Meyer, 2021) have made a further contribution to a lack of participation in in-person Christian churches. According to Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021, p. 3), “American Protestant churches declined by 5 million members (i.e., 9.5%) from 1990 to 2000 [and] half the churches did not add new members for two years preceding 2007. The result was the continuous decline of membership.” In the 1990s, some referred to this phenomenon (digital religion) as the cyber church, a term introduced by G. Pascal Zachary (1955-), a technology expert, in 1995 (Warsh, 2000).

By the early 2000s, the concept of the cyber church became known as the online church (Hutchings, 2011), a faith practice rapidly growing in numbers (*Barna*, 2020b). Thus, as research showed, in-person worship appeared to be in a more rapid decline. In 2009 77% of the American population claimed to be Christians but this dropped to 65% by 2019. In contrast, the number of those claiming to be either atheists, agnostics, or having no religious affiliation grew from 17% in 2009 to 26% in 2019 (*Pew*, 2019a). Some may argue, of course, that had it not been for online faith practices the percentage of decline might have been much higher. According to Chilwa (2012, pp. 746-747), “the advantages of online worship appear to outweigh its disadvantages, especially in that it attracts a global audience ... certain church people have had their faith boosted and have become more committed to their churches.”

Sociological

Sociologically, further change related to technology is in the air. Studies have shown that no longer is face-to-face communication essential. Many people prefer to text or email each

other, particularly when it involves pedantic (annoying or boring) discussions, rather than meet and talk about things in person (Licoppe, & Smoreda, 2005; Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). According to one study, people place faith in technology to alleviate social problems in the future claiming that technology has spiritual and supernatural (magical) advantages (Chiluwa, 2012; Cook, 2015). “For instance, Jake,” a study participant, “equated modern technology, such as smartphones, with magic” (Cook, 2015, p. 528).

This appears true for many Christians, including Florida Baptists, who have adopted online worship practices rather than attending an in-person religious service (McKenna, 2022). In Florida, for instance, Midway Baptist Church (<https://www.midwaybaptistonline.org>), Calvary Baptist Church (<https://calvaryonline.com>), Olive Baptist Church (<https://olivebaptist.org>), Palmetto Avenue Baptist Church (<http://churcho palmetto.org/contact-us>), and Landmark Baptist Church (<https://landmarkbaptistchurch.org>) all have online ministry programs. Even childhood Christian education has been affected by current technological developments. In many Christian schools’ technology, for the most part, has moved the teaching of the gospel from classroom-teacher learning to online computerized learning (Smith et al., 2020). For example, Florida Baptist College (<https://www.floridabaptistcollege.com/>), the Baptist College of Florida (<https://www.baptistcollege.edu/>), and Trinity Baptist College (<https://tbc.edu/>) are all spreading the gospel through online education.

Theoretical

There are several theories regarding the lack of participation in the Christian faith. Secularization (a way of thinking that removes faith practices from social and cultural endeavors) appears to be prevalent among them (Fowler et al., 2020). An attempt by some churches to integrate secular ideologies into their faith practices in hopes of curtailing the lack of

church participation has been of no avail (Feitoza, 2021). Despite such efforts, members of the Christian faith have continued to leave the church. Why is this happening? Part of the answer could be found in the realms of diversity. For example, unlike the Church of England which once held social influence (Dixon, 2021), no longer is one specific entity instructing the direction society is to follow.

America is a diverse nation (Fowler et al., 2020) and along with such diversity, a melting pot of cultures is on the boil giving rise to a wide range of faith ideologies. Each new culture brings its traditions, and each tradition has its form of believing in and worshipping. As cultures mix and brew together, new ideologies are born. Such was the case, for example, in Egypt during the rule of the Pharaohs when people from different lands settled along the Nile River eventually integrating with the common Egyptian culture (*Religion in Ancient Egypt*, 2018). Each culture brought with it a different belief and a different form of worship thus accepting and practicing the belief of many gods (Shabka, 2018).

The Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

The researcher has always held the in-person (traditional) form of worship in high regard. There is a warmness, a sense of belongingness, and a profound feeling of faith when gathering as one body for the glory of God. However, based on observations and discussions, the researcher noticed that fellow parishioners were preferring to stay at home and participate online rather than attend an in-person worship service. This knowledge led the researcher to the possibility that technology may be a contributing factor in the current in-person lack of church participation. According to Coetsee (2021, pp. 1-2), "The reasons for the decline in church member numbers in the West are legion. A variety of factors play in on one another, including anti-Christian

sentiment, atheism ..., secularism, pluralism, and relativism; immigration ..., changing attitudes to death and technology.” As a Christian, this in-person change of winds is concerning.

Scripture instructs the faithful to hold on to traditions regarding the word of God (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 11:2), to avoid the traditions of men (Mark 7:6-8), to never conform to the ways of the world (Romans 12:1-2), and to pass on biblical traditions to our children (Deuteronomy 4:9-10). In the United States, the Bible “... has been America’s ... traveling companion ...” (Setzer & Shefferman, 2020, p. 15). The researcher’s unwavering grasp of traditional values that are common among many Christian churches in the United States presented a bias in the study. However, the researcher moved forward with this study with the understanding that a bias can be minimized or eliminated by objectively (accurately/truthfully) looking at and considering the facts of the study rather than personal views and opinions (*Bias*, 2006; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

To present relatable literature, both Liberty University's available academic sources and Google Scholar online databases were considered and searched. While much was written concerning technology and in-person forms of worship (Cones, 2020; Chilwa, 2012; Duff, 2013; Hutchings, 2011; Kawash, 2022; McKenna, 2022; Oliver, 2022), the lack of Christian church participation (*Barna*, 2007; *Barna*, 2009; Bay, 2004; Duke, 2018; Hewitt, 2015; *Pew*, 2019), and the decline in the Baptist faith (Earls, 2020; Hillmore 2022; Moore 2022; Newport, 2021; Pipes, 2019; Shellnutt, 2019a; Shellnutt, 2021; Shellnutt, 2022b; Waters, 2020) no literature was found that addressed the continued lack of in-person and online Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida.

Surmised from the readings, a gap existed in this particular area of research that warranted attention. As will be mentioned later in this writing, the essence of the problem appeared to be that many Christians were and are no longer focused on a biblical existence. Rather, self-preservation and materialism appeared to have become more important than saving one's soul and the attainment of everlasting life in God's kingdom. This seems particularly true in today's health-stricken environments (COVID-19, Mpox) where many in-person forms of gathering have been affected and where secular rules had to be followed for the preservation of life as we know it. As a result, many believers have turned to online faith platforms where it seems the common denominator is that salvation and God's blessings can be delivered via a keyboard and a computer screen (*Barna, 2021*). If continued, this new form of thinking can lead to eradicating the human factor of the Christian faith (*Hutchings, 2007*) where physical hugs, welcoming smiles, warmth, communal prayers, the laying of hands, and brotherly or sisterly love exist.

The online faith explosion, however, is not, as some may think, necessarily due to some evil scheme attempting to destroy Christianity or to creation by atheists wishing to inflict the Christian mind with fabricated unrealities of God (*Boedy, 2018*). While some of this may be true, the upsurge of online faith practices is, for the most part, due to average citizens, Baptists included, who are partaking in a love for technological growth that offers no limited boundaries when it comes to human imagination. For example, on top of everything else (virtual gatherings, handshakes, prayers, communion, and so forth) virtual baptisms appear to be in the future (*Goswami, 2020*). According to *Cockes (2022, para. 1-2)*, "As usage [sic] of digital devices increases, some Southern Baptist leaders are urging Christians to examine ways technology may

be shaping them. ... technology is no longer merely a tool we use, but something that is changing how we view the world.”

It takes one person to convince another that the real path to one’s existence lies within their interpretation of what they have come to believe is real and true (Jeremiah, 2018). The other person proceeds to convince another, who convinces another. Before long, a network of untruths takes root deep in our social fiber providing the possibility that many of those untruths will become part of the social norm (Hutchings, 2007).

Online churches began innocently enough. They were started by church leaders such as Reverend Charles Henderson (Flournoy, 2021) who felt a need to extend past their reach and touch the lives of the lost with the word of God offering support and strength to believers. Online faith platforms rapidly became tools for extending the gospel from the limited reach of in-person communal (local) and domestic (national) ministry to a broad (international) spectrum (Campbell, 2012). According to one study, more than 27 million Christians used the online platform for spiritual reasons (Waters & Tindall, 2010).

So common have these online churches become that many of their platforms appear to be used as launching pads for people to express theoretical, theological, or philosophical opinions. By the commencement of the 21st century, digital religion (the integrating or blending of offline and online religious practices) had been deeply rooted in the technological world (Brien, 2020). This integration or blending has given rise to a new way of considering online faith practices (Campbell, 2012).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches

in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. For this study, the lack of Baptist church participation was generally defined as attending an in-person service 0-1 time per month. The theory guiding this study was Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical framework which focuses on the commonality of experiences. Heidegger believed that to arrive at the essence of a phenomenon a researcher must go through the revisionary process of what Heidegger termed the Hermeneutic Circle. What this briefly means is that as a researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon being studied, he or she must be cognitively flexible enough to revise his or her understanding of the phenomenon as new data about the phenomenon is received. To grasp an understanding of the study as a whole, there must also be an understanding of those smaller parts that play a lesser but possibly significant role in arriving at the whole picture of the study (Peoples, 2017, 12:24-18:55/35:48).

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today's Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida, believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices?

RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

Assumptions and Delimitations

To collect data that would be both well-grounded and trustworthy, the researcher arrived at six research assumptions. First, the researcher assumed that the number of participating church leaders (4) and the number of participating church members (8) sought for the study would sufficiently represent the views and opinions of all the participating churches. Second, it was assumed that English would be the participants' primary language. Third, it was assumed that participants would share their own lived experiences regarding the phenomenon rather than those experiences that may have been shared with them by nonparticipants of the study, such as other church members. To ensure they would provide their own experiences; participants were asked about their experiences with the phenomenon during the screening process (Appendix I).

Fourth, it was assumed that participants, church leaders and church members alike, would provide honest responses to all the interview questions and engage in dialogue with the researcher concerning any views and opinions they may have shared regarding the phenomenon. To encourage their openness, participants were assured that anything they said would be kept confidential. Fifth, it was assumed that, when combined, the elements of the Hermeneutic Circle and the Attribution Theory would prove useful in arriving at the truth(s) surrounding the lack of in-person Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida. Sixth, it was assumed that the computer software (NVivo) used for qualitative research data analysis would be adequate for the study's trustworthiness.

Delimitations of Research Design

The delimitations of this study were as follows:

1. The study was delimited to adult Baptist church leaders and adult Baptist church members (ages 18 and older).

2. The study was delimited to Baptist churches with a congregation of 200 or more members.
3. The study was delimited to Baptist churches which experienced a decline in in-person church attendance within the past five years (2018-2023).
4. The study was delimited to twelve adult Baptist participants (four church leaders and eight church members) who had experienced the phenomenon under study (i.e., a lack of church participation).
5. The study was delimited to participating churches within the geographical area of Seminole County, Florida.

Definition of Terms

Terms defined herein are terms regularly used within the body of this study.

1. *Baptist*. “Since 1644 the name has been applied to those who maintain that baptism should be administered to none, but believers and that immersion is the only mode of administering baptism indicated in the New Testament” (*Baptists*, 2018, para. 1). For this study, a Baptist, is any member of the Baptist faith who professes adherence to Baptist principles and doctrine.
2. *Christian*: For this study, a Christian is a baptized follower of Jesus Christ and a member of the Christian faith who professes belief in God as Father, God as Son, and God as Holy Spirit and lives life according to biblical principles seeking salvation in the kingdom of heaven. According to Diehl (1933, p. 50), “Everyone who has the Spirit of the living Christ is His, is a Christian. All the knowledge that a man needs to make him a Christian is only the knowledge that Christ can and will bestow the Holy Spirit.” However, there are some who would argue that “there is no definition of ‘Christian’ which will satisfy everyone, and probably no definition which would include everyone who calls him or herself a Christian” (Nichols, 2021, p. 1).
3. *Diversity*: Diversity is “an all-inclusive term that incorporates people from many different classifications. Generally, ‘diversity’ refers to policies and practices that seek to include people who are considered, in some way, different from traditional members” (Herring, 2009, p. 209). For this study, diversity is defined as a difference in in-person perspectives concerning faith practices. It must be noted, however, that diversity encompasses a range of definitions depending on how it is being used. The term can be used to identify such social aspects as race, culture, class, gender, faith, sexual orientation, disability, and so forth.
4. *Hermeneutic circle*: For this study. A Hermeneutic circle is a way of conducting a research study by looking at, considering, and analyzing the entire study by holistically considering the sum of all parts. In other words, it is “a process of interpretation in

which we continually move between smaller and larger units of meaning [to] determine the meaning of both” (Gijsbers, 2017, 7:37-7:50/12:04).

5. *Phenomenological*: A form of research that attempts to capture meaning from the experiences of those being studied. “Phenomenological research aims to capture the subjectivity of human experiences by using participants’ terms and frames of reference, distilled into an essence” (Wang, Raja, & Azhar, 2020, p. 339).

Significance of the Study

Interest in conducting this study derived from personal observations of a lack of church participation at this researcher’s church of choice and a host of conversations with fellow parishioners. Several parishioners shared that the church was not what it used to be (whatever that meant) and would prefer participating in worship services while at home. Further inquiry revealed that many of the discontented parishioners were often exploring and participating in online rather than in-person worship services. According to Nortey (2022, para. 7), “a third of U.S. adults (32%) ... [went] to religious services at least once or twice a month. Of these ..., two-thirds (67%) [reported having] attended physically (in person) ..., while 57% [said] they [had] watched services online or on TV ...” Additionally, studies revealed that a lack of church participation was not only local but national and was largely attributed to church leadership ineffectiveness (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Flatt, Haskell & Burgoyne, 2018; Fowler et al., 2020).

However, while ineffective leadership may be a strong contributing factor, secularism appears to be the overwhelming reason why many Christians are leaving the church (Flatt et al., 2018). Studies have shown that Christians are more readily accepting a worldly way of life rather than continuing to follow biblical principles (Hirschle, 2010). It was found, for example, that secular education is directly connected to a lack of interest in religious thinking and church participation (Dilmaghani, 2019; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007).

This study, it is believed, will prove significant for several reasons. First, the study will prove significant to church leaders struggling with a desire to comprehend why parishioners are leaving their churches. Not all church leaders are ineffective, yet their churches lack participation. In this researcher's experience, when church leaders ask congregants about church issues they may be having, congregants rarely tell the whole truth. Thus, learning the exact essence of the problem is seldom accomplished leaving church leaders scrambling in thought.

Second, the study will prove significant to academic administrators. As alluded to, there exists a correlation between academics and a lack of religiosity. By becoming aware of the exact correlation, academic administrators can explore ways to better address matters of faith with their student bodies possibly instilling in them a deeper appreciation of how and why they were created (Genesis 1:26), what it means to be a servant of God (2 Timothy 2:24), and why God instructed humans to be stewards of the earth (Genesis 1:28; 1 Peter 4:10; Titus 1:7).

Third, the study will prove significant to students. Many students make decisions based on peer pressure or a lack of understanding. With all the past and recent scandals involving church leaders such as Theodore McCarrick from the Roman Catholic church (Muth, 2018), Stephen Carl Lentz from Hillsong church (Guthrie, 2021), and Johnny Hunt from the Southern Baptist Convention (Helmore, 2022), current believers, particularly members of Generation Z (Gen. Z) are either questioning or leaving their faith. According to Burge (2021), "In 2016, about 39% of Gen Z were nones. Currently, it's up to 44.4%, with 7% identifying as atheists, 6% as agnostics, and another 31% saying that they are nothing in particular." The possibility, therefore, exists that these leaders' unethical failures have contributed to a negative view of faith and a decline in in-person church participation. Presenting students with the study's findings may provoke a new and more positive perspective.

Fourth, the study will prove significant to organizations, including faith organizations, because there exists an apparent lack of trust (Cheong et al., 2011). According to one study, for example, “religious service attenders [sic] express relatively low levels of trust in clergy to [advise] about social and political issues” (Pew, 2019b, para. 12). Moreover, without trust, there is little improvement in social organizations (Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2021).

Finally, the study will prove significant to other researchers who will review and consider its findings possibly opening doors for further research. According to McDowell (2018, p. 73), there appears to be a “trend in U.S. society in which young people are increasingly wary of associating with organized religion ... and instead see themselves as having more authority over how to create a spiritual experience that feels right to them.” This study sought to explore the current lack of church participation within the Baptist faith in four churches in Seminole County, Florida, to learn the reasons why a lack of participation is still taking place and share its conclusions with whoever may find an interest in its results.

Summary of the Design

In qualitative research, the researcher strives to attain an in-depth understanding of a particular circumstance(s), or phenomenon (Liu, 2021, 2:55-3:05/5:19). The phenomenon being explored in this study is the lack of church participation involving Baptist Christian adults within Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. To accomplish this endeavor, a qualitative phenomenological study design was used. In a phenomenological design, a subject is selected, and data is collected from the participant(s). In gathering this data, interviews were conducted, and observations were made to obtain as much non-numerical data as possible. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. A signed informed consent form was required from each participant, and all

ethical guidelines were followed. Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face session. During the interviews, the researcher actively listened without interrupting the interview process.

Ten open-ended questions were asked designed to draw out a participant's perspective, sentiments, and insights surrounding the phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. During the interviews, the researcher was observing and took notes about actions and behaviors of those things that were not verbalized by research participants but that proved relatable and significant to the outcome of the research. Additionally, in some instances, the researcher was an active participant in some of the interviews in that dialogue, and additional questions sometimes developed during the interview process. For the most part, dialogue, and additional questions were necessary for participant responses to be clearer in their content.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Religiosity appeared to be losing its influence on many people in the United States (Cutright et al., 2014; Duke, 2018) including, with its recent controversies, the Baptist faith (Newport, 2021; Younis 2022). As the literature illustrated, many American Christians (Baptists included) were and are questioning whether they should hold on to a faith practice that seems to be in disarray. Part of the problem seemed and seems to be that some Christian denominational churches, with their theological, and philosophical differences (Newport, 2021), appear engrossed in a tug of faith each proclaiming its dogma to be the way to God's salvation (Kazansky & Trifunović, 2021; Recker, 2022). What seemed to be misunderstood was and is that as church leaders concentrate on ideological differences, God's children start seeking a more suitable church or faith practice in which to worship (McGraw, Peer, & Draper, 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. This chapter consists of a theological framework, a theoretical framework, a related literature section, a rationale for the study, and the gap in the literature.

Theological Framework

Theo and logy come from the Greek words *theós* meaning God and *ology* meaning the study of (Oxford, 2007). Logically, therefore, theology means the study of God. However, no one has ever seen God (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12; 1 Timothy 6:16). How, then, some may wonder, can one study God when, in our human senses, we rely on sight, touch, hearing, smell, or taste to define a studied reality? According to Scripture, God is in all that has been created (Job 12:7-10; Psalm 139:7-12; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Romans 1:20). One, therefore, only needs to study creation

to know that God is real (Theokritoff, 2008; Peterson, 2018). Scripture also tells us that God is faithful and that through faith, we seek God (Hebrews 11:1, 6; Luke 11:10), understand the ways of God (2 Corinthians 5:7; Romans 1:17), and know God (Jeremiah 31:33-34; 1 John 2:3). It would, therefore, not be too farfetched to, in its essence, agree with Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) when he defined theology as “fides quaerens intellectum” or rather “faith seeking understanding” (Tullius, 2015, p. 2). Within the confines of this theological framework, two subsections were presented: Scripture and humanity, and Biblical tradition and faith. Both were presented to illustrate (1) the importance of believing in God, (2) the importance of being human, and (3) the importance of holding on to the biblical ways of our predecessors who believed, endured, and sacrificed for the continuance of the Christian faith.

Scripture and Humanity

Knowing that humans needed guidance and that we would go astray, God selected and inspired some to write. In time a book of instructions, rules, and laws was created. It became known as the Holy Bible (God’s Word). The writing lasted many years. According to Peterson, (2016), the first book of the Bible (Genesis), for example, is said to have been written between 1445-1405 BC, and the last book (Revelations) was written between 94-96 AD. For many, the Bible became a way of life, God’s basic instructions before leaving earth (Amankwah, 2020). Friends and families gathered to learn God’s Word. They taught it to their children, who in turn passed it on to their children. However, many Christians are not reading God’s Word which is, perhaps, one of the reasons why church numbers continue to decline. According to *Barna* (2017), the number of U.S. adults desiring to read the Bible dropped from 67% in 2011 to 61% in 2016. Earls (2019) writes that by 2019 only 32% of Christians were reading the Bible daily

with 27% reading it several times a week, 12% once a week, 11% several times a month, 5% once a month, and 12% rarely or never.

As these percentages illustrate, there are many who, nonetheless, still hold firm to God's Word with the apparent faith and hope that what has been scripturally written is true. But what is faith and what is hope? One of the best definitions is found in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. While the entire chapter is significant, an understanding of faith and hope can be acquired from Hebrews 11:1 where the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 1973/2007). According to Pink (2003), faith works as the persuasive element of hope. Through faith, a believer clasps on to hope with the undeniable belief that what God has said through Scripture will come to pass.

History shows, however, that biblical truth depends on its interpreter. As will be mentioned later in this writing, several schisms within the Christian faith are attributed to ideological differences. One of these differences involved the Baptist believers of England who separated from the Church of England because of the church's acceptance of monarchs (kings) "as representations of God on earth" (Althouse, 2010, p. 178). Eventually, Baptist beliefs were brought across the Atlantic Ocean and proclaimed within the colonies of the United States (Singletary, 2004; Tomlin, 2020).

Briefly, in 1639, after baptizing himself and several others, Roger Williams (1603-1683) established the first Baptist church in the United States (Neff, 1996). It was established on four main principles: adult baptism (as opposed to infant baptism), the proclaiming of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the separation of church and state, and religious liberty (Nash, 2020; Neff, 1996; Mohler, 2020; Singletary, 2004). However, not all Baptists agree. According to Singletary

(2004, p. 84). “Baptist beliefs concerning religious liberty vary from congregation to congregation, and more importantly to Baptists, from individual to individual.”

The Baptist faith holds eight principles: (1) Biblical authority- Scripture has the final word in everything related to faith and practice. (2) The autonomy of the local church-each church answers to God, not to a governmental body. (3) Priesthood of the believer–forgiveness lies solely on Jesus Christ, not on a church leader. (4) Two ordinances (rulings) -communion and baptism (5) Individual soul liberty-a believer is free to believe according to his or her conscience. (6) Saved church membership-all members of the Baptist faith must have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (7) Two offices-the only two offices held in the Baptist church are that of Pastor and that of Deacon. (8) Separation of church and state-church authority is separate from secular authority (Harry, 2019, 9:08-23:12/23:56). As mentioned on page 51, at the time of the study, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was comprised of 47,614 Baptist churches (*Fast Facts*, 2022; Yeats & Yeats, 2022), several of which were located in Seminole County, Florida. Four Baptist churches in Seminole County were the focus of this study.

Biblical Traditions and Faith

In further considering a theological framework, the researcher determined it important to briefly reflect on the influence traditions had on God’s Christians and how faith is currently theologically affected by such traditions. There was a time when biblical traditions and faith worked together for the service of God. While they have, in some respects, continued, biblical traditions appear to be fading (Hughes, 2011); fading, perhaps, because of human progress and change. Refusing to change equates to non-growth which may, in turn, lead to stagnation and, sometimes, death (Deneen, 2020). Take, for example, COVID-19. Upon its arrival, the disease called for immediate and rapid social changes (Gous, 2021). It has been documented that those

who embraced and adapted to the changes (wearing masks, keeping their distance, getting vaccinated) stood (and stand) a better chance of survival than those who refuse(d) to change (Yakusheva et al., 2022).

Despite such drastic social changes and adaptations, however, many traditions continued. In America, for example, people, including some Christians, have risked COVID-19 illness and death to continue celebrating secular rituals such as Independence Day (first celebrated in Philadelphia in 1777), Halloween (1921-Minnesota), Martin Luther King Day (1986-Georgia), and, amongst others, New Year's Eve (153 B.C.-Rome), a tradition that began before the birth of Jesus (*New Year's Day*, 2022). It is worth noting that even though the New Year's Day celebration was started by foes of Christianity (Romans), many Christians celebrate it each year worldwide (*Britannica*, 2003; Brunner, 2021; *New Year's Day*, 2022). This is done despite God's instructions not to partake in the likes of secular customs (Jeremiah 10:2-3).

What this should illustrate to the reader is that regardless of the persistent presence of possible illness and death, people continue to faithfully celebrate secular rituals important to them. Thus, secular traditions will continue to exist irrespective of friend or foe. How much less important, one might ask, are in-person church services, group prayers, communal Christian celebrations, and other in-person biblical faith practices?

For the most part, the Baptist faith does not share such secular views. Baptist believers understand that tradition is an important element of their faith (Nash, 2020). To Baptists, such things as adhering to the word of God, fighting for religious liberty, adult baptism, proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and continuing to struggle for the separation of church and state are traditional practices that must be maintained (Althouse, 2010; Nash 2020; Singletary, 2004). However, the Baptist faith operates on the principle that each church is autonomous and

responsible only to God (Harry, 2019). Thus, sometimes Baptists have differences in views and opinions, particularly over the aspects of modernization. In recounting one incidence, for example, Thompson (2006, p. 28) wrote that “debates broke out between the [Baptist] brethren hoping to retain old traditions and to stand against modernizing forces and those who favored change and modernization in both religion and economics.”

One of the current differences within the Baptist faith is whether to protect or prosecute church leaders accused of sexual abuse allegations (Moore, 2022). Some advocate for the protection of the victims (Shellnutt, 2019b) while others claim the church chose to protect itself (Shellnutt, 2022c). Whether such differences were contributing to a lack of participation in the Baptist churches of Seminole County, Florida, was one of the considerations in this study.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. Despite Baptist leaders' efforts to curtail the continued lack of participation, pews keep emptying. No one knows exactly why. In the theological framework (above) two aspects were considered: Scripture and humanity, and biblical traditions and faith. Together, they endeavored to lay the groundwork for one principal purpose: an eventual understanding of why Baptist church participation is, currently, continuing. In keeping with this foundational base, a theoretical framework is now presented. According to Collins and Stockton (2018, p. 2),

A theoretical framework is the use of a theory (or theories) in a study that simultaneously conveys the deepest values of the researcher(s) and provides a clearly articulated signpost or lens for how the study will process new knowledge. A theoretical framework is at the intersection of existing knowledge and previously formed ideas about complex phenomena.

In keeping with Collins and Stockton's view, the theoretical framework in this study considered possible ways in which the elements of two theories, the Hermeneutic Circle and the Attribution Theory contributed to a better understanding of the lack of participation within the study's participating churches. Together, these two areas of theoretical thinking intertwined and contributed to this study's process, findings, and conclusions. It is important to note, however, that the elements of the Hermeneutic Circle and those of the Attribution Theory were not applied in this study as a theoretical foundation for the study. The elements of both theories were utilized as tools in the analytical process of the study to determine the practical applications of the study.

The Hermeneutic Circle (HC)

Mythically, hermeneutics finds its roots in the Greek language. Hermeneuein means to interpret and hermeneia means interpretation (Freeman, 2008; Heracleous, 2008). It is believed the term itself comes from the Greek god Hermes who was responsible for helping humans understand the messages sent to earth by Zeus-the supreme god (Kerdeman, 2014; Schindler & Schindler, 2000). Thus, hermeneutics can be broadly defined as the theory of interpretation or, as some call it, the hermeneutic interpretative theory (*Hermeneutics theory*, 2006). "Interpretation ... characterizes how human beings naturally experience the world. Realized through our moods, concerns, self-understanding, and practical engagements with people and things we encounter in our sociohistorical contexts, interpretation is an unavoidable aspect of human existence" (Kerdeman, 2014, para 4). Accordingly, the meaning of a phenomenon cannot be attained "simply from the thing [phenomenon] itself. We also have to look at the context in which it was produced and in which we are now trying to make sense of it" (*Hermeneutics*, 2000, p. 142). The phenomenon must be considered from every possible aspect or angle before attempting to arrive at a possible conclusion (*Hermeneutics*, 2000; De Vries, 2013).

Originally, the hermeneutic interpretative theory was used for the interpretation of Scripture such as, for example, a hermeneutical writing on the book of Acts or a hermeneutical interpretation of faith (*Hermeneutics*, 2001; Jeanrond, 2011; Svenaeus, 2012). While it is still used for the evaluation of theological interpretation (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2020) the theory was eventually applied to other areas of research such as biology, chemistry, and physics, as well as anthropology, psychology, and sociology (Jeanrond, 2011; Svenaeus, 2012). According to Schindler and Schindler (2000, para. 1),

Modern hermeneutics participated in epistemological debates and challenged traditional methods for retrieving the ‘true’ meaning of a word, sentence, and [sic] text. By establishing a methodological framework, hermeneutics eventually emerged as a theory: what was traditionally conceived as the art or technique of interpretation transformed into a methodology for the human sciences and into a general philosophy of understanding as well.

Throughout the ages, many scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, who will be mentioned further in this writing, have contributed to the field of hermeneutics. For example, in his hermeneutical analysis Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German priest and initiator of the Reformation, determined that through Scripture God’s word was understandable and not in need of authoritative interpretation such as Catholic church leaders around the time of the Reformation were claiming. According to Kerdeman (2014), “the hermeneutic circle ... became prominent during the Reformation, when Protestant theologians sought to interpret the Bible without appealing to the Catholic Church to determine the meaning of problematic passages or resolve interpretive disputes.” Later, one of Luther’s supporters, Matthias Flacius (1520-1575), a Lutheran theologian, went on to stress the importance of hermeneutics by pointing out the significance of learning and knowing the correct interpretation of Scripture. Flacius’ hermeneutical interpretations further contributed to the theory of hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle (Schindler & Schindler, 2000).

Another contributor to the field of hermeneutics was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a German Protestant theologian. Schleiermacher believed that when conducting a hermeneutical analysis of a written work, the interpreter, essentially, stepped into the writer's shoes in both an objective and a subjective manner (Kerdeman, 2014). Objectively, the hermeneutical interpreter has to become familiar with the writer's vernacular (i.e., his or her writing style, his or her language). Subjectively, the hermeneutical interpreter has to learn as much as possible about the writer not just in a literary sense but in a personal sense (i.e., who he or she is, his or her family, his or her background, his or her lived experiences). In this way, the hermeneutical interpreter can become one with what the writer is conveying and why s(he) is conveying it (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2011). Schleiermacher was a proponent of the hermeneutic circle. He believed "the hermeneutic circle could ensure understanding not only of the Bible but also of all written and oral expressions. Using this method correctly, interpreters could understand the meaning of linguistic expressions better than the authors who produced them" (Kerdeman, 2014, para. 10).

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), a German Protestant theologian and proponent of the social sciences, is also a significant figure in the realm of hermeneutics. "Dilthey thought that human beings express their understanding of life experience in the form of meaningful objects, such as texts, works of art, and various cultural expressions, and that interpreting these meaningful objects is fundamental for maintaining social life" (Kerdeman, 2014, para. 8). Thus, Dilthey believed that historical content was the foundation of meaning in a person's life. Accordingly, to learn of the world and know oneself one has to only take a look at and interpret history. "Interpretation is an [sic] historical activity that has as its object the historically situated life-expressions through which human beings work out their understanding of themselves and

their worlds” (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2011, para. 5). In conducting his hermeneutical interpretations, Dilthey relied on the elements of the hermeneutic circle which supposes that interpretation can best be understood when conducted in a circular motion. For example, Dilthey believed that to properly interpret and understand Scriptural passages (parts of the Bible), the interpreter had to have a grasp of the entire Bible (the whole). The meaning of the Bible, however, could shift as the interpreter considers and analysis the parts (Kerdeman, 2014)

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), a German philosopher, argued that to find meaning in a text a hermeneutical interpretation required a dialogue to develop between the interpreter and the writing being interpreted in which neither, the interpreter nor the writer, is in control and one that changes depending on what each contributes to the dialogue. Thus, the hermeneutical interpretation of a text is forever changing (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2011). So too is the understanding of a text. In hermeneutical interpretation(s), what is understood by one party may be differently understood by the other party. Thus, unless there is a fusion of understanding between the two parties such as interpreter and writer, hermeneutical understanding is forever changing (Kerdeman, 2014). This is what Gadamer calls a difference in horizons. According to Armstrong and Armstrong (2011, para. 12),

Gadamer describes understanding as a historically contingent process whereby the ‘horizons’ of the text and the interpreter meet and interact in potentially unpredictable ways. On the one hand, the text is directed across the horizons of its original situation toward a future of interpretation it cannot fully anticipate or control. On the other hand, interpreters set in motion expectations based on presuppositions that define their historical, social, and cultural situation, and thereby open themselves across their horizons to the possibility of surprising new experiences that may transform their understanding of themselves and their worlds.

In 1927, *Being and Time*, written by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German phenomenologist and philosopher, was introduced to the literary world. Briefly, Heidegger suggested that being, as in human beings, was not correctly understood and that to understand

the concept of being one first had to understand what being was (Bush, 2014; Crowell, 1999; De Vries, 2013). This type of thinking eventually gave rise to the use of what is known as the Hermeneutic Circle. The Hermeneutic Circle entails the understanding of a phenomenon (in this case, the lack of Christian Baptist church participation) by not only looking at the phenomenon in the form of a snapshot (picture) but by considering every element that developed the snapshot itself (*Hermeneutic circle*, 2010; Lengyel, 2018).

Chesterton et al (2021), conducted a phenomenological hermeneutical study in which the elements of the Hermeneutic Circle were used. The study involved the professional accountability of registered nurses as it related to poor managerial support and how the lack thereof affected a nurse's mental and emotional health and performance. As with this study, purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study, and data collection was gathered through the process of interviews. In general, "The findings [suggested] that professional accountability in nursing practice [was] a complex phenomenon, which can be compromised by many factors which are historically, socially or politically driven" (p. 189). However, by using the elements of the hermeneutic circle (i.e., considering the parts of the whole rather than just looking at the whole), the study's findings determined, amongst other things, that nurses were unjustly blamed for aspects of their profession for which they had little control, contributing to poor performance and inadequate patient care.

Through the hermeneutic circle, other themes emerged, which related to, but differed from pre-registration preparation. These included experiences relating to fear and collegiality and participants were unable to explore the 'whole' of their pre-registration preparation without reference to the 'parts' of their experience. Moving from whole to parts [sic] and back again, enabled [a] greater and more coherent understanding of the data and provided a more complete analytical picture. Chesterton et al (2021, p. 192)

Essentially, it is not enough to say that Christian Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida, is lacking due to, as some have deduced, secularization, pluralism, diversity,

and modernization, or because church leadership is ineffective (Fowler et al., 2020; Coetsee, 2021). A researcher must examine the intricacies of each domain to attempt to arrive at the essence and meaning of why the lack of participation is taking place (Spanos, 1976). Thus, elements of the Hermeneutic Circle were used in this study to accomplish such a task (see Analysis Methods, pp. 85-86 for further discussion).

The Attribution Theory (AT)

Attribution can be defined as the process by which people infer the behavior of others or themselves (Kovacs, 2020). “Attribution theory provides the framework necessary to understand how individuals explain why events in their environment happened” (Martinko & Mackey, 2019, p. 523). The Attribution Theory was introduced by Fritz Heider (1896-1988) in 1958. According to Heider, while people may be inexperienced in psychological matters, they nevertheless, whether consciously or unconsciously, act as social psychologists when observing and reaching conclusions about another person’s behaviors (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Heider further postulated that people look at the behavior of others in one of two ways. They either attribute the behavior to internal factors-what is going on inside the person-or to external factors-what is occurring in a person’s surroundings (*Attribution Theory*, 2016). Internal factors are considered dispositional or natural tendencies while external factors are situational or environmental (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Flatt et al., 2018). The elements of the Attribution Theory can be applied to all sorts of human behavior (Murray & Thomson, 2009). For example, Firdausya et al. (2021) conducted a study on longevity and faith. The study involved participants who had lived 100 years or more (centenarians). Participants were asked one principal question: “What is your secret to longevity?” (p. 403). Some participants attributed a long life to a belief in

God and prayer. Others attributed long life to aspects of life other than God. According to Firdausya et al.,

The findings ... illustrated the relevance of faith in patterns of life satisfaction toward the end of life. Centenarians maintaining faith-related attributions experienced an increase in life satisfaction. On the contrary, those with attributions unrelated to faith reported a decrease in life satisfaction. (p. 407)

As understood, what this study illustrates is the possibility that people attribute their behavior or the behavior of others according to their surroundings or how they feel about their present situation (Flatt et al., 2018).

One of the most significant aspects of the Attribution Theory, and one of the reasons for its use in this study, is its all-inclusive perspective. Despite profession, academic standing, economic status, cultural background, or faith practice, we are all involved in this never-ending circle of judgment. In Judaism, for example, every male worshipper must wear a kippah-head covering-(Juhasz, 2013) and in the Islamic faith, anyone entering a mosque must remove their shoes (*Where Muslims worship*, 2008). Regardless of the reason, not following the ordinance is considered a sign of disrespect (*Formal Prayer*, 2004; Juhasz, 2013) exposing a violator to snappy judgments and ridicule.

Using a kippah while worshipping is not written in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) nor the Talmud (the rabbinic book of Jewish law). The kippah became obligatory only after much debate (*Head-covering*, 1997; Juhasz, 2013). On the contrary, despite being written in the Holy Qur'ān-Sūrah 20 Ṭā Hā 14 (Ali, 1979, p. 767) removing one's shoes was not the norm during the early stages of the Islamic faith. Washing over one's foot coverings was sufficient, and it was only after much debate that the removal of footwear becomes mandatory (Yalçın, 2019). Importantly, the removal of footwear before entering holy ground is also written in the Christian Bible (Exodus 3:5; Joshua 5:15). "Here the shoe partakes of the character of the

profane, symbolizing the Earthly in contrast with the Holy. Removing the shoes signifies putting off something profane, obligatory upon those who approach the Holy” (Nacht, 1915, p. 1).

Like in the Jewish and Islamic faiths, Christians also judge other Christians (Johnson, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2019; Waters, 2020). A parishioner, for example, may attend services, looking rather shabby (unshaved, uncombed, wrinkled clothes). Upon entering the church, other worshippers (especially those who have never seen the parishioner) are quick to judge, often making the parishioner feel unwelcome and unloved. Unbeknown to those who judged, the parishioner may have awoken late and rushed to church causing him or her to neglect their appearance. Thus, an inaccurate and unfair judgment or attribution has been made about the parishioner’s person and character. “These man-made rules (social norms adopted by the Christian subcultures) may be the things that get in the way the most for the churches who want to influence people from their host communities to become church attendees” (Waters, 2020, p. 60).

According to one study, 87% of those surveyed believed that Christianity is overly judgmental (*Barna*, 2007) possibly contributing to the lack of church participation which currently stands at 63% (Smith, 2021b). Except for righteous judgments (Leviticus 19:15; James 4:11; Deuteronomy 1:16; Matthew 7:15-20), many Christians who judge others negate God’s instructions. Jesus instructs followers not to judge by appearances (John 7:24). Judgments, Scripture teaches, should be left to God (James 4:12) because as followers judge others so too will they be judged (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37).

Another significant aspect of the Attribution Theory and a second reason for its importance is the concept of biases. As defined, a bias is any element in the research process (instrument, methodology, sampling procedure, researcher’s personal views) that may tilt, slant,

twist, slope, or tip the research findings one way or the other (*Bias*, 2006). This is something Heider warns about. Research findings, Heider noted, that have been influenced by biases are not valid (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Of course, in keeping with the concept of the Attribution Theory, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to be completely unbiased. Nevertheless, “the researcher must make every effort to eliminate or minimize distortion [bias] in the research process” (*Bias*, 2006, para. 2).

Part of the purpose of this study was to make a concerted effort to arrive at the truth as to why Baptist Christians in Seminole County, Florida, are continuing to leave the church. The researcher believes that when asked why they are leaving the church, Baptist parishioners, out of fear of disappointing church leaders and fellow congregants, are not being completely honest. Honest responses to such questions may shed a brighter light on the current lack of church participation within the Baptist faith. The elements of the Attribution Theory are designed to accomplish this result and, in conjunction with the elements of the Hermeneutic Circle, were used as tools during the interview process to arrive at a better sense of truth (see Analysis Methods, pp. 85-86 for further discussion).

Theoretical Analytical Process

Each developed theme in this study was considered and analyzed through a two-phase theoretical process involving the combined elements of two theories: the Hermeneutic Circle (HC) and the Attribution Theory (AT). Individually, each theory considers the parts of a whole before concluding the whole. For example, in their interviews, some study participants claimed their church was not correctly teaching biblical principles (see Improper Teachings, RQ2 Theme 2, pp. 122-125). In considering the claim (the whole) it was important to look at the reasons (the parts) leading to the claim(s) before arriving at some sense of truth.

Hermeneutic Circle (HC)

In the meaning of its whole, not correctly teaching biblical principles can mean different things to different people depending on who is interpreting. The whole could mean the church is not following God's instructions (a part). It could also mean the church's leadership body is not proficient in biblical interpretation (a part) or that the gospel message is being delivered in a way that is beyond the average parishioner's level of understanding (a part). Working in a back-and-forth circular motion, HC considered the possible meaning(s) of the parts concerning the whole and the whole concerning the parts until all possible meaning(s) were exhausted. Once the process was complete and a possible truth derived, the theme was taken through its second phase of interpretation: the Attribution Theory.

Attribution Theory (AT)

Like that of the HC process, AT considered the internal and external factors (the parts) of the behavior (the whole) before concluding. AT examined the assumptions people made based on what they saw and how they judged the behavior (*Attribution theory*, 2016; Murray & Thomson, 2009). According to Murray and Thomson (2009, p. 98),

Theories of attribution differentiate between causal factors, both internal and external to an individual's behavior ... That is, where an internal attribution is applied to behavior; the individual is considered to be in control or responsible for the outcome. Where an external attribution is applied, a situational or environmental factor out with [sic] the individual's control is considered to be responsible for the outcome.

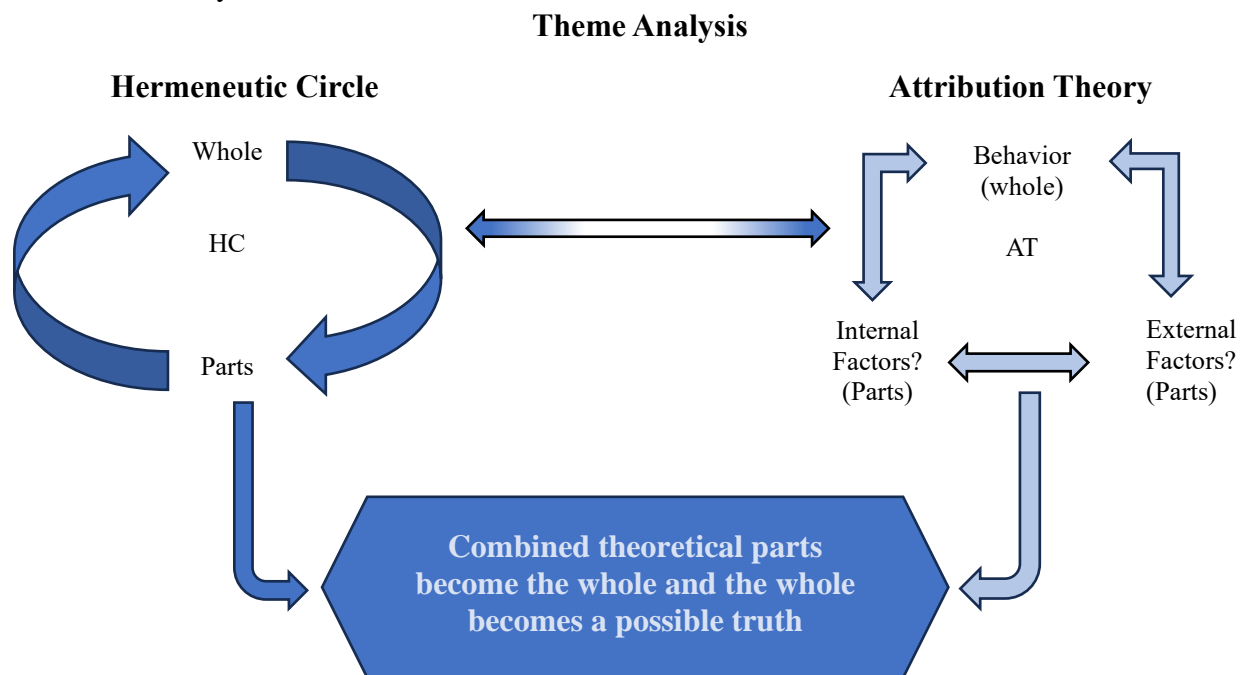
Consider HC's example (the claim that some churches were not correctly teaching biblical principles). The behavior (leaving the church) could have been due to internal factors (how the person was feeling or thinking) or external factors (what was going on in the person's surroundings). Study participant(s) might have made this claim based on what they saw and the judgments they made at the time. Perhaps the study participant(s) attended a Bible study or a

worship service in which not many congregants participated. Perhaps the church's doors were not opened as often as the participant(s) would have liked. Maybe the participant(s) needed pastoral care, and none was available.

Based on any one of these possible factors, the participant(s) might have assumed and judged that the church was not correctly teaching biblical principles. A close look at the study's data revealed that the reason why parishioners were probably not attending Bible studies or worship services was because of COVID-19. As found, many parishioners were afraid of the possible effects of the disease and stayed away from in-person gatherings. Governmental mandatory shutdowns were, at one time, also in place. Many churches could not or would not open their doors as usual. To reiterate, AT looked at each theme as a whole, considered its parts, compared its preliminary conclusion with HC's preliminary deduction, and (as Figure 1 illustrates) only then was a possible truth determined.

Figure 1

Theoretical Analytical Process



Summary

In this theoretical framework, two theoretical processes were considered: the Hermeneutic Circle and the Attribution Theory. While each theory may be considered different from one another, they were, nevertheless, determined to work conjunctionally on one significant aspect related to this study. Using them as research tools in the analytical process, both theories considered the parts of each of the study's themes rather than just the whole of each of the themes. The researcher believed that working together, these two theories offered a better perspective on the reasons for the continued lack of church participation within the participating churches.

Related Literature

Thus far in this literature review, a theological framework and a theoretical framework were considered. The theological framework was developed to present how Scripture and this study interrelated. The goal of the theoretical framework was to present possible ways in which the elements of two theories (the Hermeneutic Circle and the Attribution Theory) may help to provide a better understanding as to why the lack of Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida, is continuing.

As the researcher will show later in this writing, the lack of participation in Christian churches was neither confined to the geographical boundaries of the United States, a particular age group, a specific culture, or a distinctive denomination or faith practice. According to Jones (2021, para. 1), "In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999." It could, therefore, be said that a lack of faith participation is a worldly concern. The related literature section that follows presents three studies. The first study involves Australia's Generation Y (Gen. Y). The second study concerns

an online ministry church effort in South Seattle, Washington. The third study considers the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the State of Florida. All three studies, the researcher believed, were directly or indirectly related to this phenomenological study.

Generation Y

Between 2016 and 2018 Bohr and Hughes conducted a study surrounding church participation. The study took place in Australia involving Christian participants from Gen. Y (people born between 1982-1998) who regularly attended worship services at the Hillsong Church (established in 2018) and other Pentecostal churches. It was a mixed-methods study gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Participants from diverse backgrounds, gender inclusiveness (male and female), and dissimilar geographical locations (living in different Australian states) were sought. A total of 343 participants were surveyed with 55 of them interviewed. However, the results of the study were based on only 75 participants, all of whom belonged to the Pentecostal faith out of which only 14 attended the Hillsong Church. The study's purpose was to determine what factors were causing young Christian adults (ages 18-34) to leave the church or the faith altogether.

According to Bohr and Hughes, the Pentecostal faith in Australia noticeably flourished between 1976 and 1996. This was to be expected since "one Pentecostal scholar, Barry Chant, predicted in 1984 that, based on this rate of growth, the [Australian] Pentecostal churches would have a million attendees by 2001" (Borh & Hughes, 2021, p. 11). This prediction, of course, was not realized. On the contrary, in 2001 Australian Pentecostal church attendance began to dwindle. The study attributed several factors to the lack of participation. Prevalent amongst them was the overwhelming interest in the aspects of secularization (i.e., identification with a materialistic worldview), and an affirmation of religious individualization (i.e., that the belief in

God was a personal rather than an institutionalized religious choice). Six main issues were identified as contributing to the lack of church participation.

1. Study participants felt they could no longer agree with the principles of the Christian faith as postulated (claimed) by their church. To them, the church no longer held the absolute right to human values and moral standards. According to one participant, “For several years, I still believed in the Christian God, but could not understand how it was possible to love Him when there was the ultimatum (love me or go to hell) [attitude of the church]” (Bohr & Hughes, 2021, p. 20).
2. Study participants either had unfavorable encounters with or lost full trust in their church. Often, parishioners were shunted away by other parishioners or church leaders because of an opposing view. According to one participant, “There needs to be a little more openness. Just because you think that something about another thing isn't that bad, it doesn't make you any less Christian or any less a faithful servant to God” (p. 22)
3. Study participants felt their church leaders were narrow in scope and fake in their leadership. In speaking about a church leader, one participant shared that the church leader, was not okay with Muslims or with gay people. “I just find her very narrow-minded ... I want to be the opposite ... I want to be accepting [sic] of everyone ... I want everyone to be able to have their own beliefs” (p. 23). Another participant, concerning the Hillsong Church, commented that she “thought people were fake and I didn't have a good personal experience. I didn't want to be part of it” (p. 23).
4. Study participants felt judged by other parishioners about their personal beliefs. One participant who had left the church decided to return only to be looked upon and judged as a backslider. Other “participants had issues with the ways the churches handled

situations such as same-sex marriage, which led to them feeling judged even if the churches had not explicitly taken up the issue with them” (p. 24).

5. Study participants felt their church did not provide sufficient openness and dialogue regarding matters of congregational importance. “I believe that there are too many rules,” one participant said, “that restrict people from entering the faith or relating to the people of faith, most of the people with uninformed opinions or secluded views on life” (p. 24).
6. Study participants believed their life experiences led them away from their church. “A compounding factor for these participants ... was the social connections that they had formed outside the church. Due to the churches’ social connections not being as strong, [they] ended up leaving the church” (Bohr & Hughes, 2021, p. 25).

Gender inequality (discrimination on the bases of sex), dogmatism (proclaiming an opinion as fact), and marginalization (denying access to certain people or groups) were also some of the findings leading to a lack of participation in the Hillsong Church and other Australian places of worship. Bohr and Hughes, however, concluded, in part, that the participants’ illustrated reasons for the lack of church participation demonstrate the growth of social changes, and a desire, for Christian individualization. They pointed out,

While some people had moved to identify themselves as having 'no religion', many others continued to describe themselves as 'Christian' but did not wish to associate themselves with a particular denomination or tradition. To that extent, the movement cannot be identified simply as a process of secularization. People are not necessarily giving up all that is spiritual. Many still regarded the Christian faith as providing some important keys to morality and life. (Bohr & Hughes, 2021, p. 26)

Online Ministry

The beginning of online ministry is attributed to Reverend Charles Henderson, a Presbyterian, who in 1994 established the First Church of Cyberspace (Hutchings, 2011). Since then, many online ministries have been started. One of them was initiated by the Sunrise Church.

In 2021 Daniel E. Bagaas conducted a study involving the Sonrise Church, its congregants, and the general public. The study's purpose was to determine whether the church's online platform was sufficiently attracting members and non-members of the church with the gospel of Jesus. The Sonrise Church was founded in the late 1970s (more than 50 years ago) in South Seattle, Washington. The church has a multi-ethnic congregation consisting mostly of Caucasian Americans and Cambodian American immigrants. The Sonrise Church had always enjoyed a modest number of adherents (about 100). Over the years, however, the number had decreased and at the time of the study, less than 25 congregants remained (Bagaas, 2021).

Believing in the potentiality of online platforms and tools, Sonrise Church began to explore the possibility of going digital. "Online tools are understood as anything that can be utilized by the church to migrate its ministry ... any social media platform, such as Facebook or Instagram, and the church's website, could be referred to collectively as online tools" (Bagaas, 2021, p. 11). Sonrise established its Facebook page in 2010. This effort was well-intended but unengaging. Facebook views were, at best, sporadic. Continuing its efforts to spread the gospel by way of the World Wide Web (WWW), Sonrise established its "website in 2016 which, for the most part, provided information about the church (Bagaas, 2021).

During the onset of COVID-19, social restrictions were imposed preventing the Sonrise Church, like others, from any congregational gatherings and worship services. Endeavoring to continue the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), the Sonrise Church began attempts to spread the gospel via its online platforms. To the Sonrise Church, a community of believers is not only physical it is also metaphysical (transcending) and, therefore, able to rise above its brick-and-mortar presence through whatever means are available.

According to Bagaas (2021, p. 1), “In modernity, one way that the church can be more adaptable and transcend the physical that will assist it in remaining relevant as it continues to pursue the *Missio Dei* ... is that of the digital landscape, specifically online platforms ...” However, the online platforms and tools employed by the Sunrise Church bared little fruit amongst members of the congregation. Despite the church’s efforts to stay connected during a time of social distress (COVID-19), only six members of the church’s congregation embraced or took part in Sunrise’s online ministry. Study findings determined, however, that one of the reasons why more congregants did not participate in the church’s website and online ministry was because of a lack of language support for the Cambodian members of the congregation (Bagaas, 2021, p. 111).

Nonetheless, the study also found that Sunrise’s website and Facebook page were visited by non-congregational Christians in the general public. “Overall, there appeared to be an upward trend in public engagement on the Facebook page, demonstrating that the advertising and invitations to individuals to like the page was creating a larger virtual audience for the church on the page” (Bagaas, 2021, pp. 113-114). At the time of the study, the Sunrise Church had resumed its in-person worship services but continued its attempts to spread the gospel online.

Study data involving the general public were collected by way of two separate surveys. Both surveys were conducted within the United States. They included culturally diverse, gender-inclusive (male and female) adults 18 years and older from varying economic levels. Each survey contained ten questions. Survey one collected data from 92 out of 100 participants who attended church and identified as Christians. In part, the results showed that “combined, 91 percent [of participants] indicated they were either watching, reading, or studying Christian

content online between 1-10 hours a week” (Bagaas, 2021, p. 91). Additionally, 87% said that online ministry is vital, and 80% shared that “online ministry needs to be pursued” (p. 92).

Data from survey two were collected from 103 participants from the general population who “did not attend church” (p. 92). In part, the results showed that 74% of participants were not interested in online religious worship. However, 59% shared that if they were interested, “... they would prefer to participate in an online religious discussion ...” (Bagaas, 2021, p. 93). Moreover, 66% of participants said their relatives and friends would be more comfortable visiting a church’s website to learn about Christianity. Based on these findings, the study, in part, concluded that “there appears to be great potential for local churches to engage and help their congregants grow more if they would provide their congregants with a robust and active online ministry”. (Bagaas, 2021, p. 95).

SBC Florida Churches

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) representing 47,614 member churches is headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee (*Fast Facts*, 2022; Yeats & Yeats, 2022). SBC has over 13, 680, 493 adherents (Yeats & Yeats, 2022) making it the largest Christian Protestant denomination in America (Yang, 2022; Hilmore, 2022). In recent years, however, church participation has been dwindling (Shellnutt, 2019a; Shellnutt, 2020; Shellnutt, 2021; Shellnutt, 2022b).

In 2020 Jason R. Waters conducted a qualitative focus group multiple case study identifying issues surrounding church attendance at SBC churches in the State of Florida. The study assumed that SBC Florida churches wanted to spread the gospel, that believers who had stopped attending were still full of hope and a search for meaning, and that hope and meaning among those who had parted with their churches could have been found in the gospel of Christ.

Endeavoring to research these suppositions, Waters focused on SBC churches with an attendance rate of 300 to 1000 members (medium size churches) that had experienced a 20% decline in attendance within the previous four years.

Following a search for SBC churches meeting this criterion, four were selected for the study. The four focus groups (FG) deriving from these selected churches were presented with five research questions (RQ1-5). Each RQ was designed to answer a particular research concern. Briefly, RQ1 sought to find the degree of church awareness concerning the needs of the community, RQ2 the degree of church awareness regarding community member values, RQ3 whether church members had the skills necessary to effectively lead members of the community into the church, RQ4 focused on the effect church ministries were having in the community, and RQ5 sought to find church ministries that would best minister to the people in the community. The study hoped that through its findings, churches could come to know their flaws and decide to strengthen their mission in the great commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

According to Waters, SBC churches' missing the mark in their spread of the gospel was not due to a lack of love, schisms within the church, or ineffective leadership per se, rather it appeared that SBC Florida churches no longer understand how to best spread the gospel to members of their communities. Thus, a lack of church participation continued to rise. New cultures, according to the study, were continually entering Christian church communities and as new cultures become a part of the Christian faith, they brought with them new modes of thought, change, and a demand for their needs to be met. When their needs were not met, they sought change in other communities of faith or left the faith altogether.

To possibly stop or decrease the exodus from their churches, SBC church leaders learned how to better address the changing concerns of their communities. "One of the roles of the

church then is to understand the reality of its surrounding community and apply corresponding Bible references to best lead others to Christ as the best answer” (Waters, 2020, p. 31). Waters adds that to successfully spread the gospel the church becomes part of the community rather than treat the community as a separate entity from the church.

In its conclusions, the study found that (1) Participating churches understood and were aware of the needs of the community, took steps to address community needs, and solved whatever community issues they could solve. (2) Participating churches appeared to know the values of the community. The most significant community value was family relationships followed by “financial stability, faith, education, health/wellbeing, enjoyment of life, job/career, materialistic wants, and hobbies” (Waters, 2020, p. 161). It is worth noting, here, that faith occupied third place in the study’s list of values. (3) Participating churches strove to bring the gospel to members of the community wherever they were, and (4) Keeping with Scripture, participating churches modified their ministries to bring people to church and possibly stop believers from leaving their churches. This effort, in part, proved fruitful. Many people entered SBC churches and heard the gospel but did not stay long or commit themselves to the faith.

The study’s findings illustrate four things regarding Baptists in the State of Florida: (1) SBC churches are continually striving to spread the gospel and meet the needs of their communities, (2) Despite their efforts, as shown in some of the literature (*Fast Facts*, 2022; Helmore, 2022; Shellnutt, 2022b; Yang, 2022; Yeats, & Yeats, 2022), a lack of church participation continues, (3) For whatever reason, many people have a lack of interest in becoming part of the Body of Christ, and (4) A believer’s reasons for leaving the church and a nonbeliever’s reasons for not becoming part of the faith are inconclusive.

To move beyond this study and explore other possible reasons for a continued lack of church participation, Waters recommends that further research be completed in three areas: (1) The aspects of life's enjoyment. According to Waters (p. 132), "Enjoyment of life came up often and was also regularly intertwined with conversations around faith, family, career advancement, and hobbies." (2) How churches perceive their communities, and (3) What are members of the community getting from church participation as opposed to not participating.

Rationale for the Study and Gap in the Literature

As the above-related literature studies illustrated, much needed to be considered when exploring and attempting to understand why a lack of Baptist in-person church participation has continued and why a rise in Baptist online church participation is taking place in Seminole County, Florida. All three studies showed that a social movement was and is taking place involving Christians, faith ideological differences, and technological advancements. It appears that the more technologically advanced a society becomes, the more different ideologies are embraced. The following section will present the rationale for the study and what gap(s) exist in the literature that may warrant further study in this area of research.

Losing the Faith

Preliminary study research showed that more and more Christians in the United States appear to be losing their faith or, at the very least, seeking faith elsewhere. Studies show that between 2007 and 2021 the number of adults affiliated with the Christian faith has decreased from 78% to 63%, that those identifying with other faith practices has increased from 5% to 6%, and that those claiming no religious affiliation increased from 16% to 29% (Smith, 2021b). While these percentages reflect a lack of Christian church participation within the United States, the same appears true in other parts of the world. For example, in Sweden and the Netherlands,

60% of the people have no religious affiliation, in England 50%, and in Germany 40% (Simsek et al., 2018). According to Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021, p. 2), as a whole “Western countries comprise 77.7% of global reduction [in the Protestant faith], while the other parts of the world, combined, indicate a reduction of 22.3%.”

From a biblical worldview, these numbers are a bit concerning. Worldwide, “the total number of religiously unaffiliated people (which includes atheists, agnostics and those who do not identify with any religion in particular) is expected to rise ... from 1.17 billion in 2015 to 1.20 billion in 2060” (Duke, 2018, p. 27). This includes members of the Baptist faith. According to some studies, between 2007 and 2014 participation in the Baptist faith decreased from 26% to 21% (Fahmy 2019), in 2017 the Baptist faith closed its doors to 291 missions (Pipes, 2019), and has lost more than a million members within the past three years (Shellnutt, 2022b).

To reiterate, when asked, many Baptists are, perhaps, not completely honest about their reasons for leaving their places of worship. They appear to quickly place the cause on such things as modernization, ineffective church leadership, scandals, Scriptural differences, or a host of other reasons but seldom seem to tell the whole truth (Duin & Duin, 2013). The researcher contends that by using the combined elements and principles of the Hermeneutic Circle and the Attribution Theory a more insightful truth can be attained amongst members of the Baptist faith in Seminole County, Florida.

Yesteryear’s Church Crisis

It is a well-known belief that the first Christian church was established on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47). Afterward, believers prayed together, functioned as one body, began spreading the gospel, were recognized as Christians, persecuted, and martyred (Henry, 2017;

Willmington, 1984). It can be correctly concluded, therefore, that the Christian church has been in crisis since its inception (or since Jesus began His ministry, some might argue).

History illustrates that some of the crises were due to ideological differences. In the Catholic faith practice, for example, there was a disagreement with the giving of the Eucharist. Some believed unleavened (unraised) bread should be used for communion while others argued that leavened bread was most appropriate. Some also believed a priest should marry while others felt a priest should take a vow of lifelong celibacy (Herbst, 2016). Eventually, these and other differences led to the schism of 1054 establishing the Roman Catholic church in the West and the Orthodox church in the East (*Schism*, 2017).

Another schism took place in 1517 (almost 500 years later). It began when Martin Luther (1483-1546), a Catholic priest, found himself protesting the practice of good works. Essentially, the Catholic Church promoted the belief that if believers did good things for the church, God would recognize their efforts, and their salvation would be guaranteed. Martin Luther disagreed professing that the effort to do good deeds to attain salvation was wrong and that God would not recognize their works but instead consider it a form of sin (Keen, 2005). To Martin Luther, salvation came by faith alone, not through works nor through the purchase of indulgences (a written church document that presumably reduced punishment upon death) which the Roman Catholic church sold (Luther, 1987; Luther, 2001). These and other differences led to the start of the Reformation movement (1517-1555) which established the Protestant faith.

The Protestant faith eventually led to a host of denominational practices, one of which was Anabaptism. Essentially, Anabaptists rejected communion and infant baptism. They believed baptism should be done after a person is an adult and only following a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. For this, the Anabaptists were greatly persecuted

(Patterson, & Yarnell, 2013; Whiting, 2012). The Baptist faith practice finds its origin in the Anabaptist faith of the Reformation movement (Gordon, 2016) and still practices adult baptism.

Today's Church Crisis

Misunderstood by many, Jesus was questioned, taunted, hunted, arrested, beaten, and eventually crucified (Mark 15). Contrary to popular belief, some people have argued that Jesus was not real and that the crucifixion never happened (Ahmad, 2012; Jordan-Wolf, 2022; Khan, 2020). Such claims make one wonder whether Christians today are still willing to suffer and possibly die for the faith. The answer is an undeniable yes. According to Curry (2021, p. 3), "More than 340 million of our Christian brothers and sisters live in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination." Persecution, however, is not the only contributing factor to the church's current crisis.

Currently (almost 500 years after the Reformation movement) the Christian faith is, once again, being affected by ideological differences. Some, for example, are questioning the image and gender of God (Deguara, 2018; Parsell et al., 2021), others are debating over the concept of holiness (Bay, 2004; Murphy, 2020), issues of pedophilia (Alexander, 2018; McPhillips, 2016), and the influence of online churches (Cooper et al., 2021; Harwig, Roeland, & Stoffels, 2018). As a result, while many Christians hold firm in the faith, some wonder whether Christianity is a belief worth holding onto preferring to find other forms of worshipping. The Baptist faith is no exception.

A not-so-distant issue facing the Baptist faith surrounds the efforts of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus community (LGBTQ+) to be included in worship services. Members of the LGBTQ+ community are often made to feel different by fellow Christians or ostracized from church participation altogether (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2021; Platt,

McCown, & Szoka, 2021). According to one study, in 2014 30% of Baptists felt members of the LGBTQ+ community should be accepted while 63% disagreed. The remainder (7%) was either neutral or undecided (*Pew*, 2022b). The Baptist faith has also been plagued by sexual abuse scandals and critical race theory allegations (Fahmy, 2019; Helmore, 2022; Lexington, 2022; Newport, 2021). Akin to what happened with the Catholic church's sexual abuse scandals that caused millions to part with the faith (Lexington, 2022) there will possibly be an exodus of believers from the Baptist faith as well (Cressler, 2022).

The Gap in the Literature

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. To accomplish the endeavor several literature sources surrounding the lack of participation in the Christian faith (including the Baptist denomination) were reviewed and considered. The literature sources covered many of the possible reasons why Christians have either given up on their faith, stopped attending church, or are seeking a faith practice elsewhere.

In reviewing the literature, similar themes emerged concerning a continued lack of church participation. Some pointed to a lack of evangelism. According to the studies, churches were not concentrating on spreading the gospel beyond their congregations (Dandridge, 2020; Mars, 2017). One study concluded that “[a] common pattern that all the pastors shared were [that] they each loved to preach about Jesus but, [except for] one, had yet to focus on witnessing” (Dandridge, 2020, p. 69).

Other themes showed a lack of community missionary work (Dandridge, 2020; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Mars, 2017), “A church,” one study shared, “that does not participate

actively in its community by reflecting Jesus' character, has ceased to practice its faith" (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021, p. 8). There appeared to also be a failure in biblical education. Bible studies are failing in their efforts to impress upon participants the essential elements for developing a healthy biblical worldview (Harris et al., 2020b; Mars, 2017). As a result, there is no spiritual maturity (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Son, 2018) nor the understanding that for God to save the church, believers must humble themselves before God, pray to connect with God, repent for their sins, seek God with all their mind, heart, and soul, and obey God without question (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Mars, 2017).

According to several literary studies (Barrow, Dollahite, & Marks, 2021; Brien, 2020; Flatt et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; Mars, 2017; Son, 2018), several other factors appear to be contributing to a continued lack of participation within the Christian faith. They include:

- (1) A failure of parents to teach the gospel to their children. It was found that most parents agree with the importance of their role in teaching the principles of faith to their children. However, "although parents expressed many reasons why it was important to them that their children follow in their faith, they also acknowledged that the choice to do so was a decision only their children could make" (Barrow et al., 2021, p. 227).
- (2) Technological advancements such as the internet, online churches, and Facebook. For example, "In the United States, early studies showed that 40% of regular worshippers [had] replaced church attendance with online services instead" (Brien, 2020, p. 244).
- (3) A lack of role models. The "findings support the fact that lousy role modeling can be the cause of the decrease in church participation and attendance among the youth" (Jones, 2020, p. 30).

- (4) No sense of church belongingness. According to Harris et al. (2020b, p. 47), “individuals who don’t identify strongly as members may not feel a sense of belongingness or may feel they lack an emotional connection and influence with other community members.”
- (5) Secularism. “Churches have attempted to adopt and implement secular properties within their organizations; however, membership numbers continue to decline across the nation” (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 210). According to another study, in-person churches no longer relate to today’s youth nor offer useful benefits in someone’s life’s journey (Harris, 2020).

While all the above findings are significant, the most prevalent factors for a past and contemporary lack of church participation, appear to be (1) unfriendly and unaccepting church environments (Flatt et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Son, 2018) and (2) ineffective church leadership (Dandridge, 2020; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Flatt et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Son, 2018). “They [church leaders] are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty. When all a church does is preach to its members and fellowship amongst themselves this objective fails” (Dandridge, 2020, p. 69).

The literature reviewed illustrated that additional studies were needed to explore other possible causes for the lack of church participation giving rise to the existence of a gap in the literature. One study, for example, recommended better theories (Jones, 2020). Others pointed out that their studies needed the inclusion of different churches, a more gender-inclusive group, and participants from a more culturally diverse background (Dandridge, 2020; Jones, 2020). Finally, Florida is home to more than 21 million residents (*Unites States Census*, 2021) out of which 70% are Christians, 6% non-Christians, and 24% are unaffiliated or nones (*Pew*, 2022a). Seminole County, Florida, where this research study was conducted, has a total population of

470, 856 (Pew, 2020) with a 41.2% religion rate and a host of denominational churches (Seminole, 2021) many of which are of the Baptist faith. The Seminole Baptist Association (SBA), for example, has 11 member churches. While some studies related to the lack of Baptist church participation have been conducted in the State of Florida (Earls, 2020; Waters, 2020), none have been specifically directed toward the lack of Baptist church participation in Seminole County. This study endeavored to add to the literature.

Conclusion

In this literature review a theological framework, a theoretical framework, related literature, a rationale for the study, and the gap in the literature were considered. Together they presented the necessary elements to proceed with a research study exploring the reasons why a lack of church participation in the Baptist faith has continued until the current day. With its current ideological differences (LGBTQ+) and scandals (sexual abuse, matters of race), the Baptist faith appeared to be in peril. Baptist Christians continue to question their faith, leave their places of worship, disaffiliate themselves from their belief, or seek a different religious practice. Through its findings and conclusions, this qualitative research study endeavored to recommend to church leaders and others how a solution to the current lack of church participation may be possible.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Every methodology is different depending on the type of study being conducted.

“Methodology refers to the set of rules and principles that guide the investigation of a research topic” (*Methodology*, 2001, para. 1). This past undertaking was a qualitative phenomenological research study. The purpose of this research study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. This chapter commences with a research design synopsis followed by the research problem, research purpose statement, research questions, research design and methodology, research setting, research participants, the role of the researcher, research ethical considerations, research data collection methods and instruments, research analysis methods, the research’s trustworthiness, and a chapter summary.

Research Design Synopsis

Qualitative research can be classified as a narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, case study, or phenomenological research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). For this study, a qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized. In a phenomenological research design, the research data is based on the lived experiences of people involved in a phenomenon. There are many aspects and levels of a qualitative research study. Observations made during the study, therefore, cannot be shortened or measured. Rather, they must be depicted as they appear (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). That is to say that in a qualitative phenomenological study rather than studying the phenomenon as a whole every element of the phenomenon is considered before conclusions are reached.

Research Problem

Since the 1990s, or earlier, when the World Wide Web was first introduced in 1991 (Pourret, Dasapta, & Tennant, 2020), a battle has been taking place between Christian in-person and online ideologies (Hutchings, 2007). The latter is continually being embraced by many Christians possibly causing a lack of participation in in-person forms of worship (Hewitt, 2015). No one knows exactly why this is taking place. Heterogeneity (diversity) within the faith and a lack of interest by current younger generations are two of the claims being made (Saiya & Manchanda, 2021; Thumma, 2021). It appears more likely, however, that secularism is a major player in this continuing trend (*Barna*, 2009; Hewitt, 2015; *Pew*, 2011).

This seems especially true in disease-stricken social environments where many in-person forms of gathering, and worshipping, have been affected. COVID-19, for example, has, thus far, claimed more than 1, 128, 903 lives in the United States alone (*CDC*, 2023a), and Mpox has, thus far, infected 30, 422 people out of which 42 have died (*CDC*, 2023b). As a result, many Christians are reluctant and afraid to gather and socialize the way they were accustomed to doing before the pandemic opting instead to follow and adhere to the rules of secularism more willingly.

The apparent Christian interest in finding safer ways of worshipping led Christian believers into exploring online churches. Many Christians are convinced that God's grace is attainable by way of a keystroke and a computer screen. One study found that 68% of Christians were entertaining the idea of online church participation (*Barna*, 2021). Taking part in human advancement (e.g., technology) and succumbing to secular rules (as with health issues) is, sometimes, necessary. Christians, however, should not lose sight of God's biblical lessons. 1 John 2:15-17, for example, warns about loving the things of the world.

When overly embraced, the things of the world interrupt or interfere with a Christian's understanding of and love for God and Jesus (Bennett, 2021). Scripture also warns against falsehood (Isaiah 57:4; Jeremiah 51:17; Micah 2:11; Revelations 22:15) and online practices have the potential of misleading people into accepting untruths or what some call falsification, fake news, and disinformation (Gritsenko et al., 2021; Jeremiah, 2018; Manuel, 2019; Naked untruth, 2019). According to Gritsenko et al. (2021, p. 200), "Various semi-pagan cults and self-proclaimed 'prophets,' who previously were not known beyond the regions of their activity, nowadays cover the entire territory of the country, [Russia] thanks to digital network channels."

The Bible is truth and for centuries biblical truth ideology has reigned over a Christian's life. Online Christian ideology, on the other hand, is a fairly recent form of worship susceptible to the wiles of untruth. Unless the online gospel message is a prerecorded worship communication that can be paused and challenged or a livestream worship service that can be questioned, listeners and viewers of God's Word may be exposed to and misguided by those who do not believe in or have a misunderstanding of the gospel.

The lion is always looking for whom it can devour (1 Peter 5:8), and believers must be weary of false prophets (Matthew 7:15). According to Rogers (2021, para. 17-19), "Present-day false prophets ... are thriving. They propagate ideas, philosophies, and ideologies contrary to biblical teaching, [and] antithetical to Christianity ... Some false prophets are 'online influencers,' operating lucrative websites, video channels, or social media sites, marketing lies, especially to young people." Unaware of such opposing views, many Christians continually use online church services to receive and share the gospel (*Barna*, 2018; Chilwa, 2012). According to one study, 53% of Christians in the United States regularly livestream their church services

online with another 34% participating in “digital church hopping [jumping from one online live church service to the other]” (Barna, 2020c, para. 3).

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023.

Research Questions

The findings of this study depended on how well the following five listed questions were explored, interpreted, and analyzed.

RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today’s Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices?

RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

Research Design and Methodology

A research design can be classified differently depending on the type of research being conducted (*Research Design*, 2011). An experimental research design, for example, focuses on cause-and-effect relationships such as the relationship between two variables (Mitchell, 2016).

For this study, a research design was created through which research questions were answered by utilizing the principles of established theories, making inferences, analyzing, and reaching conclusions based on the interpretation of gathered data (Altman & Altman, 2011; Miller, 2003; *Research design*, 2011).

According to one source, “Research methodology concerns the philosophy, approach and general frame of reference you will use to study, analyze and understand the research field and phenomena that you are interested in” (*Research methodology*, 2011, para. 1). Therefore, a research design is a process through which research questions are considered, the methodology contains the tools through which the researcher proceeds. Together, they arrive at possible answers to the research questions.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used for this study. It involved the observation, interpretation, and analysis of research data (Avila, 2016). Contrary to quantitative research which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research is aligned with the study of phenomena (*Qualitative vs. Quantitative*, 2010). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2018, p. 230), “In a qualitative study, the specific methods [used] will ultimately be constrained only by the limits of [the researcher’s] imagination.”

In this qualitative phenomenological study design, the research data was based on the lived experiences of people involved in the phenomenon. A lived experience is a life event or occurrence that a person has had which usually shapes the person’s existence (*Lived experience*, 2011; *Lived experience*, 2017). According to Van (1990), lived experiences are important because they may unearth truths surrounding the mysteries of a phenomenon. In this study, data

from such lived experiences were gathered by making observations, conducting interviews, maintaining a reflective journal, and utilizing an audio recorder.

The interview and the reflective journal will be further discussed later in this chapter. For now, it will suffice to mention that an interview can be seen as a conversation through which a researcher strives to gather as much data as possible regarding the interviewee's experiences (Nixon, 2020). A reflective journal, on the other hand, is another research tool used to record a researcher's thoughts, and the thoughts and behaviors of study participants during the research process (Yonge, Myrick, & Davidson, 2015).

Research Design Appropriateness

A qualitative phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study because the purpose of this study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. To properly explore and understand this phenomenon, participants' lived experiences were gathered and analyzed. According to Creswell (2013, 232-2:44/7:15), only through a qualitative research design, will the researcher "be able to hear the tone of [a participant's] voice [and] feel the emotion of the experience. Those are all rich details. You'll never get that in quantitative research."

Research Methodology

In seeking answers to the research questions, the research methodology encompasses the rules and principles of the study process (*Methodology*, 2001; *Research methodology*, 2011). Researchers use a set of instruments such as interviews, surveys, standardized tests (assessment tests, achievement tests), and voice recording devices to gather, analyze, and understand research data (Daly & Daly, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). In this study, the methodology consisted of

four steps. (1) Find, observe, and interview two adult church leaders from two in-person Baptist churches. (2) Find, observe, and interview four adult in-person Baptist congregational members (two men and two women). (3) Find, observe, and interview two adult church leaders from two online Baptist churches (4) Find, observe, and interview four online Baptist congregational members (two men and two women).

To accomplish this methodological process four procedural instruments were used. (1) Observations, (2) Interviews, (3) A reflective journal, and (4) An audio recorder. Using these four research instruments resulted in satisfactory answers to the study's research questions and contributed to the existing gap in the literature. According to Creswell (2013, 6:40-6:50/7:15), "The best researchers in our world are those who have a pretty large toolkit of approaches for understanding problems." During the entire research process, all ethical considerations were implemented to assure a participant's anonymity was established, confidentiality was secured, and privacy, beliefs, and cultural customs were respected. An appropriate sampling method was utilized (see sampling method, p. 13).

Setting

Unlike originally intended, participating Baptist churches (BC1-BC4) were not selected from either the SBC or the SBA membership listings. Each participating church was selected and approached by the researcher following a search for Baptist churches in the geographical area of interest. The broader setting for this study was the State of Florida. According to Lipka and Wormald (2016), Floridians, at the time of their study, were highly religious, attended church once per week, considered daily prayer important, and had a high belief in God. In a more recent study, however, "many medium-sized [Southern Baptist] churches in Florida have experienced years of growth followed by years of decline in their average attendance and involvement"

(Waters, 2020, p. 64, 159). Seminole County, Florida, was the selected geographical area for this study.

According to the *United States Census* (2021), Seminole County, Florida, has a total population of 470,093 residents. The county is located in central Florida and is geographically divided into seven cities: Altamont Springs, Casselberry, Lake Mary, Longwood, Oviedo, Sanford, and Winter Springs (*Seminole*, 2022). Demographics reveal that 51.6% of the population is comprised of females and 48.4% are males. Additionally, 58.9% are Caucasians, 22.5% are Hispanics, 13.1% are African Americans, 5.0% are Asian Americans, and 0.5% are Native Americans (*United States Census*, 2021). The religion rate in Seminole County, Florida, is 41.2% (*Seminole*, 2021) and over 73,592 members of the population are Christian Protestants encompassing 146 denominations (*ARDA*, 2020).

No empirical studies concerning church participation had been conducted regarding the decline in Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida. This study has, therefore, contributed to this area of research. As illustrated below (see Participants), the study included four of Seminole County's in-person Baptist churches with a congregation of 200 or more and an online presence. A fifth Baptist church that fell below this study's parameters was included in the study to validate the study's findings. The Baptist Faith in Seminole County, Florida has a countywide 22,813 adherents belonging to a wide range of established churches (Grammich et al., 2010) eleven of which belong to the Seminole County Baptist Association.

Participants

A participant can be defined as anyone who volunteers to take part in a study (*Participant*, 2009). Participants in this study were adult Baptist church leaders and adult Baptist church members (ages 31 and older) from four established in-person Baptist churches in

Seminole County, Florida, with a congregation of 200 or more and an online presence. There was also an additional Baptist church (BC5) with a congregation of 80 members and an online presence. However, because it did not meet the study's parameters, BC5 was used in this study for validation and conformability. Except for BC5 and its church leader, BC5L, in total, there were twelve study participants (BC1L-BC4P1): four Baptist church leaders and eight Baptist church members (seven men and five women).

Participant Baptist Churches

As autonomous (self-ruling) churches, Baptist churches in Seminole County are not all affiliated with a particular body of churches. Out of the Baptist churches within Seminole County, Florida, for example, only eleven are members of SBA with the remainder functioning as independent churches or associated with other Baptist bodies such as the FBC (B. Tate, personal communication, October 17, 2022). FBC currently has a membership of 2,700 churches (T. Johnson, personal communication, October 23, 2022) out of which SBA is a member. Participant Baptist churches were, therefore, selected from the churches associated with FBC (Seminole County member churches only), or from independent Baptist churches in Seminole County following a period of observation.

Except for one church, participant Baptist churches had 200 or more members and were experiencing or convalescing (recuperating) from a lack of church participation. A lack of church participation is defined as any Seminole County Baptist church that has been experiencing a lack of membership attendance for the past five years or since before COVID-19. While COVID-19 caused a major decline in church attendance between 2019-2021, believers who stopped attending because of this social crisis appear to be returning to their churches (Shellnut, 2022a).

Therefore, a church recovering from a short lack of participation should not be counted as part of an ongoing trend in church attendance (Waters, 2020).

Participant Baptist Church Leaders

The study's Baptist church leaders had five or more years of experience, a sound understanding of Scripture, a strong commitment to Biblical principles, and a clear vision for the church. They were also determined to be servants of God, servants to their congregations, involved in the church's surrounding community and had experience with the phenomena under study. These standards were measured through the process of observations, discussions with church members, and available public information sought from their church's websites and considered before selecting and approaching them as possible participants. In matters related to God, some of the best research data come from church leaders who have acquired their wisdom by following God (Ruvalcaba, 2015).

Participant Baptist Church Members

The study's Baptist church members were selected from a sampling population of 200 or more through the process of nonprobability purposive sampling. In nonprobability sampling, not every member of the sampling population may have a chance of being selected for the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). Selected church members had qualities that best helped to answer the research questions such as experience with the phenomena under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). Selected church members who were involved in or knew about the phenomenon offered important insight and were, therefore, purposely selected for the study (Campbell et al., 2020). Furthermore, purposive sampling was: (1) cost and time-effective (Acharya et al., 2013), (2) data trustworthy (Campbell et al., 2020), and (3) results were relevant to the research topic (Denieffe, 2020). Moreover. "Purposive sampling [allowed] for the essential task of generating new

knowledge through the processes of comparison and contrast” (Denieffe, 2020, p. 663). A request was made to church leaders to recommend church members who may have had experience with the phenomenon. Afterward, a screening process was conducted with recommended church members that ascertained whether the church member would be asked to partake in the study.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher made every effort to understand all particulars surrounding the phenomenon under study (Liu, 2021). The phenomenon explored in this study was the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. To accomplish an in-depth understanding, as much phenomenological data as possible was collected from study participants’ lived experiences. Face-to-face interviews were conducted. The researcher asked several open-ended questions while actively listening without interruption. The researcher also observed and took notes during the interview process (Crawford, 2009c; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Huttlinger, 2017; McKechnie & McKechnie, 2008). Research, particularly in a phenomenological design where lived experiences are at the forefront, is about exploring, understanding, and discovering new knowledge with a focus on expanding the existing understanding of prior knowledge (Bradshaw, 2008). In conducting the study, the researcher, therefore, kept in mind any biases that may have affected the outcome of the study (*Bias*, 2001; Crawford, 2009c) and was prepared to amend his views as new understandings about the phenomena were received (Ivaschenko, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a part of any type of research study (Kale, 2007). They involve the protection of study participants, voluntary participation, informed consent, right to privacy,

confidentiality, parental consent, and (amongst others), IRB approval (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). This study involved adult participants only. Since children were not a part of the study, there was no need to consider parental consent.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

According to the standards established by the United States federal government, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) is established in every research institution that conducts studies involving people. The IRB of every institution is authorized to permit or deny any proposed research study deemed to be unethical or not in compliance with the established rules and guidelines of research (*Institutional review board*, 2010; Petrosino & Mello, 2014). In keeping with ethical considerations, the researcher sought IRB approval. Upon receiving approval, FBC was contacted requesting church recommendations, SBA was contacted requesting church leadership recommendations, and church leaders were contacted for permission to conduct the study at their places of worship. This was because church leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of watching over the safety and well-being of church members and must, therefore, approve anything related to the study that involved their church and congregations (Bayne, 2013; Crawford, 2009a). Once the church leader agreed to participate in the study and approved church member participation, appropriate sites for the study were selected.

Authorship

Before the study commenced, authorship for publication was established so that appropriate contributors (those who have provided intellect, time, and energy) to the study were acknowledged and recognized (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Shared Study Purpose

After establishing authorship, study participants were informed of the purpose of the study. In this way, any confusion, misunderstanding(s), or feelings of deception regarding what the study entailed, and what the study was going to be for were abolished before the commencement of the study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 94), “Deception occurs when participants understand one purpose, but the researcher has a different purpose in mind.” In the process of sharing the purpose of the study, concerns were addressed, and questions were answered.

Informed Consent

A “common practice—and one that is required for certain kinds of studies at most research institutions—is to present an informed consent form” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 112). Every study participant was, therefore, required to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study. All study participants signed an informed consent form without hesitation.

Cultural Norms

An ethical consideration both before and during the study was that of cultural norms. There existed the possibility that Baptists of different cultural backgrounds were to be selected as participants in this study. The understanding was that not every selected Baptist participant may worship with the same mindset. The researcher did not, therefore, allow conflict to develop between himself and a participant’s cultural and customary manner of worshipping. (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Study Site

A study site is a physical location in which the study is to be conducted. In this case, study sites varied depending on location. A suburban site, for example, was different from an urban site, each with its particular customs. Therefore, in collecting the data or in the observation and interviewing process study sites and site norms were respected.

Confidentiality

Study participants were assured that whatever they said will be protected and that confidentiality was of prime importance (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). Caution, however, was practiced. “One issue to anticipate about confidentiality is that some participants may not want to have their identity remain confidential. By permitting this, the researcher allows the participants to retain ownership of their voices and exert their independence in making decisions” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 95).

Anonymity

Aside from confidentiality, the identity of participants was and continues to be anonymous. To accomplish this task, the researcher created a pseudo-identity (alias) for each participant. Pseudonyms are known only to the participant and the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Jane Olson (fictitious), for example, became Sharon Horowitz, Thomas McCreary became Alfred Nightingale, and so forth. “Pseudo-identification is necessary for [participants] to remain anonymous yet allows the researcher to conduct a retest for reliability measures” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 143).

Generalizations

In analyzing the data, the researcher avoided taking sides one way or the other, but instead saw the data for what it was and analyzed it accordingly. A yes to a question, for

example, was a yes and was analyzed as a yes, not as any other connotation that may have been interpreted as something other than a yes. “A good qualitative researcher actively—and conscientiously—resists temptations to find commonalities that don’t truly exist, make sweeping generalizations that aren’t accurate, or jump to quick but unwarranted conclusions” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 350). Furthermore, positive as well as negative data are part of the concluding results.

Reporting the Data

In reporting the data, the researcher did not falsify the findings, plagiarized, or disclosed information that may be deemed harmful to study participants. The researcher communicated the findings using innocuous jargon (inoffensive language), shared the findings with participants to ensure the results met ethical standards, and will destroy the findings after 3 years (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the researcher made clear who owns the data, and will never duplicate the published results (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Data Security

All interviews were anonymous, and a pseudonym, known only to the participant(s) and this researcher, was created for each participant. Furthermore, all face-to-face interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of familiarity and comfort to the participant such as a participant’s home, office, or other mutually agreed upon location where other persons did not overhear the interview questions, responses, and conversation(s). Being that the interviews were anonymous, a code was assigned to each interview participant. For example, the twelfth interviewee became BC4P1.

The code list of names and the list of pseudonyms will be kept under lock and key in separate locations known only to the researcher. This will ensure that pseudonyms will not be

connected to a participant's actual name. All interviews were transcribed, compiled, and securely stored in a place known and accessible only to the researcher. Some responses to interview questions were written in a reflective journal, the journal will be securely stored in a place known and accessible only to the researcher. All the study's gathered data remained securely stored (i.e., under lock and key) until the data analysis process began. The interview process is further discussed in the Instruments section of this chapter.

The results of this study and all pertinent tangible material and records relating to this study are private and have been securely stored in an area accessible only to this researcher. The possibility, nevertheless, is that collected data will be shared with other researchers for further use in future studies. However, if data is shared with other researchers, all the information identifying a participant will be omitted. This act of privacy will extend to and include all forms of publication.

All electronically obtained data such as recorded interviews have been transferred onto a universal serial bus (USB) and, along with tangible documentation, securely stored in a place known and accessible only to this researcher. As a form of added security, once all electronically obtained information was transferred onto a USB, all the gathered data was deleted from this researcher's computer database. In this way, hackers, or anyone else who may manage a computer breach, will not have access to any element of the study's data. Should other researchers find a need to use the results of the study, the USB will be utilized for this purpose. The secured research data will be kept for a recommended period of three years after which it will be destroyed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Other Ethical Considerations

In conducting the study, the researcher made certain that the study was of mutual benefit to all parties involved in the study. Study participants were never made to feel as if the researcher was deceiving them. Rather, they were assured their input into the study was relevant, that what they shared was correctly interpreted, and that their participation will reap some type of reward even if only for future generations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

In qualitative research, data is collected by way of narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). Narratives are stories of occurrences people have experienced (*Narrative*, 2015). Writing the narratives of Baptists who stopped attending an in-person church and joined an online church or left the Baptist faith practice altogether was the focus of this study. As such, a particular process should be followed. In this study, the researcher closely listened to what study participants were sharing, document their responses, and wrote the collected data in the form of a story (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2007; Rizo & Levitt, 2021). Not following a set procedure can end in a lack of excellence or complete failure (Waters, 2020).

Collection Methods

Data collection commenced with observations. Once a church had been selected, the researcher visited the church, attended church worship services, participated in communal church activities, and made observations. It is important to note that observational data was not derived solely from what was seen (as the term may, to some, imply). Observational data was also collected from what was experienced by the other human senses such as smell and taste (*Data collection*, 2010).

Observational data were followed by data collected from church leaders. The process for the data collection of church leaders will be discussed further in the Procedure section of this chapter. It will, for now, suffice to say that whether in an in-person or an online faith setting, church leaders were in a unique position. Hovering over their places of worship (i.e., directing, planning, seeing, and listening), church leaders had a bird's eye view (so to speak) over the church's entire operation enabling them to portray an excellent picture of what was taking place.

After meeting and consulting with church leaders, data collection continued with their congregations. Whether as a guest in one of their meetings, at a church social gathering, at a fund-raising activity, or on church grounds following a worship service, congregational members were informed of the study. Two volunteers from each congregation were being sought (one male and one female). Part of the goal was to bring together as many culturally diverse participants as possible. This effort, however, was not fully realized for two reasons: (1) study participants, while selected, were volunteers. Thus, the possibility existed that all study participants would be of one specific cultural background (i.e., all Caucasian, all African American, all Hispanic, and so forth) and (2) study participants, while individually informed of the study, were recommended by their church leader(s). Data was also collected from any available documentation (Drolet, 2013). The process for the data collection of congregational members will be discussed further in the Procedure section of this chapter.

Instruments

In research, a set of instruments such as interviews, surveys, standardized tests, rating scales, video cameras, and voice recording devices are used to gather, analyze, and understand research data (Daly & Daly, 2003; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). In this study, three research instruments were used: an interview, a reflective journal, and an audio recording device.

Interviews

Interviews took place in thirteen face-to-face individual sessions. It is important to note that while technology offered convenience, it was, nonetheless, prone to any possible setbacks during the interview process such as power outages, faulty equipment, and interruptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For these reasons, study participants were encouraged to agree to a face-to-face recorded interview scheduled at their convenience and in a mutually agreeable location. Doing so allowed both the researcher and the participant to develop trust and a welcoming rapport. A face-to-face interview also allowed the researcher to make and note observations. Informed consent forms were made available at all face-to-face interviews.

The interview consisted of several open-ended rather than close-ended questions (Appendices K and L) in a semi-structured atmosphere. Unlike a structured interview where every participant is asked the same questions in the same order (Crawford, 2009b; *Types of questions*, 2010), a semi-structured interview atmosphere was not so rigid. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to ask and change the form of the opened-ended question(s) according to how the interview was going (Longhurst, 2009; *Types of questions*, 2010). Additionally, with close-ended questions, the participant can only respond with a yes or no answer restricting conversation(s). Open-ended questions, on the other hand, provided the participant with an opportunity to expound on his or her responses and create an atmosphere of dialogue in which the participant's lived experiences were more fully explored, understood, and connected to each of the research questions as they relate to the phenomenon.

Reflective Journal

While permission was part of the informed consent form, before the commencement of each interview or dialogue with either church leaders or congregational members, permission

was sought to use an audio recorder along with the reflective journal. It was explained that while using a recording device was part of the informed consent form, it would allow for greater concentration on discussions and a moving away from note-taking distractions. Every participant appeared to appreciate the request and not one participant questioned nor objected to the use of the recording device.

The use of a reflective journal provided the ability to write points of importance and interest that sparked memory when reflecting (thinking) on the interview or discussion. The reflective journal was also used to record observations the researcher made during the interview process. Moreover, the reflective journal served as a tool to make note of any researcher biases, codes, themes, or other ideas that sprung to light while meeting with study participants (Camp, 2022; Ortlipp, 2008).

Audio Recorder

An audio recorder was used at every study interview. Along with a reflective journal, an audio recorder proved invaluable. Not only did it capture verbal expressions and nuances that were missed by the researcher, but it also provided the ability to replay and better understand what study participants were sharing. Some participants were soft-spoken, others rambled, and several spoke in run-on sentences, making it hard for the researcher to follow.

Procedures

Before data collection began, the research proposal was submitted to the IRB. The study could not commence without IRB approval (*Liberty University, 2020-2021*). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 170). “A researcher needs to describe in detail the sequential step-by-step procedure for conducting the [study].” Once IRB approval was granted, study participants were sought.

Participating Churches

In keeping with the research plan, two in-person brick-and-mortar Baptist churches and two online Baptist churches were to be selected for this study. The churches were to be selected from a list of established churches in Seminole County, Florida, with 200 members or more. Each participating church had to have gone through a period of decline in attendance between 2018-2023 (five years). Once churches had been selected, the church leader of each was to be contacted by telephone, postal service, electronic mail (email), or a personal visit to his or her church office.

Upon establishing church leader contact, the study was to be briefly outlined and explained (Arcury & Quandt, 1999). An appointment with the church leader was to be requested. At the appointment, the particulars of the study would be explained in more detail and the church leader's participation was to be requested. If church leaders agreed to participate in the study, an interview was to be scheduled. The interview would be conducted face-to-face. However, for reasons that will become clearer later in this writing, neither the selection nor the interview process went quite as planned. It will, for now, suffice to say that a concerted, time-consuming, effort had to be made to find participating churches and that church leaders did not make themselves readily available for a meeting let alone an interview.

When meeting with each church leader for the first time, an interview was conducted. Before each interview commenced, the signing of an informed consent form was requested and all particulars related to the interview explained (i.e., anonymity, confidentiality, respect for privacy, and so forth). The informed consent form also explained the particulars of the study and how the participant would be part of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod,

2018). The entire interview was recorded and later transcribed. Observations made during the interview, deemed pertinent, were noted in the reflective journal.

Following the interview, church leaders were asked for permission to canvass their congregation(s) for possible study participants. All five church leaders were hesitant to involve members of their congregations in the study. After further discussion in which the importance of church member participation was stressed, church leaders agreed to recommend at least two members for the study whom they believed would best represent their church. The researcher's contact information (i.e., telephone and email) was provided to the church leader who would in turn share the researcher's contact information with any recommended church member. Additionally, a request was made for the church to provide a private room where interviews could be conducted, if necessary.

Canvassing the Churches

While awaiting church leader member recommendations, the researcher canvassed each church. This was done if no church members were recommended and before and following each of the attended Bible studies and worship services. Church members were approached, introductions were made, and the study and its purpose were briefly mentioned. During these informal conversations, questions were formulated to determine a church member's knowledge of the phenomenon and his or her possible participation in the study. This time-consuming endeavor, however, proved fruitless as the names of recommended church members started to eventually arrive. In total, contact information for nine church members was received.

Recommended church members were contacted by telephone and, after introductions, informed of the study, its purpose, and other particulars (Arcury & Quandt, 1999). They were then asked to consider their participation. Except for one, all church members agreed to

volunteer for the study. They were immediately screened and determined appropriate for the study. Their emails were requested. Shortly following the screening process, a member recruiting letter was emailed to them along with an informed consent form for their review.

Data Analysis

Every research study requires an interpretation of its findings, and such interpretation commences with an analysis of the data. According to Aaronson (2017, para. 1), “Data analysis is a systematic method for examining data gathered for a research investigation to support interpretations and conclusions about the data and inferences about the population.” The data related to this study was derived from observations, interviews, a reflective journal, audio recordings, and any available documentation associated with the study’s purpose and research questions. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. Each participating Baptist church was individually considered. The researcher endeavored to look at such things as past and current leadership effectiveness, past and current records of attendance, past and current church ministry programs, past and current membership program involvement, past and current secular community involvement, past and current visions of the church, and past and current church scandals, if any (Waters, 2020).

Analysis Methods

As described in chapter two (Literature Review), to properly analyze the data, the aspects of two data analysis theories: the Hermeneutic Circle (HC) and the Attribution Theory (AT) were used as research tools. Individually or combined the elements and principles of these two theories assisted with this study’s data analysis process, findings, and conclusions. As illustrated

HC (pp. 39-40) and AT (pp. 40-43) are forms of interpreting data. HC is “a process of interpretation in which we continually move between smaller and larger units of meaning to determine the meaning of both” (Gijbers, 2017, 9:57-10:40/12:04). For example, Brother Joey said he livestreamed a worship service (large unit of meaning). Did Brother Joey livestream because he was ill, his car broke down, because he was upset with a fellow parishioner (smaller units of meaning)? AT describes “how we explain the causes of other people’s behaviors” (LoSchiavo, 2018, 0:25-2:39/22:22). For example, sister Barbara shouted and jumped up and down during the entire sermon (behavior). Sister Barbara jumped up and down because she was touched by the Holy Spirit (explanation of the cause for the behavior).

Data as a whole provides a picture, a glimpse into its actual meaning. To try and understand the meaning of the picture one must step closer and see the parts that make up the picture. The same can be said of words. When expressed, words have a particular meaning. For example, church leader ineffectiveness, as a whole, can mean that the church leader was not doing a good job. However, a closer look at the meaning of its parts might reveal exactly why the church leader was ineffective. The church leader may have lacked the ability to properly organize the operations of the church, to properly listen and interpret church member concerns, to properly counsel church members, to properly deliver the word of the gospel or a host of other possibilities.

During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions. Their responses determined whether the researcher asked additional questions to arrive at a better interpretation of their responses. The responses to these additional questions were noted in both the reflective journal and audio recorded. During the analysis process, participants' additional responses were considered to arrive at the essence of their original responses. Thus, utilizing the combined

elements of HC and AT as analytical tools the researcher endeavored to interpret the meaning(s) of participants' responses concerning the RQs.

The data analysis for this study was completed through the use of the NVivo 12 Pro qualitative analysis computer software program. A student license was obtained for this purpose. With NVivo 12 Pro interview transcripts uploaded, data analysis charts were created, and, during the data analysis process, NVivo offered the researcher the ability to build on the research as the data were analyzed (Cadegan, 2022). To make the data analysis process more manageable, a twelve-step system (below) was created and implemented in this study. It must be noted that, unless otherwise cited, the twelve-step system was, for the most part, conceptualized from the reading of Creswell and Creswell (2018) and was, therefore, subjected to change during the analysis process. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2018, p. 357),

There is usually no single right way to analyze the data in a qualitative study. The researcher begins with a large body of information and must, through inductive reasoning, sort and categorize it and gradually boil it down to a small set of abstract, underlying themes.

Twelve Step System

Step 1: Transcribe all interview audio recordings.

Step 2: Read all transcriptions for familiarity.

Step 3: Share transcribed recording(s) with the participant(s) for confirmability and accuracy.

Step 4: Read transcriptions again and reread (if necessary) until a full understanding of the transcripts is reached looking for similarities and patterns.

Step 5: Code every phrase and section of transcribed data determined to be relevant to the findings (Kawulich, 2017).

Step 6: Categorize coded data. Leadership ineffectiveness, for example, will be a category (Mandler, 2005).

Step 7: Reread and examine categorized data looking for possible new codes.

Step 8: Seek and outline every possible theme from coded data (*Themes*, 2010).

Step 9: Compile themes into their own set of categories and compare them with other themes.

Step 10: Interpret the connections between the themes.

Step 11: In narrative form, write and discuss the results with the study's assigned supervisor and anyone else directly involved with the study.

Step 12: After inductively considering the research, and the input of those directly involved with the study, complete a written report of the findings.

An inductive style of research logically considers all elements of the research (i.e., observations, interview responses, journal notes, recordings, available documentation) from the bottom up rather than from the top to the bottom (as in deductive reasoning) seeking truthfulness in patterns, categories, and themes from the gathered data (Creswell & Creswell; 2018; *Inductive reasoning*, 2016; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018; Sutherland, 2006). "This inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and the database until the [researcher has] established a comprehensive [trustworthy] set of themes" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181).

Trustworthiness

The term, trustworthiness, was introduced in qualitative research by Egon Gotthold Guba (1924-2008) as a parallel (equivalent) to validity in 1981 (*Trustworthiness*, 2011). Validity (legitimacy or soundness) is often used in quantitative research as a form of showing the reliability (dependability) of research studies (Seale, 2001). As a parallel term, trustworthiness, in this study, was used to show the reliability of a participant's lived experience and research data. Thus, trustworthiness can be defined as a phenomenological research inquiry with findings shown to be significant and accepted by other researchers (Schwandt, 2007). According to Leedy

and Ormrod (2018, p. 239), “Qualitative researchers don’t necessarily measure things ... in the numerical sense of the word—but they need to ensure that their research is trustworthy, that data are collected ethically and accurately, and that findings are credible, plausible, and well-substantiated.”

In their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985), Yvonne Sessions Lincoln (1944-) and Egon Gotthold Guba (a husband-and-wife team) outlined their evaluative criteria illustrating how the trustworthiness of research can be determined (Schwandt, 2007). Lincoln and Guba’s criteria include four terms: (1) Credibility, (2) Dependability, (3) Confirmability, and (4) Transferability, and are often used in qualitative research (Langtree, Birks, & Biedermann, 2019; *Trustworthiness criteria*, 2010). For this study, the principles of Lincoln and Guba’s recommended criteria will be followed to establish the trustworthiness of the study.

Credibility

Credibility is established through the development of a trustworthy relationship between the researcher and study participants. Developing trustworthiness, however, and thus credibility is not an instantaneous occurrence derived from the occasional sharing of pleasantries. Rather, trustworthiness is an emerging daily process in which the researcher and study participant(s) must be engaged during the entire length of the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 303), to establish trust, the researcher must strive:

To demonstrate to the respondents that their confidences will not be used against them; that pledges of anonymity will be honored; that hidden agendas, whether those of the investigator or of other local figures to whom the investigator may be beholding are not being served; that the interests of the respondents will be honored as much as those of the investigator; and that the respondents will have input into, and influence, the inquiry process.

In conducting this study every effort was made to establish credibility by developing a trustworthy rapport with participants during interview interactions (Jowers, 2020) and in every

other opportunity where individual attention was given. Additionally, a rigorous effort was made to make certain each participant's lived experience was accurately analyzed (Conklin, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jowers, 2020).

Once interviews were completed and transcribed, participants were contacted and presented with their responses to each of their interview's open-ended questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this way, participants confirmed the researcher's transcriptions fairly and accurately represented their responses. This process confirmed that the participant's views and experience of the phenomenon were represented and not those of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jowers, 2020; Schwandt, 2007). Thus, trustworthiness and credibility were established. "Credibility of a study is determined when coresearchers or readers are confronted with the experience, they can recognize it. Credibility addresses the 'fit' between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the changing settings of research that call for the researcher or researchers to outline, define, or explain in detail how data will be collected (Jowers, 2020; Leedy & Ormrod, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Schwandt, 2007; Tickal, 2016). In this way, other researchers will be able to examine the data and arrive at the same conclusions determined by the researcher. According to Nowell et al. (2017, p. 3), "to achieve dependability, researchers [should] ensure [that] the research process is logical, traceable, and documented ..." In this study, the researcher established dependability by outlining a research process that other researchers can easily follow. In this way, should the need for an audit trail arise, the research auditor will be able to trail the research procedures to affirm the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An

audit trail is an investigation of the findings claimed in a research study to ascertain the study's trustworthiness (*Audit trail*, 2010; Schwandt, 2007).

Confirmability

As with the dependability of qualitative research data, confirmability must illustrate that the study's findings have been the result of the study's gathered data (Nowell et al., 2017). No matter how many times the study's data is analyzed, the research study's findings must be consistent and in concurrence with the study participants' lived experiences and not influenced by the researcher's interpretation (Tickal, 2016). One can, therefore, accurately surmise that Lincoln and Guba's criteria of dependability and confirmability can be combined (Ivaschenko, 2021; Jowers, 2020). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 313), "a single audit, properly managed, can be used to determine dependability and confirmability simultaneously." To accomplish confirmability, throughout the study, the researcher sought the advice of all parties who were involved in the study and, following an analysis of the data, provided and shared the data with the study's supervisor so that the data could, possibly, be analyzed by someone other than the researcher. In this way, the data was confirmed before a report was written.

Transferability

Transferability is another way of considering generalization and weaving together (so to speak) research data, findings, or inquiry (Jowers, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017; Schwandt, 2007). It is the researcher's responsibility to present to other researchers a research study with findings that can be validated in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Schwandt, 2007; Tjora, 2018). According to Tjora (2018, p. 148), "The study report [should] provide sufficient details of the study, so to enable the reader to assess the extent to which the results will be valid, for instance, for the reader's research project."

Chapter Summary

From research design to data analysis, this chapter presented a methodological window through which readers can view the process of this qualitative phenomenological research study. The study involved in-person and online Baptist church participation. Many Baptists appear to be negating in-person services and opting, instead, to congregate and worship via online churches. This has left many brick-and-mortar church leaders struggling to understand why such a trend has continued when participation in established in-person Baptist churches has always been of the utmost importance. For this reason, this chapter presented five research questions in an endeavor to explore, understand, and find answers to an apparent continuing religious movement. It is hoped this study's findings may, in some way, produce a positive contribution to existing literature and present viable solutions to the lack of participation in the Baptist faith.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. The lack of Baptist church participation was generally defined as attending an in-person service 0-1 time per month. This chapter presents four different areas related to the analysis of the findings. One, Compilation Protocol and Measure. This section outlines what is essentially an identification of the people involved in the data-gathering process such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and the Seminole Baptist Association (SBA). Two, Demographic and Sample Data. This section relates to the population involved in the study such as Baptist churches, church leaders, and church members. Three, Data Analysis and Findings. This section outlines the process through which the gathered information (data) is considered and the results of the data. Four, Evaluation of the Research Design. This section presents a breakdown of the study's approach, the appropriateness of the design, and a view of how well the design worked when considering the data.

Compilation Protocol and Measure

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), letters were mailed to leaders of the Florida Baptist Convention-FBC (Appendix B) and the Seminole Baptist Association-SBA (Appendix C) requesting assistance in locating churches that had experienced or were experiencing the phenomena under study (i.e., the lack of in-person church participation and the rise of online church participation). The letters (sent through the U.S. postal service) were mailed to follow proper faith leadership protocol. Four participating Baptist churches (BCs)

were needed to meet the delimitations of the study. The researcher was hopeful, but as anticipated, neither the FBC nor the SBA responded to the letters. The letters were followed by telephone calls. The researcher was unable to reach the FBC leader. While the SBA leader was reached, he was unable to assist with the research. These failed attempts encouraged the researcher to compile a list of twenty-one BCs within Seminole County, Florida, two of which (BC1 and BC2) were already being considered for observation pending IRB approval.

The researcher proceeded with efforts to contact the remaining nineteen BCs by telephone. Two BCs answered their phones, four resulted in disconnected phone lines, and thirteen left voice messages. Except for six, all the BCs that received a voice message responded. Thus, out of a list of twenty-one BCs fifteen (thirteen which received a voice message and two which were under observation) received a manilla envelope containing a permission request letter (Appendix D), a permission request response letter (Appendix E), and an informed consent form for their review (Appendix F). Manilla envelopes were personally delivered by the researcher. Out of the fifteen that received a manilla envelope, five BCs were found to meet the study's parameters. All five church leaders were males.

Out of the five BCs which met the study's parameters, four (BC1, BC2, BC3, and BC4) agreed to an interview. The remaining church (number five) was not receptive to the study and ignored the follow-up letter (Appendix G). A sixth BC (BC5), the leader of which had agreed to a meeting before other BCs were located, was interviewed. Interview findings showed that BC5 did not meet the study's parameter threshold and would, therefore, not qualify as a participant in the study. Nevertheless, following a consultation with the study's academic supervisor, the researcher determined interview data associated with BC5 was useful to the study and consequently included BC5 in this study to further validate the findings wherever possible. Each

of the selected BCs held in-person and online worship services. The researcher made an exhaustive effort to locate and interview online church leaders with a Baptist faith program. The effort proved fruitless. No online Baptist church was found in Seminole County, Florida, solely dedicated to conducting online worship services. Thus, BC1, BC2, BC3, and BC4 study participants (leaders and members) as well as BC5's validating church leader, BC5L, were asked questions during the interview process concerning both in-person and online church worship and attendance as they related to the study's research questions (RQs).

Demographic and Sample Data

Table 1

Participant Demographics

| ID | Church | Affiliation | Age | Gender | Ethnicity |
|-------|--------|-------------|-----|--------|------------------|
| BC1L | BC1 | Leader | 66 | Male | African American |
| BC1P1 | BC1 | Member | 71 | Female | African American |
| BC1P2 | BC1 | Member | 48 | Female | African American |
| BC1P3 | BC1 | Member | 61 | Male | African American |
| BC2L | BC2 | Leader | 35 | Male | Caucasian |
| BC2P1 | BC2 | Member | 34 | Male | Hispanic |
| BC2P2 | BC2 | Member | 47 | Female | Caucasian |
| BC3L | BC3 | Leader | 57 | Male | Caucasian |
| BC3P1 | BC3 | Member | 78 | Female | Caucasian |
| BC3P2 | BC3 | Member | 77 | Male | Caucasian |
| BC4L | BC4 | Leader | 55 | Male | Caucasian |
| BC4P1 | BC4 | Member | 35 | Female | Caucasian |
| BC5L | BC5 | Leader | 31 | Male | Caucasian |

As Table 1 shows, pertinent study demographic data such as name (pseudonym), age, gender, and ethnicity were collected from participants. Church affiliation (pastor or member), years as a Baptist, years at the church, and years as a leader or member were also collected to determine each participant's level of experience, church connectivity, church contribution, and possible knowledge of the phenomena. However, these collected demographic details were omitted from Table 1 because of confidentiality concerns. Originally, a total of twelve

participants were sought to take part in the study: four Baptist church leaders and eight Baptist church members. Difficulty in accomplishing this goal, however, was found amongst the four selected church leaders.

While all four church leaders agreed to an interview, they were hesitant to involve their church members in the study. However, following their interviews, time was dedicated to clarifying the study's purpose further and stressing the importance of church member participation. As a result, church leaders decided to recommend the names and contact information of two church members who would best represent the church. Except for one church leader, BC1L, who provided church member names almost immediately, this proved to be a tedious process, causing the researcher to consider alternative measures such as repeated phone calls, emails, and canvassing church congregations.

In the process of doing so, church member names and telephone numbers began to be available. Each church proceeded as follows. BC1 provided four church members (two males and two females), BC2 provided two (one male and one female), BC3 provided two (one male and one female), and BC4 provided one (female). As for BC5, no church member names were provided. In total nine church members (five males and four females) were recommended. Church members were called and informed of the study (Appendix H). Following the screening process (Appendix I) eight church members were determined suitable and accepted as possible participants for the study. Recommended church member nine (a male) declined participation sharing he did not feel as being appropriate for the study.

All possible participants were emailed a member recruitment letter (Appendix J) and an informed consent form (Appendix F) for their review. After three days, all eight possible participants were contacted via a telephone call. All eight expressed their desire to volunteer for

the study. Follow-up letters were not required. A face-to-face interview date, site, and time was arranged with each study participant according to their level of comfort. Five participants (BC1P1, BC1P2, BC1P3, BC3P1, and BC4P1) selected an interview in a private room at their places of worship, two participants (BC2P1 and BC3P2) selected to be interviewed in their private residences, and one participant (BC2P2) selected a private room at her place of work. All four study participant church leaders (BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L) and the validating church leader (BC5L) were interviewed in their church offices.

All BCs had experienced a decline in in-person church participation, were affected by the onset of COVID-19, and were involved in spreading the gospel through online channels. In total, thirteen residents of Seminole County, Florida, volunteered as participants for the study thus meeting the study's level of participant delimitations. As Table 1 shows, there were eight Caucasian American participants (five males and three females) between the ages of 31 to 78 years, four African American participants (two males and two females) between the ages of 48 and 71 years, and one Hispanic (male) 34 years old. All thirteen study participants signed an informed consent form in the presence of the researcher. All thirteen study participants were assigned a pseudonym. All participants were well educated and whether retired or employed, they described themselves in a prolific manner.

BC1 Synopsis

BC1 was established in 1875 in Seminole County, Florida (over 148 years ago). While conducting this study, the church celebrated its 148th anniversary. A celebration in which the researcher partook. The congregation is predominantly African American. It was started by a small group of Christians with a fervent desire to have a place of worship they could call their own. As the population in the area grew, the church's congregation increased eventually leading

to BC1 being listed as one of the first five churches to be part of a Christian association in South Florida (1892). Over the years, BC1 has had 24 pastors, some of whom served the congregation for long periods. For example, the church's current pastor, Moses Washington (BC1L), has pastored the church since 1997 (26 years). Under his leadership, BC1's congregation has grown from 150 to more than 2,000 current members (Figure 2). While the current membership has remained steady, the church has had its share of decline with many members deciding to worship online. BC1 has had up to 3,000 members on its roster.

BC2 Synopsis

BC2 was established in 1869 in Seminole County, Florida (over 154 years ago). The congregation is predominantly Caucasian American. The original church was built by several Christian worshipers looking to congregate and worship in a communal place rather than in their homes. At the time they met in homes, pastors were paid \$2.50 per month for preaching and \$27.00 per month for shepherding God's people. As time passed and the congregation grew, a plot of land was purchased (1913). A second wooden church building was erected. The congregation continued to grow, and other church buildings were constructed. Currently, the land is home to seven structures, seven parking lots, and one retention pond. By today's standards, BC2 is considered a megachurch (churches with 2,000 or more weekly attendants). The church has experienced periods of decline with many members choosing to worship online. According to associate pastor, Adam Westerly (BC2L), currently, BC2 has 2,400 members (Figure 3), but it has had up to 7,000 members in its roster.

BC3 Synopsis

BC3 was established as a chapel in 1960 in Seminole County, Florida (over 63 years ago). The congregation was a mixture of Caucasian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic

Americans, and a growing number of Chinese Americans. The chapel began holding in-person worship services with 35 members. In 1961, BC3 purchased a plot of land on which a church was built. Twenty years later (1980), BC3 purchased a second plot of land and built its current church building. Since its inception, BC3 has changed its name three times and has had twelve lead pastors. BC3's current pastor, Carl Fisher (BC3L), has been the lead pastor since 2011 (12 years). In its 63-year history, BC3's membership has fluctuated and in recent years BC3 went through a period of decline. Most of the membership body began worshipping online. Since reopening many of the members who went online have not returned to in-person worship services. Currently, BC3 has 300 members (Figure 4) but it has had up to 500 members on its roster.

BC4 Synopsis

BC4 was established in 1875 in Seminole County, Florida (over 148 years ago). It started with 10 members. Worship services were originally held in members' private homes. The congregation is predominantly Caucasian American. In 1880 the church acquired a donated plot of land on which a church was erected. In 1926 BC4 purchased a wooden building in which services were to be held. A week after holding its first worship service the building was destroyed by fire. Without a building, worship services continued to be held under a tree on the same property where the wooden building was destroyed. By the middle of 1927, a new church had been built. A series of loans allowed BC4 to expand, and in 1981 the church purchased more than 13 acres of land. It is on this land that the church is located. Its current leader, Mark Tomlin (BC4L), has pastored the church since 2018 (5 years). At the time (2018), the church had between 180-200 members. In recent years, BC4 went through a period of decline in in-person

attendance, many of whom selected to participate in its online worship services instead. Currently, BC4's membership stands at 200 parishioners (Figure 5).

BC5 Synopsis

BC5, included in the study for validation and conformability, was established in 1974 in Seminole County, Florida (over 49 years ago). The congregation is predominantly Caucasian American. Worship services were started with 11 congregants. Within two months the church had four missionaries. BC5's missionaries were church members who went out into the church's surrounding communities to learn about their neighborhoods, build communities of faith, and spread the gospel. Within the first year (1974-1975) there were 11 missionaries. In 1975 BC5 purchased a plot of land on which a sanctuary was built. Since its beginning BC5 has had five church leaders. The most current is Jason McMullen (BC5L). In the early 2000s church attendance on a Sunday morning was at its peak (anywhere between 100-150 attendees) but, for unknown reasons, attendance began to steadily decline. By 2018 in-person worship attendance was down to 48. Many of those who left in-person began to worship online. Currently, between in-person and online, BC5 has 80 attendees (Figure 6) most of whom have returned to in-person worship.

Data Analysis and Findings

Research questions (RQs) in this study were designed to possibly answer four main areas of interest: (1) why were Baptist church members leaving in-person worship services, (2) why were Baptist church members who leave in-person worship services join online worship services, (3) what were Baptist church leaders doing to curtail or stop church members from leaving their churches, and (4) what could have been done to encourage believers to return to in-person

worship services. To find answers to the RQs, 10 open-ended interview questions (IQs) were created and presented to each study participant in face-to-face interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and ranged between 30-to-60-minutes. Interview questions slightly varied depending on whether the interviewee was a church leader (Appendix K) or a church member (Appendix L). A Sony ICD UX570 audio recorder was used to record all interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed using Word Sound Organizer Version 2.0 computer software, a transcription application tool. Transcribed interviews were then uploaded to NVivo qualitative research software program that assisted with the analysis of interview data such as coding (Appendix M), categorizing (Appendix N), and theme development (Appendix O). Tables and figures were created by using Excel spreadsheets in Microsoft Office 365 computer software programs.

RQ1 was formulated to explore the knowledge study participants had concerning the decline in in-person church participation, the growth in online church participation, and the impact both forms of worship had on the study's participating churches. The goal of RQ1 was, therefore, to determine the lived experiences and meanings of church participation of both church leaders and church members and the significance given to church worship in participating Baptist congregations. RQ2 was composed to consider what participating Baptist church leaders believed to be the main issues causing believers to leave the church. The goal of RQ2 was, therefore, to determine the primary factors contributing to a lack of in-person church participation and the rise in online worship participation. RQ3 was composed to determine how participating Baptist church leaders could work with their congregations to keep believers from leaving their in-person worship services. The goal of RQ3 was, therefore, to explore the

measures church leaders and church members could take to curtail the lack of in-person church participation.

RQ4 was prepared to explore how in-person and online Baptist church members of the study's participating churches could better relate to each other's choice to either worship in-person or worship online. The goal of RQ4 was, therefore, to consider ways church leaders and church members might create a better understanding between in-person and online worshipers. RQ5 was created to understand how participating Baptist church members were affected by the studied phenomenon. The goal of RQ5 was, therefore, to look at how the participating Baptist congregations had experienced the lack of in-person church participation and the rise of online church participation.

The researcher hoped that by exploring these five RQs church leaders might have a better grasp of what transpired in their churches and of the contributing factors leading to an in-person membership decline. It was further hoped that by knowing the causes churches could find viable solutions and curtail any further loss of members within their churches. The researcher believes that through the process of theme development, and the use of the theoretical framework (HC, AT), this, to some degree, has been accomplished. Additionally, rather than paraphrasing, the researcher believed that direct quotes from participant interviews would best capture the essence of the findings and are, therefore, included verbatim throughout this report.

At this juncture, the researcher believes it is important to revisit researcher bias. A major bias for the researcher was the indoctrinated perception that partaking in in-person worship services was the most significant form of worshiping God. Thus, those who worship online, or by any other technological means, are not following biblical principles nor showing a true union with the Body of Christ. Another significant bias was that the researcher was nurtured within the

doctrinal confines of the Roman Catholic faith. As such, the dogmatic practices of Catholicism such as considering the Pope to be the vicar (supreme representative) of Christ and the observance of the seven sacraments (Childhood Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders) are considered the foundational stones of the church and of, some would argue, the Christian faith.

Contrastingly to the Baptist faith SBC churches do not have a governing hierarchical structure above the local church (everyone is considered equal) and Scripture is embraced as having supreme authority (not the Pope). Thus, the researcher had to be careful in both respects. As mentioned on p.42 and p.72, a bias is any element in the research process (instrument, methodology, sampling procedure, researcher's personal views) that may tilt, slant, twist, slope, or tip the research findings one way or the other (*Bias*, 2006).

To avoid the possible filtering of these biases into the content of the research, the researcher underwent a self-administered bracketing process. Bracketing, or epoche, a term introduced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), was used in this study to rid the researcher's psyche of any preconceived notion(s) related to the phenomenon. Thus, the researcher proceeded with the gathering of data and the analysis of the findings with the belief that prior notions of the phenomenon were suspended to arrive at the desired research outcome (*Bracketing*, 2010).

While conducting interviews, bracketing proved useful in one instance. The researcher was taken aback during an interview when a participant (BC1P3) adamantly shared that the in-person and the online gospel experience were the same. The participant's perspective went against the researcher's traditional values causing a feeling of discontent within the researcher. The researcher had to remember the ill effects of biases, contain his emotions, and practice self-restraint to keep from contradicting BC1P3's view(s).

Research Question 1

RQ1 sought to determine the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance church participation had on Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida. As Table 2 indicates, two themes were established concerning RQ1. Table 2 also shows that data collected from five church leaders and seven church members were used for RQ1 Theme 1. Data collected from five church leaders and four church members were used for RQ1 Theme 2. Individually, participants shared their lived experiences concerning the phenomenon. Combined, participants portrayed a picture of what was possibly occurring in Baptist churches throughout Seminole County, Florida, in 2023.

Table 2

RQ1 Theme, interview questions (IQs), and participants

| Theme | Leader IQs | Leader | Member IQs | Member |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|------------|---|
| Theme 1 Lived Experiences | 1,2,3,4,5,7 | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L, BC5L | 1,2,3,4,8 | BC1P1, BC1P2, BC1P3, BC2P2, BC3P1, BC3P2, BC4P1 |
| Theme 2 Leader Vision | 1, 2, | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L, BC5L | 2 | BC1P2, BC3P1, BC3P2, BC4P1 |

RQ1 Theme 1 Finding

RQ1 Theme 1 reflects the lived experiences of participating church leaders and church members concerning church attendance in 2019. According to church leaders, in 2019 in-person church participation was steady, strong, or getting stronger among the participating churches. For example, between its two services (8 am and 11 am) BC1 was enjoying a healthy, flourishing, and participatory congregation. According to BC1L, BC1 “at one point [was] seeing, officially, about five years ago, between 2,500 and 3000 members” (BC1L, personal communication, April

4, 2023). BC2 fell into the same participatory range. According to BC2L, in 2019, not counting those who worshipped online, BC2 was “getting around 3000 [attendees] on a Sunday morning” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). As for the other three participating churches, BC3L reported that BC3 “had pretty much plateaued at 500 in attendance” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023), BC4L shared that BC4 was at around 200 attendees, and BC5L determined “the number [in attendance] was close to 50” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023).

Except for BC5, which did not provide additional participants, the above numbers were confirmed by interviewing church members. According to Andrea Way (BC1P1), Cynthia Hudson (BC1P2), and Thomas Olms (BC1P3), BC1 attendance, BC1P1 said, was always great before 2020. BC1P1 shared that because of its overwhelming attendance, BC1 “had to go into two services ... the 8 am and the 11 am service plus in between the Sunday schools. That’s why we had to build a bigger sanctuary, because of the influx of people” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023). This was further confirmed by BC1P3 who shared that “we [BC1] did have two services on Sunday because we can’t necessarily have that many people in our main sanctuary” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

As for BC2, Pamela Green (BC2P2), a church member, said that attendance in 2018-2019 on “Sunday mornings, was high. If I am remembering correctly,” she continued, “between the two services, we were probably getting between 5,000 to 6,000 people. It was big” (BC2P2, personal communication, May 3, 2023). BC3’s claim was also confirmed. When asked about attendance in 2018, Antwan Solski (BC3P2), a church member, shared that “upstairs was packed with the early service and downstairs it was probably 80% full ... the capacity of the one upstairs is 179 people, and the capacity of the downstairs is 400” (BC3P2, personal communication, May

5, 2023). This was further confirmed by Joan Andrews (BC3P1), a church member, who said that “lots of activities were going on. Like on Sundays and Wednesday nights. We had meals on Wednesday nights two to three times a month. Different sports activities where the community was brought in” (BC3P1, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

Finally, concerning BC4, Michelle Gurski (BC4P1), a church member, confirmed that “at the time, we had a full congregation on Sundays ... 200 is a big capacity for our church, but we have been at 200. I would say average, as far as attendance in church, it would probably be 160-180” (BC4P1, personal communication, May 3, 2023). Excluding BC4 which reported no change in membership (Figure 5) and BC5 which reported an increase (Figure 6), participating churches experienced a loss in in-person attendance. As charts will show, in 2023, BC1 has “1,500 to 2000 [members] that still come now either virtually online or in person [Figure 2]” (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023), BC2 is in the 2,400 range (Figure 3) and BC3 is at “about 300 every Sunday worship between [their] two services [Figure 4]” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023). As mentioned on p. 69, all four participating churches have an online presence. Through the use of a computer keyboard or any other available technological means such as Facebook, church members, and visitors, can easily go onto the church’s websites and either live stream worship services or view past sermons.

RQ1 Theme 2 Finding

RQ1 Theme 2 concerns church ministry building and leadership vision. Determining how many ministry programs were established illustrates the condition of the church when church leaders assumed responsibility. Likewise, a church leader’s vision was a window through which the researcher saw where the church was heading and how God’s people were being led. According to the findings, each of the four participating BCs as well as the validating church,

BC5) underwent a period of change.

BC1 Church. BC1L shared that when he first became pastor, BC1's facilities were insufficient. There was no "classroom space to teach [or] things to do extra stuff with such as having banquets or having things that we can offer to our children and stuff like that" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Trusting in God, and his God-given abilities as a pastor and church leader, BC1L moved forward. BC1L had a vision, and his vision "was [and is] to be in a place where we can all have good preaching sessions, where we can teach ... to see us come second to no other ministry with the cross" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023).

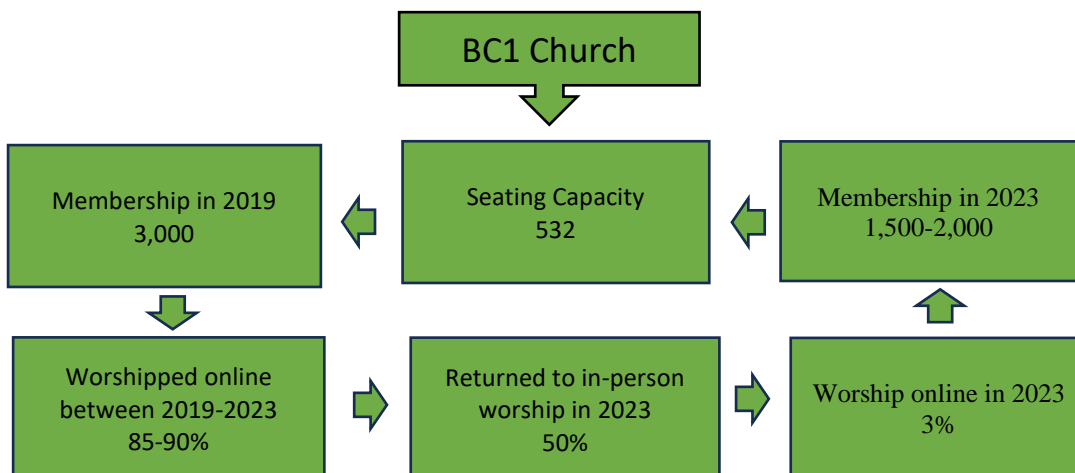
According to BC1L, a Sunday school and a Planning and Research ministry were established when he first became pastor. In referring to BC1, BC1P2 also reported there was a mission ministry, a youth ministry, a children's ministry, a hospitality ministry, and an usher ministry as well. Established ministries were to be expected in a church that had survived for more than 148 years. However, according to BC1L, the established ministries were lacking. The Planning and Research Ministry, for example, was inactive. Ministry members were sitting in the congregation, but they were not being utilized. When BC1L requested to know why none of the ministry members were doing anything? One member's response said it all. "I was never asked," he said. BC1L concluded that "the intention was there, but nobody empowered [anyone] to do anything, and all we came to do in some areas was just to empower some people to do what they felt God was calling them to do" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). With that, BC1L fervently led God's people. He directed, encouraged, and continually spread the gospel inspiring the congregation to follow. Currently, BC1 has over 30 established ministries.

Currently, BC1 has between 1,500 to 2000 members (Figure 2), and from what the researcher has observed, BC1L is loved, respected, and supported by his entire congregation.

When asked if leaving BC1 has ever been considered, BC1P1 said, “Never, never. I love this church. I love the people here. I love my pastor and first lady and like, no, it never crossed my mind” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Another participant, BC1P2, shared that BC1 had truly been a blessing to her and her entire family. From observing and speaking to other members of the congregation, participant sentiments were genuine and appeared to reign true across the entire church.

Figure 2

BC1 Church Transition Chart 2019-2023



BC2 Church. BC2 also has a long history (150 years). Before being ordained, BC2L had been doing ministry work at BC2 for several years. When he first arrived, several ministries were established such as the children’s ministry, the youth ministry, and the small group ministry. Currently, BC2 has 12 ministries serving God’s people in a variety of different ways. Originally, BC2L was involved in BC2’s worship ministry. He led, mentored, and counseled others in the worship team. BC2L soon discovered, however, that a generational gap existed within the ministry and strove to bridge that gap so that members of both generations could be better served. As a result, the worship ministry enjoys two different styles of worship, both of which

have about 800 attendees. According to BC2L, “You kind of have a service that tends toward an older group and then a service that tends toward a younger group” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023).

In time, BC2L set his heart and mind on BC2’s group ministry. It was a small group when he first got involved. “When I say small group ministry, it was like the traditional Sunday school model that you would be familiar with where you have a teacher that leads a Sunday school class on a Sunday morning” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). As an associate pastor, however, BC2L had a vision. He described his vision in this way,

It was my goal to take that small group model and expand on that and create a better system for relationship building and discipleship, and so we've instituted two different types of curricula: one for leadership training and one for discipleship to kind of take the small group from Sunday morning and make it live throughout the week, make it something broader than just the Sunday morning group. So, I would say that's been my biggest focus. To make our small groups on a Sunday morning healthier, more relationship-driven, and less of a structured Sunday school class.

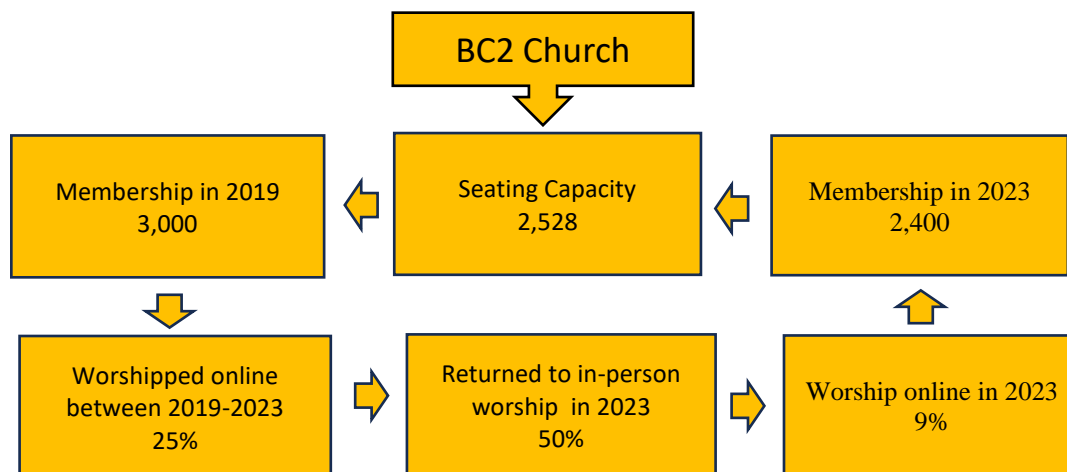
In observing and taking part in group ministry sessions, it became evident to the researcher that BC2L’s vision was and continues to be realized. Currently, BC2 has over 57 group ministries (too many to list individually). It will suffice to say that BC2’s group ministries serve church members of all ages from kids to seniors. Small groups, whichever one is selected, are spread throughout the church grounds in assigned buildings and rooms. Small group rooms are a place to gather, meet other members, partake in lessons, and learn more about the gospel of Christ. Small groups are also available to members of BC2’s surrounding community. In essence, small groups have been a blessing to many and are always growing. According to BC2P2, small groups at BC2 are continually evolving as evident with one of the groups she is directly involved with.

We just grew into two groups. One is called the Branch Young Family Class. We started as leaders in that class in 2019, I believe, and then we had our first growth. A part of the

class, singles, newly married, went to one class and we took the young family's class and so that class, as of mid-April, has now grown into two classes.

Figure 3

BC2 Church Transition Chart 2019-2023



BC3 Church. When compared to BC1 and BC2, BC3 has approximately half their history (63 years). The current pastor (BC3L) has been at BC3 for 20 years. Out of the 20 years, he has served 12 years as a lead pastor. While pastoring the church is his passion, BC3L enjoys missionary work. Domestically, BC3L has been on missions throughout the State of Florida as well as to regions of the southeastern parts of the United States. Internationally, BC3L has been on missions to Canada, Ecuador (twice), Haiti (multiple times), and Bulgaria. According to BC3L, several ministries were established when he became a church leader such as the Upward Basketball and Cheerleading program which he started before becoming a pastor.

A couple of other successful ministries have flourished since BC3L became the church leader. One of them was the Center Shot Ministries, an archery ministry. The program was opened to members of the church's surrounding community and accepted anyone from kindergarten to adults. The length of the program lasted anywhere between 6 to 8 weeks. "We've got senior adults who come to it and teach [participants] how to shoot ... we use that as a

launchpad for the gospel and so share the gospel” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023). One of the senior archery instructors and basketball referees is BC3P2, a church member, who said that

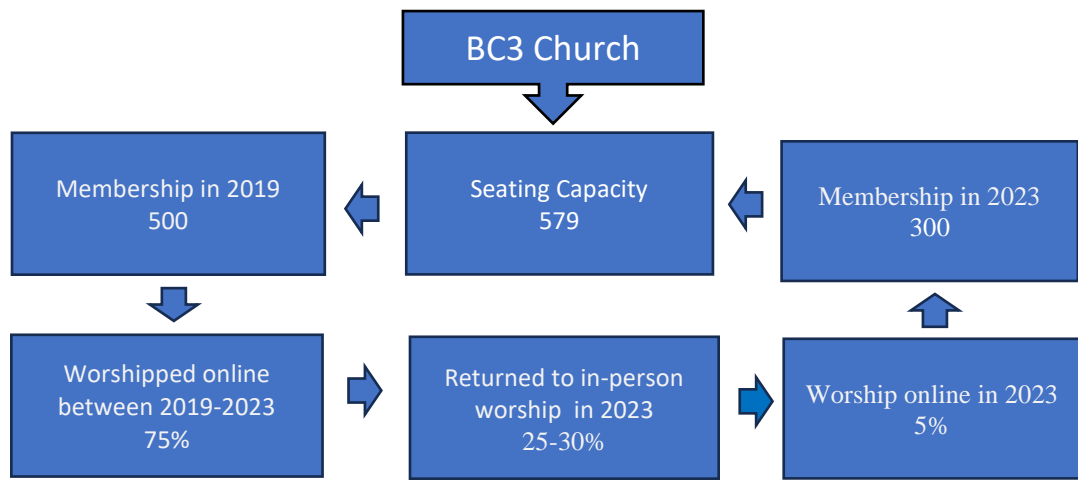
[the pastor] has brought in so many new ministries to our church and it sort of includes the person that wasn't there just for Bible study, but they got that out of it because every activity they did had a devotion tied to it. So, we were able to bring in a lot of people. We did a program called Center Shot where you could come in and learn how to shoot a bow and arrow. Then we had upward basketball, which had to do with bringing kids out of the neighborhood and teaching them basketball, but mainly teaching them about Jesus.

Spreading the gospel in this way (i.e., involving the community in church activities and programs), BC3 has brought many nonbelievers into the Body of Christ. According to BC3P2, there are approximately 400 children involved in the programs. Along with them are their parents. During program intermissions, families are taught about God and Scripture. Like any other new venture, these ministries had their challenges. Many church members, particularly seniors, went against the idea of involving the outside community, “but then, they saw all these families beginning to come into our church and they said this is great” (BC3P2, personal communication, May 5, 2023). BC3P1, a church member, described BC3L in this way: “Very caring. Powerful preaching. Preaching the right things. He preaches the Gospel” (BC3P1, personal communication, April 19, 2023). When asked about his vision for the church upon becoming church leader, BC3L provided a very modest (unboastful) response.

It was to reach people for Jesus Christ, as best we can, to be involved in missions, to be involved in evangelism and reach our community, and then train people to go out into the world, which includes doing mission trips. And I don't just tell people to go on mission trips, I go with them as I set that example.

Figure 4

BC3 Church Transition Chart 2019-2023



BC4 Church. BC4 enjoys a long history (148 years) with its list of land purchases, misfortunes, construction of buildings, and church leaders. The church’s current building was built in 1985. According to BC4L, BC4 has experienced its changes “with attendance through the years [Figure 5], but it's been a pretty strong church in the community” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). When BC4L became the church leader, several ministries such as the food ministry, prayer ministry, and the children’s ministry were established, along with a Sunday night service. BC4P1, a church member, concurs. “Some [of the ministries] were the Children's Youth Ministry, Hostess Ministry, and the Evergreens Ministry which was for [sic] our senior adults. There were quite a few ministries when I first attended. There are different ones now” (BC4P1, personal communication, May 3, 2023).

It has been several years since BC4 had a Sunday night service, but, according to BC4L, it “started having a meal on Wednesday nights to get people back together, and they were doing a little devotion. So, we have a full service for our adults on Wednesday night, prayer service, and Bible study” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). With a fervent desire to teach and guide God’s future generations, BC4L also has an active role in the children’s

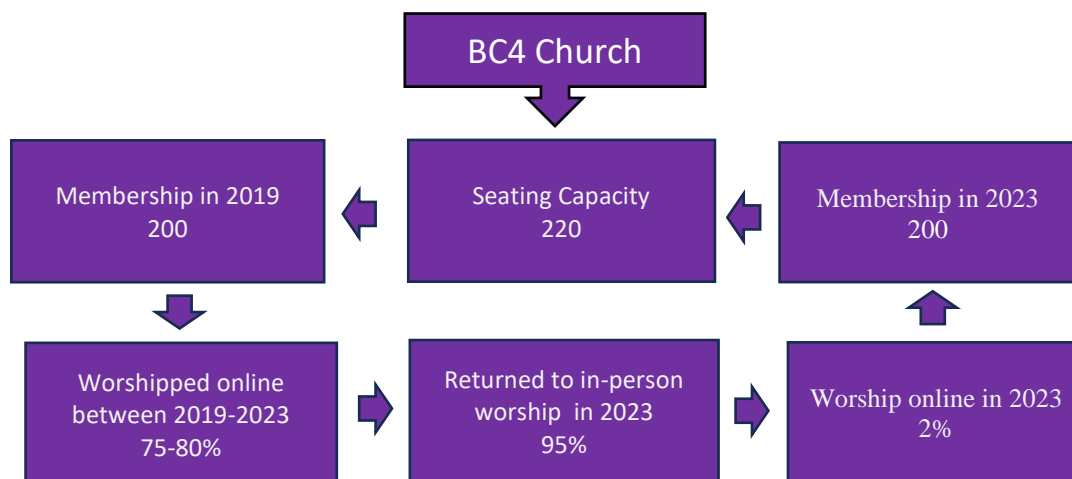
ministry. When asked about his vision for the church, BC4L’s response was one of continued perseverance. “I’d never pastored before so, for me, it was kind of learning on the job. For me, it’s about preaching the truth of the word” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

According to BC4P1, while BC4L is a relatively new leader in the church, he has been leading BC4 toward growth.

Back then, we were still growing [she said]. And of course, our church went through a big transition. We had a new pastor; he’s just been here for [a few] years. So, some people went with our old pastor, some people came to see our new pastor. But after [he] came, the church was growing again. So, we’re back to growing again. We have guests every Sunday.

Figure 5

BC4 Church Transition Chart 2019-2023



BC5 Church. BC5 did not meet the study’s parameters. Therefore, any findings related to BC5 were included in the study for validation and confirmability only. BC5 was established in 1974 (49 years ago). BC5 is the youngest church related to this study. According to its church leader, BC5L, not very much was going on in BC5 when he became the church leader. “The church did not have a lot going on as far as any kind of events or programs” (BC5L, personal

communication, April 7, 2023). He referred to the situation as a blank slate and as a blessing, a state of affairs that can best be described in BC5L's own words.

When they asked me to come and be the pastor, there were 12 voting members and an average attendance of around 30 on a Sunday morning. Previously this church, back in the early 2000s, was running between 100 and 150 on a Sunday morning. The glory days had been long gone, the church had been in decline for 10 years in every way, numerically and financially. And there were talks of closing the doors.

BC5L considered the situation a blessing because, in this way, he, and his wife, did not have to concern themselves with already established ministries or church ideologies they would consider unfavorable. They had much rather engulfed themselves in uplifting the church. BC5L said that "the hardest things for a church planter to get when you're starting a church are 1) a team of [dedicated] people or a core group of people and 2) a place to meet. Those are the two biggest obstacles" (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023). Both of these essential elements, he felt, were present in BC5. The only thing missing was a church leader or, as he put it, "a church-playing [sic] spirit" (i.e., a church leader with a spirit for the church) who would help the church grow.

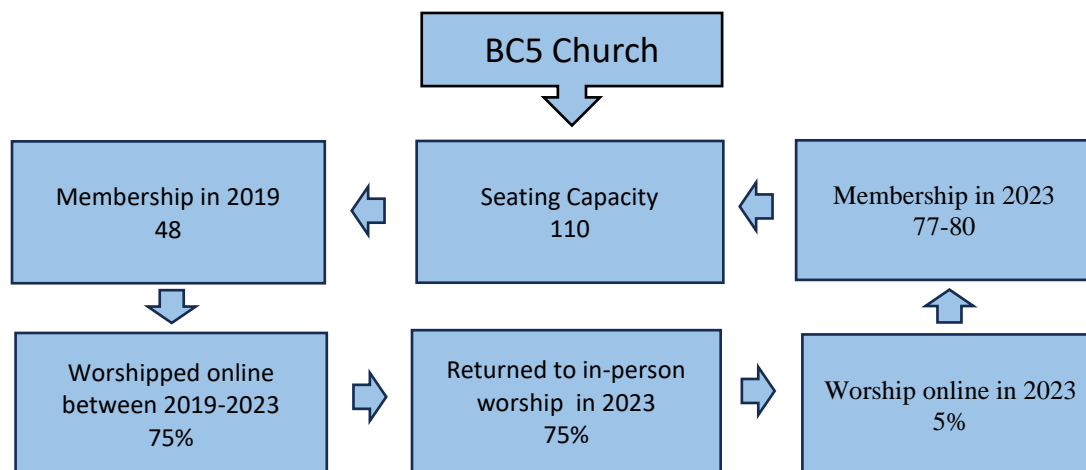
BC5 provided no church members through which the leader's character and abilities as a leader could be examined. Neither was there a church member available to confirm the condition of the church as illustrated by BC5L. However, from what the researcher gathered by way of the interview, observations, and participation in both in-person and online worship services, BC5L is a church leader determined to transition BC5 from an ailing to a healthy church. As pointed out, before BC5L became the church leader BC5 was in decline with an in-person membership of approximately 30 worshippers. Currently, BC5's in-person attendance has more than doubled (Figure 6). When asked what his vision for BC5 was, BC5L answered without hesitation.

[The] vision, that God gave us for this church, was that we would get it back on its feet, to build the foundation and help this church to get back from just surviving to live and

then to thriving and being a healthy church. And I think the biblical health of the church is the ability to send and reproduce. So, our goal here, at [BC5], is to get to a point where we'd be able to send out missionaries and also start a new church from [BC5]. In a sense reproducing ourselves and giving birth to that sense. So long term, I don't know how long that will take, but I feel that biblical health is not just how many can you sit, but how many are you sending. How many are you giving the ability to reproduce and accomplish the Great Commission?

Figure 6

BC5 Church Transition Chart 2019-2023



RQ1 Summary

RQ1 sought to determine three aspects of the research related to the phenomenon under study. 1) The lived experiences of church leaders regarding in-person church attendance on or before 2019. 2) The lived experiences of church members regarding in-person church attendance on or before 2019. 3) Church leadership visions for each of the participating churches. The lived experiences of both church leaders and church members illustrated that church attendance on or before 2019 was either steady, strong or getting stronger. This, according to the data, illustrated those Baptist worshippers in Seminole County, Florida, were, at the time, favoring in-person worship over online worship. The data also showed that, aside from experiencing stability and growth, church leadership visions were being realized. However, as charts (Figures 1 through 5)

reveal, in 2019 churches in Seminole County, Florida, began experiencing a transitional phase from which, based on the researcher's observations, several did not survive.

Research Question 2

RQ2 sought to determine what Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believed were the primary factors that led to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and a rise in participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. As it has been communicated (RQ1), beginning in 2019 but mostly in 2020 Baptist churches in Seminole County were confronted with a highly unexpected social situation that caused a shift from in-person to online church participation. Several factors have been attributed to the change. Based on participant interviews, the data found some common factors. As Table 3 shows, two themes were established from the collected data. Table 3 also shows that data collected from five church leaders and three church members were used for RQ2 Theme 1. Data collected from three church leaders and one church member were used for RQ2 Theme 2.

Table 3

RQ2 Theme, interview questions (IQs), and participants

| Theme | Leader IQs | Leader | Member IQs | Member |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Theme 1 Participation and Illness | 4,7 | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L, BC5L | 4,7 | BC1P2, BC1P3, BC3P2 |
| Theme 2 Improper teachings | 5, 6 | BC3L, BC4L, 13 | 5, 6 | BC3P2 |

RQ2 Theme 1 Finding

For the most part, participants were unable to evaluate what had caused a lack of in-person church participation before the year 2019. As found, outside the usual fluctuations in numbers, in-person church participation in Seminole County, Florida, was steady, strong, or getting stronger. Participants did, however, provide data on what they thought contributed to a

lack of in-person church participation from 2020 to 2023. In their answers to questions 4 and 7 (Appendices K and L), church leaders and church members unanimously agreed that while the livestreaming of worship services and online church participation existed before 2019, COVID-19 was a major contributing factor to a disruption in in-person worship services. Fundamentally, COVID-19 forced Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, to find a way to survive. Many, such as the churches in this study, ventured into available online technological channels to stay afloat.

According to one church leader, BC4L, “Before COVID, attendance was good. I don't think we had a lack of participation” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Another participant, BC2L, said, “I can very much tell you that the peak of our attendance was trending toward the beginning of COVID. It was a growing season for five years leading up to 2019” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). In addition, BC1P3 shared that “before COVID attendance was higher. We [had] two Sunday services because we [couldn't] have that many people in our main sanctuary ... we needed to have two services to accommodate the number of people that wanted to physically attend” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023). A second church member, BC3P2, added that in-person attendance before COVID was pretty good. To validate these claims, BC5L added that “before COVID, [his] church was growing” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023).

As has been well documented, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted the normality of life throughout the world. The Baptist Faith in Seminole County, Florida, was not spared.

Many Baptist believers perished others were afraid. According to BC1L,

When COVID hit and the deaths started to happen all over the country, even here locally, I was having funerals, we didn't come in the building, in graveyards outside, and people separated. It was so traumatic. For two years, since 2020 when COVID hit, I was burying people that I love, young people, and older people. I was having funerals fully masked

and people standing up. There was no hugging, there was no touching, there was no breathing, and no one could come to church.

All four participating churches in the study experienced similar situations leading the researcher to the possible conclusion that Baptist worshippers throughout Seminole County, like most citizens, were afraid. In shepherding God's people church leaders were uncertain how to proceed. In some churches, the ravaging effects of COVID-19 were left to chance. Secular governmental restrictions kept church leaders weighing their options. According to BC3L,

When COVID first hit, we took the precautions that our county government recommended, and we shut down and went online only for about 6 weeks. Then, after that time, when things started loosening up, we began back with just one service because we normally run two services ... In that first year of COVID, we would go forward a little bit, and then COVID would break out, we'd have a large number of our people who would have COVID so we would back off and then we would come back. And so, in the first two years of COVID, I conducted a lot of funerals. Some of them were directly COVID-related people who had COVID and passed away because of it. Most of those funerals were graveside only because folks didn't want to be indoors.

As the study found, between 2020 and 2023 the primary factor leading to a lack of in-person church participation in Seminole County, Florida, was fear. Fear of shaking hands, fear of hugging, fear of being too close, fear of worshipping together, fear of taking part in human elements that make up the Body of Christ. COVID-19 had no academic, economic, social, or cultural boundaries. Everyone was subject to its effects. According to BC1L, "There was great fear in the African American churches, so people stayed away ... The fear has been so vicious in most African American churches I know that some have never bounced back from it" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023).

Study findings also determined that the overwhelming sense of fear gave rise to other factors leading to a current lack of in-person church participation. One of the most evident is reluctance. Because of the possible outcome (illness or death) of being around others in a close church environment, many Baptist believers were reluctant to participate in in-person worship

services. According to BC2L, “It was September of 2020 before we got back to completely in-person worship services, and completely in-person small groups ... recognizing that there were going to be some people who continued to put their safety first and decide not to come” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023).

Reluctance, however, varied depending on how churches handled the crisis and the length of time a participating church went without in-person worship services. BC5, for example, was shut down for three months, BC4 and BC3 closed for six weeks, and BC2 for 3 months. BC1 was shut down the longest. “We started later than some of the white churches,” said BC1L, “The white churches approached COVID a little differently than African American churches, very differently” (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Thus, the longer a church closing lasted, the more possible it became for believers to become accustomed to their new order of worship which leads to another primary factor: comfort.

According to BC1P3, whether saved or unsaved, people are developers of change. When people are, therefore, left in a new environment for too long, they will create new habits. “It takes 21 days to learn a new habit or to get rid of an old habit. We were in COVID for way over 21 days. So, we built these new habits ...” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

Whether the 21-day habit-forming rule is at all plausible remains to be determined, research is needed for the researcher to confirm this claim. According to one source,

The 21-day myth began as a misinterpretation of Dr. Maxwell Maltz’s work on self-image. Maltz did not find that 21 days of task completion forms a habit. People wanted it to be true so much so, however, that the idea began to grow in popularity. (Selk, 2013, para. 2)

Regardless of this contradiction, what appeared conceivable was that new ways of thinking are formed when people partake in behavior for a long time. One church leader, BC4L, hinted at this possibility. “So COVID comes along and they shut everything down ... They said it would take

15 days to flatten the curve. Well, the 15 days turned into years” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

Thus, whether 21 days or three years, what the data showed is that many Baptist church members of the participating churches became complacent with the ability to worship and participate through online channels. According to BC1P3, “What COVID did is, for some people who attended church, they had too much time on their hands, obviously, and felt that they didn't need to come to church” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Another participant, BC1P2, shared that people don't have to travel. They are “just comfortable staying at home. You don't have to get dressed. You can just listen while doing some of everything” (BC1P2, personal communication, April 24, 2023). A third participant, BC4L, believes that the current lack of church participation can be attributed to egocentrism.

America today is a very selfish culture [he said]; a very self-centered culture and it is my generation. What can you do for me? Well, I don't like the songs y'all play, so I want to go where they play the songs I want to hear. That's kind of the mentality. It is an entitled generation.

Along that same trend of thought, the validating study participant, BC5L, shared that American culture and American Christianity are not very committed. According to him, American culture is a pretty apathetic (lazy) culture. “You can get anything without leaving your house. You don't have to go shopping, you can get food delivered, and so, in a sense, the online church became an idea that I can even get church delivered to me” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023). Likewise, BC3L agrees. “I've polled our people and asked [they] give me their top three things the church faces today. Apathy is one of the top things that I see people reporting back to me. I've had a great response to that” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023).

At this stage, the reader may be thinking that online worship and comfort were only attributed to Baptist church members. Based on the data, Baptist church leaders, just like Baptist church members of the participating churches were also accepting of online worship practices. In fact, in three instances, the data showed that some leaders preferred online rather than in-person worship. According to BC1L, conducting Bible studies, teaching, and spreading the gospel online had been a huge convenience during a time of social crisis (COVID-19). However, knowing his church wanted him to continue teaching them about God's word in in-person services, BC1L fought against his inclination to continue his online practices and complied with the wishes of the church body. In his own words,

It's been so convenient ... I fought Moses. I'm talking about me, Moses Washington. It became so easy for me to teach the Bible from the office of my house, where I didn't have to dress up. I could put on some shorts and dress from the waist up and teach the Bible and sit there. It's comfortable. I don't have to rush out and drive 20 minutes away from my house to get here ... It was so convenient.

I then asked if he thought this was an isolated feeling or if it was something other church leaders had experienced. As the researcher had anticipated, a sense of comfort and an adaptation to a new way of doing things was not alien to just a small number of people. As confirmed by BC1L, the ability and comfort to preach and worship online had, by 2023, become a systemic matter of faith.

I have some friends, Ismael, that you would not believe. I talked to them here [at BC1] a few weeks ago. Some have churches larger than ours. They have not yet gone to do an in-person Bible study. They admitted that as we were in our group talking pastor [to] pastor and I heard several pastors say: you know what pastor, my biggest issue for not starting Bible studies is not so much the parishioners, it's me. It has become comfortable. These are pastors admitting the convenience and the comfortability [sic] of doing it from home.

BC1P3, who is a church member and part of the leadership body at his church, shared that before COVID-19 members of the leadership body were asked to convene at their church to go over lesson plans and church business matters. At the onset of COVID (after restrictions were

implemented), meetings had to be moved online. When restrictions were finally lifted, BC1P3 suggested to members of the leadership body that meetings be moved back to the church, but the response was not what he expected.

Our meetings used to be only face-to-face. During COVID we started doing them virtually. [After restrictions were lifted] I said. Well, we could start meeting at the church again. But the majority said no ... no ... no ... no. Let's not do that. Let's stay at home. So, I said, well, we need to set an example. That is, we need to come together and meet face-to-face. But they were like, nah, not right now. But it wasn't because of COVID. It was because we'd adjusted to the convenience of meeting virtually and what would be the value of us having to come to church face to face.

RQ2 Theme 2 Finding

Aside from comfort, other possible factors were found to be contributing to a lack of in-person church participation. One of them was the apparent embracing of some aspects of secularism. In describing the blending of these ideological differences, BC3P2 shared that:

One of the things you can't do and that you should not do is do what the mega-churches do. They've got a coffee shop. They've got this, they've got that. They have social things. It's almost social to the point of oh, we forgot. We forgot to mention the Lord and what we were talking about ... the further you go away from the word toward social activities the less God's going to bless the work that's done there [in the church] ... the next thing you know, they're in trouble because they have now become a social order and not a religious order.

Along those same lines, another participant, BC4L, pointed out that often whether church members become more interested in the aspects of secularism rather than their Baptist faith depended on what they learned at home during their upbringing. The researcher's personal experiences agree with this claim. Whether it was matters of faith or the secular world, most of what was learned at home lasted a lifetime.

I've seen, in all my years of ministry, [that] some people just aren't committed to where [church] is the priority of their life ... If you don't bring your children to church, if baseball or cheerleading or softball is more important than coming to church with your kids as children, do you think, when they get to be adults, that all of [sic] a sudden church is going to be the priority? No, because you've said, hey, if it's fun or if it's something I like to do like I want to go ride on the boat on the river Sunday morning, then anything that I think is more fun becomes a priority over the church.

After closely considering audio interview recording(s) and interview transcribed data, an apparent element contributing to the lack of church participation was a seeming lack of biblical teaching and understanding. While this was not the case observed among the participating churches, some study participants shed light on the possibility that such was the case among other congregations. For example, in his interview, BC3P2 alluded to the possibility that some churches become so preoccupied with social elements that God is left out of the picture. “They've got a coffee shop. They've got this, they've got that. They have social things. It's almost social to the point of oh, we forgot. We forgot to mention the Lord and what we were talking about” (BC3P2, personal communication, May 5, 2023). In their interviews, other study participants seem to agree with BC3P2’s view. According to BC4L,

A lot of churches get too caught up in programs. Everything's programmed out. Sometimes things aren't allowed to be organic where God is in control and God's leading. We have our ideas, and we push those things, but, for me, when I came here it was about preaching truth, teaching the truth, and making sure that as a church we were holding to the Scriptures, not traditions of men, not my preferences, but what the Scriptures teach us. (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

Arguably, BC4L’s claim that, unlike some churches, he taught biblical truth is not definitive proof that a lack of biblical teaching and understanding was widespread amongst churches. However, when considered alongside BC3P2’s observation(s) concerning mega-churches becoming a social rather than a religious order (p. 127), there is an indication that such a possibility exists. Moreover, the same as BC1, BC2, and BC3 during COVID-19 BC4 experienced a period of decline in in-person church participation. However, as Figure 5 (p. 118) and Figure 7 (p. 153) illustrate, unlike the other three participating churches, BC4’s attendance after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted remained the same.

Addressing this very same question, BC5L, the study’s validating participant, shared that the weight of the responsibility to spread the gospel does not completely fall on the church

leader's shoulders. The spreading of the gospel belongs to every Christian who has accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Ephesians [4:11-13] talks about the role of pastors in equipping the saints for the ministry. So, I think a lot of people get the misconception that it's just a pastor's job to do everything which is not true. God has called every member to be a minister, every part, and everybody in the body of Christ has a role to play and gifts to use for edifying the body.

According to a third participant, BC3L, while Scripture is properly taught to believers, it is incumbent upon the believer to read the Bible for him or herself. In this way, during the delivery of a sermon or when participating in Bible studies, the believer can have a keen understanding of the messages being delivered and thereby creating a better appreciation for the word of God. According to BC3L,

People want to know, what am I going to do in [any given] circumstance ... and how do I live my Christian faith in this day? To learn that [believers] have to read God's word. [They] have to study God's word. People need good, solid teaching, not listening to every Internet preacher that's out there because you can presuppose something in your mind ... The Bible tells us that in the last days that people are going to have itching ears [2 Timothy 4:3-5]. They're going to seek teachers that are going to tell them what they want. Well, they don't need what they want, they need what they need. They need to know God's word.

A final example regarding the importance of biblical teaching was provided by BC3P2 who adamantly disagreed with a church leader concerning what he believed to be a moving away from Scripture and what BC4L considered the traditions of men and self-preferences.

They [the church] were wanting to nominate female deacons, and I said, you know, I can't find that anywhere in the Bible. He [church leader] said, well, so and so was a deacon. And I said, yes, in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament God ordained deacons, and He [God] said it is to be the husband of one wife [1 Timothy 3:12]. A woman can't be a husband and that told me that was a male's job, period! He [the church leader] didn't agree. So, I said, well, that's the main reason we left, because when you turn your back on Scripture ..., he interrupted and said no, we're not turning our back. In my heart, you are, I said, and if you nominate a young lady to be a deacon, well, I can't accept that.

As a result, BC3P2 left in-person church worship and joined an online worship service.

However, dissatisfied with the technological aspects of online worship, he eventually found another in-person church to attend in which he is currently participating and serving others.

A review of the Old Testament determined that women were an integral part of God's work. Miriam, for example, was a leader with Moses (Micah 6:4), Deborah was one of the judges (Judges 4:4-5), and Huldah was a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14). In the New Testament, some women had important roles in the spreading of the gospel. For example, Anna was a prophet (Luke 2:36), along with Phillip's four daughters, all of whom also prophesied (Acts 21:8-9), and there is also Phoebe who was, as the Apostle Paul declared, a deacon (Romans 16:1). All these women were used for God's glory, and one could, therefore, possibly argue against BC3P2's reasoning for leaving in-person worship. To be clear, BC3P2's perspective was not included in this report to refute or agree with what he shared or to make a theological claim. It was included as an illustration of a specific example of how interpretive differences affected in-person church attendance.

RQ2 Summary

RQ2 sought to determine what factors contributed to a lack of in-person Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida. Participants suggested that the effects of COVID-19 gave rise to a sense of fear, reluctance, comfort, and the forming of new habits amongst the faithful. Secularization and improper biblical teachings were also believed to be contributing factors by some. Based on participant interview responses and participant discussions, individual factors such as reluctance and comfort may be overcome, but the perspectives of the participants raise a question for the researcher: Should Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, strive for a continuance of in-person worship, or should they further embrace online worship?

Research Question 3

RQ3 sought to determine what Baptist church leaders and Baptist church members could have done to stop or curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida.

Whether supportive of a biblical or secular worldview what transpires in the failure or success of an institution, organization, or group depends, to a great extent, on the choices the leader and membership body makes (Hermans, 2012). Baptist churches in Seminole County are no exception. As Table 4 indicates two themes were established for this endeavor. Table 4 also shows that data collected from four church leaders and four church members were used for RQ3 Theme 1. Data collected from five church leaders and two church members were used for RQ3 Theme 2. Participants provided their views on what actions their churches took to keep or limit believers from leaving in-person worship services and what could be done to keep in-person worshippers from leaving in the future.

Table 4

RQ3 Theme, interview questions (IQs), and participants

| Theme | Leader IQs | Leader | Member IQs | Member |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| Theme 1 Differences in Worship | 8,9,10 | BC1L, BC2L, BC4L, BC5L | 9,10 | BC1P1, BC1P2, BC2P2, BC3P2 |
| Theme 2 Spreading the Gospel | 6,7 | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L, BC5L, | 4, 7 | BC1P2, BC3P2 |

RQ3 Theme 1 Finding

Participants were asked for their views on what they felt could have been done to either stop or reduce the number of believers leaving their churches. Participants were also asked what they felt could be done to possibly bring back those believers who, for one reason or the other, had left the church. Responses varied. In BC1L's view, church leaders needed to simplify the message of the gospel to keep believers from leaving the church. According to BC1L, quite often

the delivery of the gospel message has been so far beyond people's understanding that listeners leave the church either confused or wondering whether they should return. Believers, he continued, want to attend a church whose pastor can preach and teach God's word in a way that is not only acceptable but also relatable to what the hearer of the word may be going through.

I think the message and our preaching. Taking the scriptures and making them practical. Showing the need to be around people. Just preaching to get people to come back. The Bible says faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God. We'll have to build faith in people using practical messages. Messages that people can grasp. Not these way over people's head types of messages.

Another participant, BC3P2, said that part of the problem as to why believers leave the church is the separation that sometimes exists between those who have much and those who have less. To him, a church and its teachings should be an embracing church where believers are welcomed regardless of their economic or social standing, a practice that, in his experience, is not seen in many Baptist churches. Fortunately, he said, the church he attends does not fall under this category and is one of the reasons why he has remained a faithful member of the church for the past 11 years. As an example of church acceptance and meekness, BC3P2 shared one experience:

We had an old guy that came to one of our services one morning [he said] and everybody was looking [at him]. He was sloppily dressed and looked like he hadn't shaved in three or four weeks, and at the end of the service the call was made, and he came up. [The pastor] was upfront talking to him. Next thing you know, [the pastor] got him in his arms. Just hugging him. And he [the pastor] says to everyone: 'Praise the Lord for this man today.' He [the pastor] got that guy cleaned up and I mean, he's doing everything he should be doing in life.

Along those same lines, BC5L, the study's validating participant, shared that oftentimes believers leave the church because of the way they have been made to feel not just by members of the church but also, and most importantly, by church leaders themselves. The validating participant added that church leaders should be more mindful of their humanness and not allow

their thoughts and emotions to dictate how they are to relate to members of God's flock. In this way, the discernment and positive behavior they give to others will project itself through the Body of Christ and onto members of the outer community.

As for people who have left the church or maybe even have left the faith [BC5L said], a lot of that, I think is hurt. Maybe they're angry at God or they have sensed hurt in the church, or they are in a church that has been just outward duty and they've seen hypocrisy. Or they, maybe, see parents doing things at church on Sunday, but the rest of the week there was no real change. I can't say everybody's that way, but that seems to be a common theme as to why people have left churches completely.

Some participants believed that one of the best ways to keep believers from leaving the church is to establish a strong and lasting relationship between those in leadership roles such as deacons and deaconesses and church members. In this way, church members can feel they are important to the church and, therefore, be connected to the church and enthusiastic about partaking in the church's activities and operations. In validating this, BC5L shared that "what a lot of people are looking for in this day and age is a connection" (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023).

They want genuine relationships, [he said] and they want something real. We can only do what we can do. But we can try to make genuine relationship connections with people ... Millennials and the younger generation respond well to sincerity and being genuine. So, I think sometimes the church can be more that way. And I think that helps people to be connected. But I think also just being real about what Jesus has done for you.

A second participant, BC2L, agreed with this approach, stressing the importance of relationship building. In his view, if a believer is made to feel useful in the church, the possibility of him or her leaving the church is dramatically decreased and the possible growth of the church, while not guaranteed, is increased. Believers, he continued, not only seek a sense of belongingness they also want to feel they are contributing, in some way, to the church (the Body of Christ), their community, and, quite often, to society as a whole.

The only real thing that I can come to [BC2L said] is to do a better job of ensuring that everybody who graces the doors of your church builds a relationship with someone in the church. More often than not, two factors will keep them. One is they have somebody that

they love that's in the church. If someone has a relationship in the church the likelihood of them staying in your church is very, very high. And so, if they come into your church, get them into relationship building as quickly as you can. The other is if you can get them to serve in your church, the retention rate jumps to almost 90%. It's almost guaranteed that they can build a relationship with someone, and they can roll up their sleeves and serve someone. They're going to stick around and feel like they have a reason to be at the church.

Agreeing with BC2L, another participant, BC2P2, saw the value in establishing relationships with members of the congregation and members of the outer church community who have ventured into the possibility of taking part in programs that are offered by the church. She agreed that relationships work for church growth and church health. She encourages other churches to consider this approach as a means of limiting the possible departure of members from the church. According to BC2P2,

I think [the pastor] has done a really good job in this area of tracking new people, tracking the people who are in our demographic, and encouraging us to reach out to them, introduce ourselves, and invite them to our particular class. Then once they do come to class, we're engaging with them, not just like, oh, hey, I'm so and so and not talking with them. I mean, that's what I've seen to be successful and why we've maintained a lot of people in our class and why it's grown.

Seeing the importance of relationships, a fourth participant, BC4L, believes that pastors should make it a point to establish relationships, however possible. Doing so is not at all that complicated, he said, and should be done to develop a better connection between the church and its membership body. “We have a group that meets once a month ... Our men get together and pray. [They] pray for our church, our nation, for just different needs. Building those relationships one-on-one. That's kind of how I approached the pastorate” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Additionally, the study's data found that not only can relationship building be beneficial to curtailing or stopping an exodus, but it can also prove advantageous when attempting to bring back into the church those members who, for whatever reason, have left the church. This approach, of course, may not always be successful. There are those believers who

once they have left the church will not return. However, the possibility is that, because there is a connection, reaching out to them will encourage their return. According to BC4L,

It just goes to the personal touch. Those that are in person may be reaching out to those that aren't coming and saying, hey we miss you, we sure would love to have you there in person with us. Maybe they come back with a good reason. But if it's just because I'd rather kick my feet up and drink my coffee in my recliner, that's a hard issue. Hopefully, you can get them to come back, but maybe, maybe not, but it's relationships. I think it all goes back to relationships and communication.

A second participant, BC1P1, also felt that the church should reach out to those who have left the church to demonstrate caring and love and that they are important. The lessons of the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), she said, should be remembered. As believers, we are to go out and find those who have gotten lost. At the very least, try to have those who have left the church return to the church. “Reach out to your members, reach out to the ones who have not shown their faces [and] let them know that we're here ... Some might come back” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023).

However, while some participants, such as BC1P1 and BC4L, believe that reaching out to those who have left the church is the proper course of action, other participants believed a different approach was more appropriate. In BC2L’s view, for example, biblical teachings should be allowed to take their proper course.

I think, just continue to do ministry faithfully [he said]. I tend to think that if people decide to leave, there's never a one size fits all reason for that, and I can't go and market to them hey, come back, come back, right? But if I faithfully do what God's called us to do here and if our church is led in the way it needs to be led then somewhere along the way they might feel the desire to return, and if we're doing it well if we're doing it right, it should connect.

In this opposing view, a second participant, BC1P2, agreed, stressing that what was going to happen would happen in God’s time and purpose. As interpreted, those who left the church have left and there was essentially nothing anyone, not the church leader, not anyone from the

leading body, not a church member could do to bring the believer back into the church until s(he) decided to return. According to BC1P2,

The only thing that you can do is maintain what you were doing prior. People are going to make decisions and choices based on what they feel is comfortable and what presents the best opportunities for their lives. Sometimes there are things beyond your control that you can't do anything about. You just have to remain focused and committed to what you have always been doing. You might have to scale up a little bit to try and get more engaging and what have you, but, again, you have to also realize that [the] pastor is the shepherd, and as God reveals the things to him and the directions that he needs to take to either bring back congregants that left or to gain more.

In this regard, the data found a participant, BC2P2, who shared a slightly different perspective. To her, if a church member decides to leave, the church, having many other matters to consider and contend with, is to leave that member to his or her conscience. According to BC2P2, the church members who decided to leave will decide whether to return on their own just like s(he) decided to leave.

Let them go [she said]. The people that want to stay will stay. If you're not committed, go find someplace else. We've been in church ministry for a very long time, and we've seen some hard things. We've seen some ugly things. My husband and I have had conversations with people and said if you're that miserable at this church, please find another church. And we're not saying that with mean intent but you're not growing here and all you're seeing is all the stuff that's wrong and not [the] good. So go somewhere where you can be filled and where you can become a part of it.

RQ3 Theme 2 Finding

Between 2020 and 2023 Baptist church leaders as well as Baptist church members of the participating churches had to contend with COVID-19. There was much concern as to how Baptist churches would proceed with the devastating effects of the pandemic. Churches throughout the world in every faith practice were faced with the possibility they might not survive. Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, were no exception. They too had to survive. The question was: How? How can Baptist churches keep themselves together? How can they help their congregations? How can they continue to spread the gospel amid a somewhat

chaotic social situation? During the search for this study's participating churches, the researcher learned that several churches in Seminole County, Florida, permanently close their doors while others such as the four Baptist churches in this study, managed to stay afloat.

According to BC1L, it was not at all easy. Many times, he wondered if the church would make it, but BC1L did not lose faith. He trusted in God and continued spreading the gospel believing that God would see the church through the crisis. "God watches your faith. He'll see whether or not [sic] you are faithful to small things" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Part of the reason for his church's survival was that before the onset of COVID-19, there was an established technological ability for church members to partake in online worship services. According to BC1L, preplanning, along with commitment, a sense of responsibility, and, above all else, God's love was what got the church through the crisis.

As a pastor [he said], I felt, and I still do feel, responsible for the flock of God. And I prayed a lot, Ismael, asking God's guidance. I preached for two straight years virtually. I taught. I didn't miss for two straight years. I would be here with a camera and one of my men as I preached, I started first in my home, just me, making sure the message was getting out to the congregation. Two straight years. I would be here or at home preaching and teaching from the confines of my home.

Another participant, BC2L, shared that COVID-19 had a great effect on his church. However, like the previous account of survival, his church also had an established online presence through which church members could live stream worship services and partake in Bible studies. According to BC2L, all praises have to be given to God. The fact that God had blessed the church with the ability to have an online presence before COVID-19 arrived, was partly responsible for the church's survival. The rest was church commitment and effort.

For about 3 months [BC2L said], our worship service was completely online, and we didn't do anything on campus. There were some people, during that time, that felt that might be something we should continue. But it's kind of like when you have kids or grandkids, if you're separated from them for any length of time, no matter how many phone calls, face times, or online chats you do, you missed them. After a while, you kind

of begin to fade out in a sense, in terms of your influence in their life. And so, it was very important to us that we got back to in-person services as quickly as we could.

A third participant, BC3L, illustrated how his church survived. Like the previous two churches, staying afloat was God's doing along with great church effort and the coming together of minds in faith. Fortunately, deciding it was another way for the church to spread the gospel, his church kept pace with modern technology, and just before COVID hit, the church had developed the ability for church members to livestream worship services. According to BC3L,

In the first part of COVID, we shut down for about 6 weeks. We didn't have on-campus meetings at all. The Vacation Bible School that Summer, Summer of 2020, was a drive-through vacation bible school. Kids came through, we had packets and bags of crafts and materials and stuff prepared for them. They came through, we handed them the packet, and they went home. The lesson would be online. Each day we would put the lesson online. And so, we had to be creative with a lot of the things we did.

A fourth participant, BC4L, shared how his church managed to weather the COVID-19 storm. "It was God's doing," he said. Like the previous three churches, his church was technologically prepared allowing church members to immediately go online. As a leader, BC4L understands that "the purpose of my going to church [he said] is not so I can be blessed, it's so I can bless others [and] use the gifts that God has given me to edify and build up the Body of Christ" (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). In guiding his church through COVID-19, BC4L said,

We immediately went to just do our service online. We brought our praise team in. We did worship and we did it live with nobody here. We did our worship just like we would have done if it was full. And we live streamed that out and people watched from home. For Easter Sunday, we had them come out in their cars, they sat in their cars, and we transmitted it to their radios. They amend themselves by honking the horn or flashing their lights and stuff like that. We just got them together. But our people were hungry to be back together.

The validating participant, BC5L, like the previous four pastors, has been in the service of God for more than two decades. While his church had the smallest congregation in the study,

it nevertheless withstood the effects of COVID-19. Same as the others, BC5L believed the church survived by God's grace. God, BC5L believed, had prepared the church for what was to come. The same as the other churches, his church was technologically prepared and church members managed to continue worshipping online with little difficulty. According to BC5L,

We shut down in-person services for two to three months. And then we started reintroducing in-person services through our Sunday Night Service, which is typically less attended. But it seems like when we did that, there was about the same amount of people mainly because there were some young people that had just started coming to church right before COVID that we were able to do a lot of one-on-one and a lot of personal mentorships with them.

The above summations have not been presented in this study as a recognition of church leadership ability, perseverance, action, and courage. On the contrary, while all three leadership qualities (perseverance, action, and courage) are admirable and worthy of recognition, the summations have been presented to illustrate how these four men of God (five with the validating participant) endeavored to curtail the number of believers who would have, possibly, left in-person church participation had their actions not taken place. According to BC3P2,

For two or three weeks all the services were online. There was nothing that was going on outside of the online service. [The pastor] and Brother [Tom] and Brother [Henry] would all be sitting at a table, and they would go: today's sermon is this and that, and so forth. Then they decided to bring the praise team back with them, so they'd have songs. It was just like a regular service. You were just sitting in front of your TV or your computer.

A second participant, BC1P2, believed that the power of God was at work throughout the COVID-19 social situation. She added that God influenced the pastor to take the measures that he took so that the church could survive even if it meant that some would find other houses of worship or not return after becoming accustomed to worshipping online.

At one point [she said], before COVID, we would, after the congregational hymn, hug each other and a number of us missed that because that's the interaction we have with our fellow brothers and sisters on a Sunday or weekly basis ... I'm praying that we do get back to that because it helped a lot of people. A hug can do many different things to help your fellow brother and sister in Christ, just a simple hug.

In a separate interview, BC3L summed up BC3P2's and BC1P2's sentiments in this way.

“Preaching [to] an empty room is hard. I learned that I missed that interaction with people, even as much as an introvert and hermit as I am. I missed meeting with God's people, and we need to do that” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023).

RQ3 Summary

RQ3 sought to determine what Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, could do to either stop or limit the number of believers leaving in-person worship services in 2023. To determine a viable solution, participating churches were asked to share the direction they took from 2020 to 2023, during a period of social crisis, when they transitioned from in-person to online worship services. The answer, simply put, was technological preparedness. All four participating churches were able to continue spreading the gospel online.

Research Question 4

RQ4 sought to determine how Baptist church leaders and Baptist churches of the participating churches could work together to create a better understanding between Baptist in-person worshippers and Baptist online worshippers. In speaking with participants, all of whom had participated in online worship services, many shared the view that while online worship is an acceptable, and sometimes necessary form of worship, it should not be the rule. Table 5 indicates three themes were established for this endeavor. Table 5 also shows that data collected from four church leaders and two church members were used for RQ4 Theme 1. Data collected from two church leaders and two church members were used for RQ4 Theme 2. Data collected from all five church leaders and eight church members were used for RQ4 Theme 3.

Table 5

RQ4 Theme, interview questions (IQs), and participants

| Theme | Leader IQs | Leader | Member IQs | Member |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------|---|
| Theme 1 Irrefutable Worship | 4, 5, 6, 7 | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L | 6,7 8 | BC2P2, BC3P1 |
| Theme 2 Embraced Worship | 5,6 7 | BC1L, BC2L | 5, 6,7,8 | BC1P1, BC1P3 |
| Theme 3 Understanding | 10 | BC1L, BC2L, BC3L, BC4L, BC5L | 10 | BC1P1, BC1P2, BC1P3, BC2P1, BC2P2, BC3P1, BC3P2, BC4P1 |

RQ4 Theme 1 Finding

To reiterate, study data showed that when it came to in-person and online Baptist worship in Seminole County, Florida, the majority of participants were of the view that online worship was, in some cases, a necessity. As such, online worship services were preferred and, in many instances, considered an acceptable and viable form of worship. Nonetheless, the participants' perspectives pointed out that, when it came to the human element, in-person worship services were irrefutable and should, therefore, be continued. According to BC2L, in-person worship was crucial.

We did have an attendance trend that hurt for a while and that's because, I believe, relationship building online is difficult to do. You don't get the same amount of connectivity as someone [in person]. You are not able to shake their hand, look them in the eye, have a conversation with them about what's going on, and get them to respond ... Even if it meant we had a lesser crowd, we had more influence over their lives than if we just continued to meet online, especially in worship, but also in our small groups.

BC2P2 agreed. BC2P2 had the view that as part of a church's leadership body, in-person worship was important, and it was the obligation of any Baptist church member in a position of influence to promote in-person worship and shy away from any other faith practice that does not promote the human element.

A really big reason [she said] is because we were leaders in the church. It was, like, how can you lead if you're not there? I mean, we all, pretty collectively, hated getting together

because our class would meet through Zoom, and that was just so challenging. We would have computer issues and couldn't hear. It just didn't have the same feel, the same level of connection. It was really hard. With us being leaders, it was, like, we just have to be there in person.

BC3P1 went on to share how being in person made her feel. Family and friends were words she shared throughout the interview. In conversing with and observing her, during our interview, the researcher felt BC3P1's dismay over believers who profess to be Christians and yet have an indifference to the significance of the connectedness that takes place while physically in the presence of other believers.

I was happy [she said] to hear a sermon. Hear God's word. But I wasn't happy being away from the church. As with my own family and friends outside of the church, I wasn't able to be with my church family and communicate the way I want to communicate with people. It's cold, to me. Not the sermon. I'm not talking about the sermon. But when I come to church it's the fellowship with the members and my friends here, the family, and the music. The whole atmosphere is different when you are there ... It's just a completely different feeling.

BC1L put it this way, "we just got to keep promoting that human element. If you can come, we want you here ... we want to love you, we want to make sure that if something happens, I can put my arms around you" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). BC3L, shared that, as Christians, our "commitment is to be with your brothers and sisters. Love them in person. You can't feel that love through a screen, but you can feel it if you're present" (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023). Not all participant sentiments regarding in-person worship services are represented in this segment of the study's report, they are used in other sections. In attempting a sense of closure concerning favorable in-person sentiments, the researcher determined it should suffice to use an excerpt from BC4L's interview.

It's not about me using my gifts to edify me, and it's not about me sitting around waiting for somebody else to bless me. It is for me to be a blessing to someone else. That's the hug, that's the handshake, that's the smile, that's the pat on the back, that's the hang in there you can do this. Don't give up. Don't quit. Don't stop. Press on.

RQ4 Theme 2 Finding

While the majority of study participants considered in-person church participation to be the most vital form of worshipping God, the presence of online worship could not be denied. According to some study participants, if not completely embraced, online worship, at the very least, was accepted especially since the exclusion of online worship was doubtful. According to BC1L, technology is continuing on an upward spiral and as new technology is developed people will continue to adapt and use the new technology to add meaning to their existence.

I don't know if we will ever be able to stop people from doing online things. I don't know if we could ever stop that because there are some good properties to that. Sometimes when you are in a hospital bed because we had people that were sick, some people want to be here and can't, so they go online or maybe I was doing a series of sermons and the person was out of town or whatever. So, I think we're not going to ever stop it.

Agreeing with this perspective was BC2L, who shared that his church had been providing online worship services for many years. According to him, his church's online presence had a wide range audience both within and outside the State of Florida. Some of those participants, he continued, were unable to view and listen to the church's sermons or participate in the church's Bible studies unless it was through online channels.

We've got people that are in the hospital, homebound. We've got people that are watching us from broader regional locations. Maybe from Jacksonville [Florida] or from [the State of] Georgia and so would you prefer that they not worship with us? No, no. I mean, here's a great online tool for people in a broader audience or people that aren't physically able to worship with us.

BC1P1, a church member, believed that online worship services should have been discontinued. In this way, online worshippers would have had no other recourse but to attend in-person worship. After some reflection, however, her views changed when realizing that many of those seeking to hear and learn about the word of God and Jesus, both domestically and abroad, would be denied the message of the gospel.

My thing was this, stop the Zoom and all that. But then we not only reach the people within our congregation, but we are also reaching people in different states, Jamaica, the Bahamas, all over. So, we can't stop. But my thing was to stop, Zoom, and then force them to come back or force them to go somewhere instead of just sitting at home with technology.

BC1P3, a church member, provided the view that how one worships God did not matter.

To him, it was God who provided humans with the ingenuity and ability to explore and create an online presence. In His omniscience, he continued, God knew these technological times would come. We just had to be prepared.

The physical thing, physically coming face to face, I think it's very important [he said]. I think that helps you to build relationships with people. That fellowship that you can experience and share and be able to, again, not just with the pastor but with other congregants, and other members. So, I think that's very, very important. But from my perspective, it's not a necessity because I would say that the church is not the building.

RQ4 Theme 3 Finding

When study participants were asked how a better understanding could be created between the two spectrums of the phenomenon (in-person and online worship), responses varied. Following a close reading and analysis of the data, participant responses were combined into two groups: 1) Church leader responses and 2) Church member responses. Each group's combined view and opinions were then paraphrased into one paragraph. Each of the two paragraphs is followed by one interview excerpt determined by the researcher to best describe the group's sentiments. It was the researcher's intent and hope that together these two sections (paragraph and excerpt) will sufficiently present an understanding of the findings related to RQ4 Theme 3.

Church Leader Responses. All four participating Baptist church leaders were of the view that creating an understanding between in-person and online worshippers should start from the pulpit. The following four church leader opinions were consistent: 1) Online worshippers should be welcomed at the commencement of each in-person worship service. 2) Church leaders

should lead by example spearheading their in-person congregation into embracing online worshippers as fellow believers and as a part of the Body of Christ. 3) Online worshippers should not be criticized for their choice of how to worship. 4) When addressing those that are online, church leaders should speak softly to them and not bash them with Scriptural passages about assembling or using the Bible as a weapon.

According to the validating church leader, BC5L, “The pastor shouldn't beat his sheep down and say you know, you guys got to do better” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023). Another, BC1L, shared that “it's not so much what we say but how we say it” (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). All four church leaders suggested that when addressing the online audience, a church leader can be humble, welcoming, caring, loving, and still express the importance of being physically present at church without being critical or beating them down. For example, BC4L tells his online audience that “it's good online, but it's a whole lot better here in person” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Finally, according to BC3L,

I think the best thing that we can do is point out that it's OK to have differences ... whatever [it is] do all things in love. Try to put yourself in the other person's position. Those people who just are doing the online experience, ask yourself, OK, why are they doing the online experience instead of just saying, well, you should be in church! Well, maybe they're sick and they can't get here. Maybe their vehicle doesn't work, and they can't get here.

Church Member Responses. As mentioned on pp. 92-92 and p. 133, the study's eight in-person participating Baptist church members had, before and during the study, experienced online worship services. Based on the findings, all eight in-person participating church members agreed that an understanding between in-person and online worshippers was necessary. Their interview responses were also in agreement that much of the responsibility for creating a connection between in-person and online worshippers was in the hands of their church leadership

body. For the most part, the deacons of the churches were responsible for establishing and maintaining a connection between the church and newcomers. They were also responsible for building relationships. According to BC1P1, each deacon at her church had what she referred to as a “ward” (district or geographical area) and each deacon was responsible for the members of their ward. Thus, whether a church member worshipped in-person or online, it was incumbent upon deacons to reach out to church members to see how the church could better serve them. In this way, a connection between the two forms of worship was established.

Participants also shared that when establishing the connection, in-person deacons should approach online worshippers with an aura of love and welcomeness rather than aversion. According to Edwin Maldonado (BC2P1), “You can disagree with somebody, but still, show them love ... as opposed to No! You subscribe to this ideology or the societal norm, so I don't want anything to do with you” (BC2P1, personal communication, April 29, 2023). Approaching them outside of love or incorrectly, BC1P3 added, is also not the way to attempt to connect with online worshippers. “If you say not coming to church means that you're not either committed or you're not doing what a real Christian should be doing, then you could lose those people” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023).

Others agreed saying that in-person worshippers should be “thrilled that they [online worshippers] chose to do it that way” (BC2P2, personal communication, May 3, 2023) because if not, as BC1P3 pointed out, they could be lost. Participant church members also pointed out that to reach an understanding, one should first find out why online worshippers chose to worship online as opposed to in-person worship. Finally, according to BC1P2,

we have to allow, as Christians, regardless of whether we are online virtually or on-site, on the campus, we have to let the mind that is in Christ be in us. We don't know the circumstances surrounding why the people are virtual versus the people that are on site. It's not for us to make the decision or the discretion to discriminate against either side. I

think we have to have open-mindedness, at this point and time, in our given society, that someone is attending which is the overarching idea. We want people to come to know Christ so that their souls are saved, and they can spend eternity on the right hand with the Father in heaven.

RQ4 Summary

RQ4 endeavored to determine whether in-person worship Baptist church leaders and in-person worship Baptist church members of the participating churches, could work together to create an understanding between in-person and online worshippers. The responses varied with each of the thirteen participants providing his or her views. Since responses varied, two different groups of responses were formed. Church leader responses (group 1) were combined and presented in paraphrased form. Likewise, Church member responses (group 2) were also presented in paraphrased form. Participants in both groups agreed in three significant respects: 1) In-person worship should be the rule, not the exception, 2) online worship is sometimes necessary, and 3) an understanding between in-person and online worshippers should be created.

Research Question 5

RQ5 sought to understand how Baptist church members had experienced or were experiencing the lack of in-person church participation and the rise of online church participation in Seminole County, Florida. As Table 6 indicates two themes were established for this endeavor. Table 6 also shows that data collected from two church leaders and six church members were used for RQ5 Theme 1. Data collected from five church leaders and six church members were used for RQ4 Theme 2.

Table 6

RQ5 Theme, interview questions (IQs), and participants

| Theme | Leader IQs | Leader | Member IQs | Member |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--|
| Theme 1 Online Member Views | 7, 8,9,10 | BC2L, BC5L | 3, 4, 7, 8, 9,10 | BC1P1, BC1P2, BC1P3, BC2P1, BC2P2, BC3P2 |
| Theme 2 In-person Member Views | 7, 8,9,10 | BC1L, BC2L BC3L, BC4L BC5L, | 3, 4, 7, 8, 9,10 | BC1P1, BC1P2, BC1P3, BC2P1, BC3P1, BC4P1 |

RQ5 Theme 1 Finding

While much support was presented with the necessity of online worship, study data reflected that not all participants were content with taking part in either virtual classroom lessons, online Bible studies, or online worship services. Several participants spoke negatively about an online presence. BC3P2, for example, shared that online worship can, sometimes, prove very frustrating, adding that online participation takes no preference over in-person worship.

If you're online [he said], first off, there are technical glitches. Sometimes, the images just sit there, nobody's moving, nobody's doing anything, and it's trying to pick up the signal. So, you're interfered with. That was a terrible part of that. Sometimes it would last three to four minutes. You're sitting there watching that thing going around and around trying to pull the signal in and nobody is moving. I did not like that at all because we were missing the key statements that [the pastor] was making while he was preaching, a lot of times. You could go back and re-play it but once you start doing that, you're not in the realm of the church. You're in the realm of watching something that happened yesterday. In other words, if you're hearing a statement [the pastor is] making, and you hear someone shout amen brother! you feel more tied to it. But when you're sitting there and you're not hearing anything it's very upsetting.

In a different interview, the validating church leader, BC5L, shared that, Scripturally, Christians are called to gather together. Asking him to explain further, BC5L pointed out that in the epistles such as Hebrews 10:24-25 and Matthew 18:20 believers are instructed to gather together in the unity of the spirit. This does not mean, however, that they should gather together virtually. Online worship has its uses, BC5L added, but gathering together as the Body of Christ was not one of them.

I'm not a big fan of the online church because Scripture tells us that the church is the assembly. The Greek word for church, ekklesia, means assembly. It's the idea of assembling. Now, obviously, in the Bible, they didn't have the technology that we have today, so I don't necessarily think we were wrong in taking a break because of the [COVID-19] pandemic. But I knew that it would be wrong if we continued, if we never came back, because the church is about the gathering. It is about being together.

In agreement with this perspective was BC2L, who, while making certain church members were being provided with an adequate online church presence, realized that church members were getting accustomed to the idea of participating from their homes. According to him, measures were taken to stop church members from becoming too comfortable with the temporary practice of online worship.

We wanted people to start realizing that you can't just stay home and get the same thing. That's not a church. The church is people, the church is a relationship, and the church is gathering. And so, we started to do some things to stop catering to the online audience and start making them feel like they were missing something if all they were doing was watching online.

Several participants shared they had never worshipped online before but, to continue supporting and participating in their church, they agreed to venture into the unsolicited practice. Participants soon learned, however, that online worship was not something they preferred doing for a long time. BC1P1, for example, was one of them. She shared that “at first, it was exciting. Then it started getting longer ... at first, I was all excited and I couldn't wait to tune in on Wednesday night and Sunday. Then I'm like, OK, I'm getting burned out” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Another participant, BC1P2, also agreed that her family would participate online only to quickly learn that she was the only member of the family to give online worship, a chance.

My husband, when he had to be home with me for [my] recovery [from a surgical procedure], did not like virtual at all. It was like pulling teeth for him to even look at the service. Once I was able to get on my own feet and monitor myself, he was back on campus immediately. He did not like virtual ... my children are on site. They don't like virtual worship at all.

A third participant was BC2P2, a volunteer at her church who conducted classes for a couple of church programs. When the church was forced to temporarily close its doors, classes were conducted online. Soon after going online, however, BC2P2 arrived at the realization that the use of technology for online classes and online worship was not at all what she had imagined. During the interview, the researcher asked if she knew of others who may share her sentiments.

The only people I have had many conversations with [she said] would be the young adults and honestly, they pretty much hated it. They hated it. I mean, they did it because it was kind of the only option available, so I appreciated that they still saw the importance of getting together but they hated it. Our class was one of the first groups that wanted to be done with this Zoom stuff. They wanted to meet in person.

Based on their responses, the researcher determined that online worship was not a very welcomed practice amongst Baptist church members of participating churches. However, in all fairness to the research, when seeking the pros and cons regarding in-person and online worship there was one participant (BC2P1) who shared what could be interpreted as having an indifference to in-person participation. According to BC2P1, when it came to in-person worship services, he was not naturally attracted to a sense of community. BC2P1 explained that in a communal setting, whether secular or faith-based, one is susceptible to hurt and disappointment. While BC2P1 understood the biblical importance of gathering together, he said some believers do it out of obedience rather than a sense of belongingness.

I think there's a sense of vulnerability when you long for that type of [communal] connection. If it's done right, then you'll get that [belongingness]. If it's not done right, that's a risk that you have to take, going physically. Online almost seems like a safe space where you don't get that, and you sacrifice that for security in the sense of at least my feelings aren't going to be hurt. So, it just seems like there's a challenge [when online]. I think that challenge is attractive, in my opinion. For the physical church it's just like, well, this is just part of it. You're dealing with imperfect people, so there are risks.

In a separate interview, a second participant (BC1P3) provided data that could be deciphered as being supportive of online participation. According to BC1P3, a brick-and-mortar structure (a church building) is not entirely representative of God's church. The church, he said,

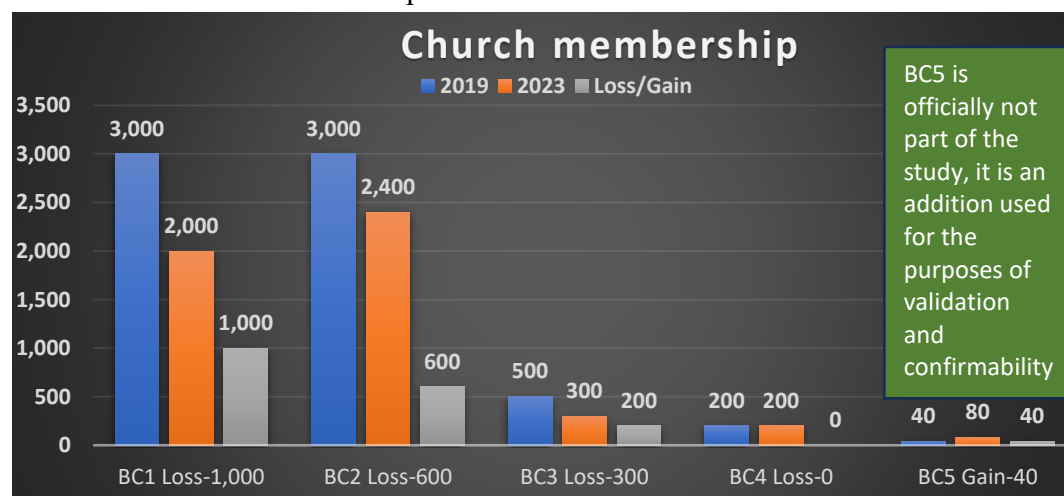
is you and I as God’s people. “You are the church. I am the church ... [It’s] better for the church to be seen as what the church is, in that the church is walking around in the grocery store, in the community, on our jobs” (BC1P3, personal communication, April 19, 2023). Based on Scripture such as 1 Corinthians 12:17, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 4:4, and Colossians 3:15, many Baptist worshippers, the researcher imagines, would agree with BC1P3. The researcher himself tended to agree with the view that, as believers, we are an individual representation of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12) and, therefore, the church (Colossians 1:24).

RQ5 Theme 2 Finding

Another question that arose during the data analysis process was: Can the lack of in-person and the rise of online Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida, be attributed to the onset of a social illness (COVID-19) or to a growing social desire to partake in an advancing technological world? As mentioned in the Demographic and Sample Data section (pp 93-98), before the onset of COVID-19 in-person church participation was either steady or growing. This was based on the gathered research data and on participant interview responses. As Figure 7 shows, BC1, BC2, and BC3 reported a loss in membership, BC4 reported stability in membership, and BC5 reported a gain in membership.

Figure 7

2019-2023 Church Membership Chart



The varying degree of church membership led the researcher to surmise that outside of fear (pp. 114-115) and comfort, (pp. 115-117), church leadership approaches during a time of social crisis may have contributed to the disparity in in-person church participation.

According to BC1L, before the social illness began in 2020, “Wednesday nights used to look like Sunday mornings ... this place was almost filling up with people during Bible study. And now, when I look out and see 25 people, that is nothing like it was before the pandemic” (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). The researcher’s observations confirmed that this was true. Very few church members were attending Bible studies when BC1 reopened its doors in 2023 (there were 15 attendees). The wearing of masks was still being implemented. By the writing of this report, wearing a mask was optional. However, Wednesday in-person Bible study participation had increased by very little (from 15 to 25 attendees). From what the researcher was able to determine, some BC1 members participated online. When asked why this may be happening, BC1L assumed it had to do with safety.

Ismael [he said], in talking to some people that had left, some said it was for safety reasons that they have not returned. Even now, some very faithful people are still saying: pastor we love BC1, we love coming to this church, but I still don't feel comfortable coming back. Others have gone on to other churches because they wanted us to open sooner and we didn't. Some people said we were just dragging our feet. You didn't open sooner, so they went, and I don't know if they officially joined, but some, a few members, have joined other churches

Researcher observations also determined that BC3, BC4, and BC5 had similar situations. BC2 was the only participating church in the study to be experiencing an increase in its Wednesday night Bible studies. This may have been because BC2 had the highest number of members in the study. It could also have been because, from an early point during the social illness, BC2 strategized its approach to online participation. According to BC2L,

When we were all online, it forced us to think about the quality of our service online because now no one's watching us in person. Everyone's watching us online and it should

have the same feel as if you were in person. That was kind of a big focus for us. Since everyone's at home, let's try to make the online experience as close to an in-person experience as we can make it which was great for a time. But then it reached a point where we started to realize that we made the broadcast so comfortable for people to stay home that we needed to stop catering toward the online audience and start making the online thing not as good anymore if you will so that people will want to come back to in-person.

According to BC1P2, “When we got hit with COVID, [the church] took a hit because a number of the congregants decided to attend other congregations just to make sure that they were having that on-site presence, and we weren't ready as a congregation” (BC1P2, personal communication, April 24, 2023). This was further confirmed by another participant, BC4P1, who said that at her church “attendance definitely went down, but as soon as we opened the doors, people were there and we even had new people come because they weren't able to go to their church, so they would come here” (BC4P1, personal communication, May 3, 2023). A third participant (BC2L) said that opening the doors earlier into the social crisis and welcoming believers from other churches was a determining factor in church growth.

We gained people in person [he said] that hadn't come to our church before because they said, well, my church is still closed. I want to worship in person, and I want to be with you. We took the opportunity and we've got some members now that have been with us since [then] that were not members before simply because we opened sooner than other churches in our area.

This is not to say, however, that church leadership planning, or the lack thereof, was the cause of a lack of in-person church participation. Baptist church members of the participating churches were presented with two primary forms of church participation: in-person or online. To reiterate what one BC1P2 shared, “People are going to make decisions and choices based on what they feel is comfortable and what presents the best opportunities for their lives” (BC1P2, personal communication, April 24, 2023). In a separate interview, BC3P1 attributed the lack of in-person church participation to laziness. She said:

I just think it's a lack of effort. If they are working people, they have to get up early Monday through Friday. Saturday, they go out and have fun. On Sunday they like to just sleep in, and I think that's what happens to a lot of people. I mean, when I was younger, and even some days now, I think it would be nice to be able to sleep till 10:00 but my desire to be here [at church] overrides that desire. It's not that I feel like I have to come. That isn't it. I don't feel like I have to be here. I want to be here. It's just the feeling that I have when I'm here. I just feel closer to God.

Participants were also asked to provide their views on the reasons why some Baptist worshippers of the participating churches would prefer to select in-person worship as opposed to online worship and vice-versa. Their responses have been placed into one of two groups: 1) In-person and 2) Online.

In-Person. As a summary of their responses concerning in-person worship, participants believed that in-person worship is biblical and that, as people of God, said BC2P1, participants “want to be obedient to God’s word” (BC2P1, personal communication, April 29, 2023). That is because, said BC5L, Christians “understand that in-person gathering is what God intended for His church” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023). In-person worship, however, is much more than joining together as part of the Body of Christ. “Human beings were never designed to be solitary creatures” (BC3L, personal communication, April 13, 2023).

According to BC1P1, “church attendance connects us socially, emotionally, and spiritually” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023). In her response, BC3P1 added that gathering with fellow worshippers at the church is what “strengthens [her] faith and love” (BC3P1, personal communication, April 19, 2023). In-person worship, said BC2L, is “the only way to genuinely have the church experience” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). Agreeing, BC1P2, shared that in-person worship could “never be fabricated, duplicated, or manufactured” (BC1P2, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Finally, according to BC4L, the in-person experience, “far surpasses any experience one can have worshipping through a

screen” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). It is important to note that only one participant (BC2P1) shared what could be interpreted as an indifference toward in-person worship (see *RQ5 Theme 1 Finding*, p. 143). The majority (12 participants) adamantly supported and preferred in-person worship.

Online. In their combined responses concerning online worship, participants believed that aside from immobility, age, illness, laziness, and the lack of accountability there were two major reasons why Baptist believers of the participating churches worshipped online. One, they worshipped online because it was more convenient, and two, they worshipped online because there was a lack of commitment. According to BC1P1, “You don’t have to get dressed, start your car, or leave your house” (BC1P1, personal communication, April 18, 2023). As BC1P3 opinioned, “people have adapted” and refuse to part with the level of comfort online worship offers. BC1P2 shared that “for some Christians, online worship is a needed break from the traditional presentation in serving God” (BC1P2, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

Other participants, like BC2L, believed that “the likelihood that an online worshipper feels part of the membership of one particular church is extremely low” (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). In their responses, BC1P3 and BC3L agreed with this opinion. Finally, “I wonder,” BC4L asked, “if they do prefer online worship, or do they just say they watch online? I wonder [he continued] how many say they watch online but do not actually watch” (BC4L, personal communication, April 19, 2023). It is important to note that outside of an absolute necessity such as immobility or illness, only one participant (BC1P3) expressed a positive view of online church participation (see *RQ4 Theme 2 Finding*, p. 137). The majority (12 participants) view online church participation as a temporary practice during times of social crisis such as COVID-19.

RQ5 Summary

RQ5 attempted to explore the experiences Baptist church members of the participating churches had or were having concerning in-person and online worship services. In this regard, two areas of research were considered: online church participation and in-person church participation. In online member views (Theme 1), participants shared their positive and negative views on online worship. In in-person member views (Theme 2) participants shared their positive and negative views on in-person worship. In both themes, participant responses were consistent. Their combined responses provided a glimpse as to why there may be a lack of in-person church participation within the study's participating Baptist churches.

Evaluation of the Research Design

Overall, the research design provided several positive aspects while conducting this qualitative phenomenological study. Through its interview format, the design presented an opportunity to try and understand what was taking place in the hearts and minds of Baptist church leaders and Baptist church members of Seminole County, Florida, between the years 2019 and 2022. It also provided an opportunity to surmise what is taking place in Baptist churches in 2023 concerning the continued lack of participation in in-person worship services and the rise of participation in online worship services.

By sitting and conversing with participants in a semi-structured setting where volunteers freely responded to a host of open-ended questions, insight was gained into the phenomena under study. All four of the interviewed church leaders shared their concerns with the decline of their membership bodies before and during the onset of COVID-19 and their frustration with members who decided to continue to worship online after governmental social restrictions were lifted. While church leaders have continued attempts to strengthen the spirit of believers and spread the

gospel through online channels, they have also continued to encourage people to congregate with others in an in-person worship environment. The same can be said of church members. All but two of the interviewed church members expressed a fervent desire and need to assemble with fellow parishioners in-person as the Scriptures instruct.

The research design did not restrict such views and opinions to one specific geographical locality. Participating churches were spread to three of seven incorporated cities (Oviedo, Sanford, and Lake Mary) and one of eight unincorporated cities (Geneva) in Seminole County, Florida. Two of the four participating churches (BC1 and BC2) were in the city of Oviedo, one (BC3) was in the city of Sanford, and one (BC4) was in the city of Geneva. The validating church, BC5, was in the city of Lake Mary.

As demographics illustrated (Table 1), there were eight men and five women in the study. Eight of the participants were Caucasian Americans, four were African Americans, and one was Hispanic. Generationally, the research design expanded across five generations. Post-war-1922-1977 (one participant), Boomers 1946-1954 (two participants), Generation Jones-1955-1964 (two participants), Generation X-1965-1980 (four participants), and Millennials-1981-1996 (four participants). Additionally, the research design provided a variety of academic, economic, and professional backgrounds.

Despite such positive aspects, however, the research design presented two significant flaws in the study. First, the research design failed to capture the views and opinions of adult church members, and possible church leaders, belonging to Generation Z (Gen Z) -1997-2012- whose adults range from 18 to 26 years of age. Members of Gen Z, the researcher believes, would have offered a more current perspective regarding the current technological world. According to Chillakuri (2020, p. 1278), “Generation Z stands out from other generations in at

least one aspect that [they] have never seen the world without the Internet.” Thus, it could be correctly surmised that adult church members belonging to Gen Z may have been in a better position to provide insight into why many current Baptist church worshippers of the participating churches are opting to Livestream and take part in online worship services.

The inability to gain the perspective of adult Baptist church members from Gen Z, however, cannot be completely attributed to the research design or the researcher. When establishing the study’s age delimitations (18 years and older), the researcher was hopeful that members of Gen Z would take part in the study. The inability to interview members of Gen Z can best be attributed to church leaders. Church leaders were at first reluctant to involve their memberships in the study opting instead to recommend church members of their choosing whom they felt could best represent their churches. As a result, the youngest adult in the study belonged to the Millennials.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Based on the collected data, the four churches that volunteered for this study (BC1-BC4) went from a stable, strong, or growing in-person body of believers to what could be described as a changing body of worshippers. In 2023 many Christian Baptist congregants of the participating churches appeared to have the option to either participate in in-person or online worship. According to the data, such things as fear, comfort, reluctance, and technology were some of the major elements contributing to a lack of in-person church participation. This chapter will endeavor to convey the conclusion of the study by presenting the research purpose, the five research questions, the research conclusions, implications and applications, the research limitations, and finally suggestions for further research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, in 2023. For this study, the lack of Baptist church participation was generally defined as attending an in-person service 0-1 time per month.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today's Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida?

RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices?

RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches?

Research Conclusions

At the commencement of this report (Chapter One), several claims were outlined regarding the possible elements leading to a lack of in-person church participation. As the researcher pointed out, some speculated that it might have been due to such things as diversity, pluralism, secularization, and ineffective church leadership (Fowler, Musgrave, & Musgrave, 2020). While Fowler, Musgrave, & Musgrave's case study findings appeared plausible and inclusive of Christians in the United States in general, much has transpired since they conducted the study in 2019. As determined by the findings in this current study, the four participating churches in this study were, in 2019, enjoying a period of stability and growth. However, the sudden development of COVID-19 in 2020, which affected faith practices throughout the world, placed Seminole County Baptist churches in a social situation in which they held on to God, pray a lot, struggled, and use technology to survive.

RQ1 Lived Experiences

RQ1 endeavored to explore the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person and online Baptist church leaders, and in-person and online Baptist church members of the participating churches. As the data showed, in 2019 both in-person church leaders and in-person church members were going through a time of growth. Trusting in God, pastors, for the most part, were shepherding God's flock through green pastures allowing them to feed off Scripture while lying next to still waters (Psalms 23). And church members, knowing this was a path to Heaven obediently followed. In-person Baptist church members, the data

revealed, supported their leaders and together participated in worship services, programs, and church activities that edified the Body of Christ and helped their churches grow. From a spiritual and faithful perspective, all was good.

Then, 2020 came, and along with it came COVID-19. The world went into a panic. Many felt like illness and death were everywhere. The government took measures. Public gathering places, including churches, closed. As the study's data showed, Baptist churches in Seminole County were also greatly affected. All four of the study's participating churches (BC1-BC4) and the validating church (BC5) temporarily shut down. According to church leaders, COVID-19 had caused many members of their congregations to become ill, several of whom had died. Seeing no other recourse, church leaders, deciding to follow governmental safety guidelines and trying to stop the spread of the disease among their congregants, embraced their already established online presence and continued to spread the gospel. Many of their church members worshipped online (Figures 1-5). The researcher, therefore, relied on the experiences of in-person worshippers who had also worshipped online to gather online worship data.

RQ2 Primary Factors

RQ2 sought to find out what primary factors contributed to a lack of in-person church participation and a rise in online church participation amongst Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. Research data showed that many congregational members belonging to the study's participating churches (BC1-BC4) had never experienced online worship. As such, the majority of in-person church members, at first, rejected the idea of using technology to congregate and worship God. They, including church leaders, believed the effects of COVID-19 would soon pass and in-person worship services would resume. But, as COVID-19 lingered from days into weeks and then into months, online channels, being the only socially available safe

way to gather and worship became more acceptable. As Figures 1-5 illustrated, online percentages began to rise.

As the effects of COVID-19 continued to instill fear, many of the in-person participating church members, the data showed, began to adapt to their new normal. As months turned into years, according to several participants, the new normal became, for many in-person participants, a new dimension of comfort. No longer did they have to get dressed, walk, drive, or spend time and money going to a brick-and-mortar church. As the validating participant, BC5L, put it, “In a sense, the online church became an idea that I can even get church delivered to me” (BC5L, personal communication, April 7, 2023). In at least three of the four participating churches (BC1, BC2, and BC3), when the churches began reopening their doors, not everyone returned (Figure 7).

This sense of comfortableness in online worship did not only reign amongst in-person Baptist church members. According to the data, comfort also proved true among several Baptist church leaders who welcomed the ability to conduct Bible studies and spread the gospel from their homes. In addition to comfort, the data showed that such things as convenience, laziness, a lack of accountability, and a lack of commitment were also primary factors in the lack of in-person church participation and the rise in online church participation among Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida.

RQ3 Curtailing the Exodus

RQ3 explored the possible ways Baptist church leaders and church members could either lessen or stop the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida. According to the data, three of the perceptions some Baptist believers of the participating churches stopped attending in-person worship services were because 1) Scripture was not being followed

according to God's instructions, 2) Scripture was not explained in a manner relatable to the hearer, and 3) Church members were often unable to understand how the pastor was interpreting Scripture. The Body of Christ is diversified. That is to say that not all believers have the same level of schooling, economic standing, social status, cultural upbringing, interpretation, and understanding.

According to the data, if in-person churchgoers are expected to stay in their places of worship, study participants recommended that Scripture be followed, that Scripture be properly interpreted, and that Scriptural messages be useful and realistic. According to BC1L, the Bible language has to have simple messages "that people can grasp. Not these way over people's head types of messages" (BC1L, personal communication, April 4, 2023). The data also found that some churches might consider developing a more embracing culture where every visitor is made to feel welcome regardless of appearance, level of education, economic or social status, cultural upbringing, or level of understanding. In addition, participant churches, by way of their leadership body and ministerial staff, found value in relationship-building and connectivity between church members and visitors. According to BC2L, when a church member has a meaningful relationship with the church, "the retention rate jumps to almost 90%" (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023). When a visitor was made to feel that s(he) has a connection with the church, s(he) is "going to stick around and feel like they have a reason to be at the church" (BC2L, personal communication, April 17, 2023).

RQ4 Better Understanding

RQ4 considered how Baptist church leaders and church members could create a better understanding between in-person and online in the participating churches. While the study found that some in-person church members were either neutral or indifferent about online worshippers,

the majority (12 out of the 13 study participants) were not agreeable with the practice. Some study participants referred to online worshippers as lazy, uncommitted, and bedside Baptist.

Quite often, believers will do as the church leader says and believe as the church leader believes. Thus, according to the data, an understanding between in-person and online worshippers starts from the pulpit with the church leader. The majority view of the study's participants was that, as shepherds, it was incumbent upon church leaders, and their leadership bodies such as deacons and deaconesses, to create a better sense of harmony between those who worshipped in-person and those who worshipped online. Understanding that they are the trailblazers of change, every church leader in the study's four participating churches began their in-person worship services by welcoming and thanking their online audience. This welcoming practice worked.

Researcher observations illustrated that the desire to be physically present at church was not isolated but far-reaching. At the commencement of the study, in-person church seating was plentiful in three of the four participating churches. At the completion of this report, empty seats, at times, were barely noticeable to the researcher. For example, in one participating church with a seating capacity of 532, in-person Sunday worship, within five months, grew from approximately 100 believers to almost full capacity. These observed changes, along with the findings of the study, may illustrate that a welcoming, appreciative, and embracing church attitude contributes to the return and growth of in-person church participation.

RQ5 Lack of In-person Participation

RQ5 was used for understanding how Baptist church members experienced or were experiencing the lack of in-person and the rise of online church participation in the participating churches. In 2019 attendance in participating Baptist churches was either steady or growing. In-

person worshippers were, therefore, less concerned with online worship. When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020 and participating churches were mandated to cease any sort of gathering, many church members opted to worship online. In its initial stages, some rejected the online idea. In time, however, being left with limited options, more in-person church members began to explore online worship. As the effects of COVID-19 continued, some study participants embraced online worship as the new normal finding comfort in the ability to worship from the privacy and confines of their own homes. Others saw online worship as a temporary necessity.

According to the research data, one out of the twelve interviewed participants (BC2P1) shared an indifference toward in-person church participation. A second participant (BC1P3) shared apparent support for online church participation. The remaining ten participants were in favor of in-person church participation but understood that in some situations such as immobility and illness, online worship is sometimes an acceptable faith practice. In validating this further, the unofficial participant church, BC5, was also in agreement that in-person church participation was the rule rather than the exception. According to BC5L,

Scripture tells us that the church is the assembly. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, means assembly. It's the idea of assembling. Now, obviously, in the Bible, they didn't have the technology that we have today, so I don't necessarily think we were wrong in taking a break because of the [COVID-19] pandemic. But I knew that it would be wrong if we continued, if we never came back, because the church is about the gathering. It is about being together.

As discussed above (RQ4, p. 157), researcher observations pointed out the growth that occurred in in-person church participation between the commencement and the conclusion of this study. This may, to some, indicate a favorable consideration for in-person worship. However, as the findings showed, both in-person and online church participation are acceptable forms of worship.

Research Implications

In preparing for the study, the researcher conducted as thorough as possible literature review regarding studies surrounding the lack of church participation within the Baptist faith. While some studies were found related to the Baptist faith in the State of Florida, none were directly or indirectly related to Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. Thus, an apparent gap existed in the literature. It was, therefore, this researcher's endeavor and hope to fill the gap in the literature with this phenomenological qualitative study.

As presented in Chapter One (pp. 18-20, 24, 26) and Chapter Two (pp. 42, 48, 50), the reviewed literature concluded that ineffective leadership, pluralism (having more than one church position), secularization (identification with a materialistic worldview), diversity (difference in in-person perspectives), relativism (relating practices and beliefs), immigration, modernization, technology, unfriendly and unaccepting church environments, a lack of role models, a lack of church belongingness, a lack of understanding on how to spread the gospel, continued persecution, and parental failure to teach the gospel to their children were all possible contributing factors to a decrease in in-person church participation (Barrow et al., 2021; Brien, 2020; Coetsee, 2021; Dandridge, 2020; Dollahite & Marks, 2021; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Flatt et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; Mars, 2017; Saiya & Manchanda, 2021; Son, 2018; Waters, 2020). Findings also determined that churches are failing in their Bible study practices when developing a healthy biblical worldview (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Harris et al., 2020b; Mars, 2017; Son, 2018).

While some of the above findings such as troubles with secularization, diversity, and modernization were found to be relative, the findings of this study portrayed a dissimilarity. When asked about their views on what primary factors they felt were contributing to a lack of

church participation (RQ2) and what they felt could be done to limit the lack of church participation (RQ3), study participants provided several opinions and suggestions. In accordance with participant responses, participating churches shared seven areas churches may consider addressing and possibly limiting the lack of church participation.

1. Scripture is not being followed. While the participating churches followed the word of God, some study participants shared the view that a lack of church participation in other churches is possibly due because biblical teachings are not being followed according to God's instructions. For example, in his interview, BC3P2 shared the following concerning his participation in a previous church (Chapter 4, p. 128).

They [the church] were wanting to nominate female deacons, and I said, you know, I can't find that anywhere in the Bible. He [church leader] said, well, so and so was a deacon. And I said, yes, in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament God ordained deacons, and He [God] said it is to be the husband of one wife [1 Timothy 3:12]. A woman can't be a husband and that told me that was a male's job, period! He [the church leader] didn't agree. So, I said, well, that's the main reason we left, because when you turn your back on Scripture ..., he interrupted and said no, we're not turning our back. In my heart, you are, I said, and if you nominate a young lady to be a deacon, well, I can't accept that.

2. Proper interpretation of Scripture. While the participating churches claimed to properly interpret Scripture, some study participants believed that a lack of church participation in other churches is due to not properly interpreting the word of God. For example, according to BC4L (Chapter 4, p. 127),

A lot of churches get too caught up in programs. Everything's programmed out. Sometimes things aren't allowed to be organic where God is in control and God's leading. We have our ideas, and we push those things, but, for me, when I came here it was about preaching truth, teaching the truth, and making sure that as a church we were holding to the Scriptures, not traditions of men, not my preferences, but what the Scriptures teach us.

3. Simplify Scripture. The data illustrated that the participating churches were presenting Scripture in an easily understood form. Some of the study's participants, however,

expressed the possibility that church participation in other churches is lacking because Scripture is being shared in an academic language not easily understood by church participants. For example, according to BC1L (Chapter 4, p. 130),

I think the message and our preaching. Taking the scriptures and making them practical. Showing the need to be around people. Just preaching to get people to come back. The Bible says faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God. We'll have to build faith in people using practical messages. Messages that people can grasp. Not these way over people's head types of messages.

4. Make Scripture relatable. As found through researcher observations, participation, and study participant interview data, the participating churches related Scriptural messages to what the church as a community was experiencing at the time of the worship service. However, some study participants shared that a lack of church participation in other churches might be attributed to Scripture not being linked to what the church may be going through as a community. For example, BC3L shared the following (Chapter 4, p. 128):

People want to know, what am I going to do in [any given] circumstance ... and how do I live my Christian faith in this day? To learn that [believers] have to read God's word. [They] have to study God's word. People need good, solid teaching, not listening to every Internet preacher that's out there because you can presuppose something in your mind ... The Bible tells us that in the last days that people are going to have itching ears [2 Timothy 4:3-5]. They're going to seek teachers that are going to tell them what they want. Well, they don't need what they want, they need what they need. They need to know God's word.

5. Create an immediate connection with visitors. Observation and interview data illustrated that the participating churches made it a practice to connect with visitors. According to some study participants, other churches may be lacking church participation because they are not making a concerted effort to create an immediate connection between the church and visitors (i.e., not collecting contact information at the time of the visit, reaching out

to visitors soon after their visit, or inviting visitors to attend a church group discussion after worship services). For example, BC2P2 shared (Chapter 4, p. 133):

I think [the pastor] has done a really good job in this area of tracking new people, tracking the people who are in our demographic, and encouraging us to reach out to them, introduce ourselves, and invite them to our particular class. Then once they do come to class, we're engaging with them, not just like, oh, hey, I'm so and so and not talking with them. I mean, that's what I've seen to be successful and why we've maintained a lot of people in our class and why it's grown.

6. Establish relationships with church members. The data illustrated that the participating churches always tried to establish a relationship between the church and church attendees. Some study participants provided the opinion that a lack of church participation in other churches might be due to not getting to know church attendees and their families after a church connection has been made, if any. For example, when discussing what keeps people coming to church, BC2L said (Chapter 4, p. 132):

The only real thing that I can come to is to do a better job of ensuring that everybody who graces the doors of your church builds a relationship with someone in the church. More often than not, two factors will keep them. One is they have somebody that they love that's in the church. If someone has a relationship in the church the likelihood of them staying in your church is very, very high. And so, if they come into your church, get them into relationship building as quickly as you can. The other is if you can get them to serve in your church, the retention rate jumps to almost 90%. It's almost guaranteed that they can build a relationship with someone, and they can roll up their sleeves and serve someone. They're going to stick around and feel like they have a reason to be at the church.

7. Practice a welcoming Spirit. The data illustrated that the participating churches practiced a welcoming spirit by embracing church attendees regardless of cultural, economic, social, academic, or gender differences. According to some study participants, other churches may be experiencing a lack of church participation because they do not practice the faith with a welcoming spirit. For example, when discussing this topic, BC3P2 shared a worship experience (Chapter 4, p. 131):

We had an old guy that came to one of our services one morning [he said] and everybody was looking [at him]. He was sloppily dressed and looked like he hadn't shaved in three or four weeks, and at the end of the service the call was made, and he came up. [The pastor] was upfront talking to him. Next thing you know, [the pastor] got him in his arms. Just hugging him. And he [the pastor] says to everyone: 'Praise the Lord for this man today.' He [the pastor] got that guy cleaned up and I mean, he's doing everything he should be doing in life.

While these findings directly or indirectly relate to the reviewed literature, they are distinctive in their own right. The study's findings cannot simply be categorized as ineffective church leadership, diversity, a lack of role models, a lack of church belongingness, or a lack of understanding of the gospel. What the data showed was: 1) that by trusting in God, in prayer, and in church unity participating churches managed to survive the devastating effects of COVID-19. 2) that technology had a significant role in holding the participating churches together. 3) that online worship was necessary for participating church leaders to continue spreading the gospel to their congregations during a time of need. 4) that the participating churches considered in-person and online worship acceptable forms of church participation. 5) that the participating churches were resilient in their faith, love for God, and belief in the authority of Scripture.

Research Applications

When applied, the findings of the study concerning primary factors (RQ2) and curtailing the lack of church participation (RQ3) may assist in solving the continual problem(s) concerning the current lack of church participation. As presented, a possible resolution of the problem(s) may include: 1) Following Scripture as God instructs. 2) Properly interpreting Scripture. 3) Simplifying the gospel's message. 4) Relating Scripture to church community situations. 5) Creating connections. 6) Building relationships. 7) Practice a welcoming spirit. As the research data shows and one of the major reasons for using direct quotes rather than paraphrasing, study participants provided what the researcher observed to be unprepared and unrehearsed views

regarding the researched phenomenon. In this way, Baptist church leaders, educators, students, other churches, and future researchers can rest assured that the presented study findings represent what the data has revealed rather than paraphrased researcher's interpretations that may contain elements of researcher bias. Regardless of how much self-bracketing the researcher underwent before starting the study (p. 100), there is no absolute certainty that indoctrinated and pre-conceived notions may have been kept from filtering into the study's data gathering and data analysis process. In this sense, the study's goal was achieved.

Research Limitations

In preparing to conduct this qualitative phenomenological study, the following five delimitations were established:

1. The study was delimited to adult Baptist church leaders and adult Baptist church members (ages 18 and older).
2. The study was delimited to Baptist churches with a congregation of 200 or more members.
3. The study was delimited to Baptist churches which experienced a decline in in-person church attendance within the past five years (2018-2023).
4. The study was delimited to twelve adult Baptist participants who had experienced the phenomenon under study (i.e., a lack of church participation).
5. The study was delimited to participating churches within the geographical area of Seminole County, Florida.

While all the delimitations were met, the study was not without its limitations. First, church leaders were unwilling to fit the researcher into their busy schedules. It took some diligence on the part of the researcher before church leaders agreed to an interview, some with conditions. For example, one church leader interview had to be conducted within 30 minutes rather than the usual 45–60-minute interview session. The question-and-answer session had to, therefore, be quick leaving little time for additional topic discussion(s), adequately observable

behavior(s), or making notes of nuances during the interview process. Second, it took some convincing on the part of the researcher before church leaders agreed to church member participation. Rather than allowing the researcher to canvass church congregations, church leaders agreed to select and recommend church members who would best represent the church. This negated the interviewing of church members who may have had different experiences, or views of the church and the phenomena under study.

Third, not one online church was found to be solely dedicated to an online worship platform. Thus, the data related to online views were provided by in-person church participants, the majority of whom, as found, preferred in-person worship. This gave rise to the possibility that collected online data may have been limited by the participating churches. Fourth, because of the church leaders' reluctance to allow the canvassing of the congregations, the researcher was unable to include interviews in the study that reflected the views of adult members of Gen Z. As found in the research literature, members of Gen Z, for the most part, have been nurtured in a technological world providing them with keen insight concerning technological developments and their use and, perhaps, a better view of online worship.

Fifth, the researcher determined that acquiring additional data following the completion of the interview process could have been avoided had the interview questions and interview process been structured differently. During the analysis process, the researcher determined additional study details were needed such as participant clarification on some interview responses, church seating capacities, and confirmation of church member numbers and percentages. Finding such details proved rather taxing as some participants, particularly church leaders, were unwilling or hesitant to provide answers. However, after several pleading researcher emails to participants, the majority of the needed data was obtained. The structuring

of better or additional interview questions could have, possibly, attained the missing elements of data.

Further Research

In the research design appropriateness section (p. 66), a qualitative phenomenological research design was determined to be the best choice for this study because the primary focus of the study rested on the participants' lived experiences. However, the findings of this phenomenological research study warrant further studies to consider whether the findings of this study are generalizable to other Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. The researcher determined that a more in-depth understanding surrounding the lack of in-person Baptist church participation in Seminole County could have been better served by conducting a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) study where both an interview and a survey can be administered. As with this study, while interviews gathered in-person views of online worship, a survey could have been distributed and completed through online channels specifically targeting data from online worshippers who, the researcher believes, might have provided more in-depth views of online worship.

In addition, the study turned out to include both genders (male and female) and a degree of diversity according to church leader participant selection in the participating churches. As Table 1 (p. 100) illustrates, study participants included one Hispanic, four African Americans, and seven Caucasian Americans (eight with the validating church leader). A different inclusion strategy may have reflected greater diversity in the findings. Thus, a stronger effort should have been made to include more Hispanics and other cultural perspectives such as that of Orientals.

Finally, due diligence and unbiased professionalism were the researcher's goals and practice throughout the entire study process. However, the possibility exists that a more

experienced researcher may arrive at a different result. Because of this, and because of the above-described limitations, the researcher believes that further research is needed surrounding Baptist churches and online church participation in Seminole County, Florida.

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APPENDIX A**IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 6, 2023

Ismael Melendez
Jason Waters

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-692 A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida.

Dear Ismael Melendez, Jason Waters,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B

CONTACT: FLORIDA BAPTIST CONVENTION

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address]

Dear Pastor [Recipient]:

My name is Ismael Melendez, and I am a parishioner at [church name] in Oviedo, Florida. I am also a doctoral student at Liberty University enrolled in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. I am currently conducting a study. The study is entitled: A phenomenological study exploring the lack of Baptist Church participation in Seminole County, Florida. The study's purpose is to explore and understand the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches within Seminole County. The goal of the study is to find viable solutions to either stop or curtail the current lack of church participation. To accomplish this faith academic endeavor, it will be necessary to contact and possibly interview two in-person Baptist church leaders and two online Baptist church leaders.

As the Florida Baptist Convention's leader currently representing over 2700 Baptist member churches, I would like to ask if you can recommend any in-person or online Baptist church that has experienced or is experiencing a lack of or a rise in church participation. If there are no churches you can recommend, would it be possible for you to provide me with a list of Baptist churches within Seminole County, Florida, so that they may be individually contacted for this study's endeavor? A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your convenience. If there are any questions or if you would like for me to clarify the study's purpose further, please contact me at -----or you may call me at [phone number] at your earliest possible convenience.

Participants will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview. They will also have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for any consideration.

Sincerely,

Ismael Melendez
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX C

CONTACT: SEMINOLE COUNTY BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address]

Dear Pastor [Recipient]:

My name is Ismael Melendez, and I am a parishioner at [church name] in Oviedo, Florida. I am also a doctoral student at Liberty University enrolled in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. I am currently conducting a study. The study is entitled: A phenomenological study exploring the lack of Baptist Church participation in Seminole County, Florida. The study's purpose is to explore and understand the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches within Seminole County. The goal of the study is to find viable solutions to either stop or curtail the current lack of church participation. To accomplish this faith academic endeavor, it will be necessary to contact and possibly interview two in-person Baptist church leaders and two online Baptist church leaders.

As Seminole County's Baptist Association's Pastor and leader currently representing eleven Baptist churches, I would like to ask if you can recommend any in-person or online Baptist church leaders who have experienced or are experiencing a lack of or rise in church participation. Additionally, since you are, without a doubt, knowledgeable and familiar with today's Baptist faith's lack of participation, I would like to request your support and guidance in this regard. A stamped self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your convenience. If there are any questions or if you would like for me to clarify the study's purpose further, please contact me at ----- or you may call me at [phone number] at your earliest possible convenience.

Participants will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview. They will also have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for any consideration.

Sincerely,

Ismael Melendez
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT: CHURCH LEADER PERMISSION LETTER

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is A phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida. The purpose of the study is to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida in 2023.

I am writing to request permission to meet with you. At our meeting, should you agree, I will discuss the particulars of the study, answer any questions, and address any concerns you may have. I will also ask for your voluntary participation in the study, for your permission to contact members of your church to invite them to participate in my research study, for you to recommend church members as possible participants in the study who will best represent your church, and for permission to interview participants at your church, if necessary. Participants must be 18 years of age or older, a Baptist church leader, or a member of a Baptist church in Seminole County, Florida. Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. I would also like to interview you.

All participants, should they agree to participate, will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher and review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and return them within 3 days. The entire interview process will be completed in an estimated 45-60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. To participate or for more information, please contact me at -----.

A consent document is attached for your review. The consent document contains additional information about my research and will be provided to each participant prior to their interview. Every participant will need to sign the consent document, in my presence, before the start of the interview. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, a permission letter, along with a stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your convenience. Should you have any questions, please call me at ----- or email me at -----

Sincerely,

Ismael Melendez
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT: CHURCH LEADER PERMISSION RESPONSE

[Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

Dear Ismael Melendez:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled A phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida. I have decided (Check the following boxes, as applicable):

- I will grant you (Ismael Melendez) permission to meet with me. Please contact our office so that a meeting can be scheduled.
- I will grant you (Ismael Melendez) permission to contact and canvass members of the congregation to invite them to participate in your research study.
- I will grant you (Ismael Melendez) permission to conduct your interviews at [name of church]. A room for your interview(s) will be made available, if necessary.
- I will provide you (Ismael Melendez) with our membership list, and you (Ismael Melendez) may use the list to contact and canvass our members to invite them to participate in your research study.
- I will not provide potential participant information to Ismael Melendez, but I agree to provide your study information to congregation members on your behalf and let them decide whether or not they wish to participate in your study.
- I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Official's Name]

[Official's Title]

[Official's Company/Organization]

APPENDIX F

CONSENT

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida.

Principal Investigator: Ismael Melendez, Doctoral Candidate, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, a Baptist church leader, or a member of a Baptist church in Seminole County, Florida. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida in 2023.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I, the researcher, will ask you to do the following:

1. Take part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher (45-60 minutes).
2. Once interview recordings have been transcribed (put in written form), you will be provided with a copy of your interview via email so that you may confirm that everything you shared during your interview is a correct account of your interview. You will be asked to respond to the transcribed interview within three days. If no response is received from you within three days, it will be determined that you are in full agreement with the interview's transcription and that no changes are to be made.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society, however, include: (1) the study will benefit Baptist church leaders wanting to understand why church members are leaving their churches, (2) the study will benefit school administrators wanting to better address matters of faith and students, (3) the study will benefit students wanting to better understand faith and their role in society as part of God's creation, (4) the study will benefit faith organizations wanting to develop a better sense of trust with their surrounding communities, (5) the study will benefit the existing literature because no studies have been found concerning the lack of Baptist church participation in Seminole County, Florida, and (6) the study will benefit other researchers who may want to conduct future studies regarding the Baptist faith in Seminole County, Florida.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Interview audio recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet for five years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, your church leader, or members of your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Ismael Melendez. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at -----or email him at ----- You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jason R. Waters, at -----

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is ----- and our email address is -----.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX G

RECRUITMENT: CHURCH MEMBER FOLLOWUP LETTER

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. Two weeks ago, a letter was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up letter is being sent to remind you to please respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is [Date].

Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher and review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and return them within 3 days. The entire interview process will be completed in an estimated 45-60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at-----, or you may call -----
-----for more information or to confirm your eligibility and schedule an interview.

An informed consent form is enclosed for your review. The informed consent form contains additional information about my research. Please do not sign the informed consent form. One of the same informed consent forms will be given to you at the time of the interview. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the informed consent form in my presence before the interview begins. A copy of your signed informed consent form will be provided to you.

Sincerely,

Ismael Melendez
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX H

RECRUITMENT: VERBAL SCRIPT (PHONE OR IN PERSON)

Hello [Potential Participant]

My name is Ismael Melendez, and I am currently a graduate student at John W. Rawlings Schools of Dividing at Liberty University. As a graduate student, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to find answers to five research study questions regarding the continued lack of in-person church participation and the growth of online church participation within the Baptist faith in Seminole County, Florida. If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, a Baptist church leader, or a member of a Baptist church in Seminole County, Florida.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher and review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and return them within 3 days. The entire interview process will be completed in an estimated 45-60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? [Yes] Great, can I ask you some questions to confirm eligibility and set up a time for an interview? Can I also have your telephone number and an email where I can send you a consent document? [No] I understand. Thank you for your time.

The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before the interview begins.

Thank you, again, for your time. Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX I

SCREENING: PARTICIPANT SCREENING QUESTIONS

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida

Ismael Melendez

Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity

Thank you for your interest in the study. To better assess your participation, I have twelve yes or no questions. Would you mind if I ask?

Q1: Were you born before 2004? _____Yes _____No

Q2: Are you a resident of Seminole County, Florida? _____Yes _____No

Q3: Are you of the Baptist faith? _____Yes _____No

Q4: Have you ever left the Baptist faith? _____Yes _____No

Q5: Have you ever thought about leaving the Baptist faith? _____Yes _____No

Q6: Have you ever thought about joining an online church? _____Yes _____No

Q7: Are you a Pastor? _____Yes _____No

Q8: Are you an Elder of the church? _____Yes _____No

Q9: Are you a member of the church? _____Yes _____No

Q10: Do you attend [name of church]? _____Yes _____No

Q11: Do you attend in person? _____Yes _____No

Q12: Do you attend online? _____Yes _____No

Notes:

APPENDIX J

RECRUITMENT: CHURCH MEMBER LETTER

[Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Address]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida in 2023. I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, a Baptist church leader, or a member of a Baptist church in Seminole County, Florida.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher and review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and return them within 3 days. The entire interview process will be completed in an estimated 45-60 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, or should you have any questions, please contact me at -----, or you may call me at ----- for more information or to confirm your eligibility and schedule an interview.

An informed consent form is enclosed for your review. The informed consent form contains additional information about my research. Please do not sign the informed consent form. One of the same informed consent forms will be given to you at the time of the interview. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the informed consent form in my presence before the interview begins. A copy of your signed informed consent form will be provided to you.

Sincerely,

Ismael Melendez
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX K

CHURCH LEADER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida

Ismael Melendez

Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida in 2023. This interview is being conducted at (Site location):

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Interview Questions

- 1. How long have you been a Baptist church leader and what was your vision for the church when you first started as a leader?

- 2. Were there any ministry programs established when you first took over as church leader and what ministry programs have been established since you became a church leader?

- 3. How many members are there in your church today as opposed to five years ago?

- 4. Was your church experiencing a lack of church participation before the onset of COVID-19 and how has COVID-19 contributed to church attendance?

5. What percentage of those who have left your church, if you know, started visiting online church services, found another church, or left the faith altogether?

6. What are your views on and how would you describe in-person church participation as opposed to online church participation?

7. What has been your experience and how, in your view, have church members been experiencing the lack of in-person church participation and the rise in online church participation?

8. What do you think should be done to either stop or reduce the number of believers leaving the church?

9. What do you believe can be done to encourage those who have stopped attending to return to your church

10. How can church leaders and church members work together to keep in-person church worship services or create a better understanding and appreciation for online church services?

APPENDIX L

CHURCH MEMBER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lack of Baptist Church Participation in Seminole County, Florida

Ismael Melendez

Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida in 2023. This interview is being conducted at (Site location):

Date:_____ Start Time:_____ End Time:_____

Pseudonym:_____

Interview Questions

- 1. How long have you been a Baptist and how many years have you been a member of this Baptist church?

- 2. Were there any ministry programs established when you first started attending this church, what ministry programs are currently in operation, and what part do have or have had in the ministry programs?

- 3. How was the church when you first started attending and how has it changed during the last five years?

- 4. Was the church experiencing a lack of church participation before the onset of COVID-19 and how has COVID-19 contributed to church attendance?

5. Has it ever crossed your mind to stop attending your church and why did you think about leaving the church?

6. What percentage of those who have left your church, if you know, started visiting online church services, found another church, or left the faith altogether?

7. What are your views on and how would you describe in-person church participation as opposed to online church participation?

8. What has been your experience and how, in your view, have church members been experiencing the lack of in-person church participation and the rise in online church participation?

9. What do you think should be done to either stop or lessen the number of believers leaving the church and bring back those who have stopped attending?

10. How can church leaders and church members work together to keep in-person church worship services or create a better understanding and appreciation for online church services?

APPENDIX M

CODE FRAMEWORK

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------|------------|
| (RQ1) Lived Experiences | RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today's Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida? | 12 | 60 |
| Established ministry programs | Determining how many ministry programs were established illustrates the condition of the church when church leaders took over. | 6 | 8 |
| Leader Lived Experiences | Any experiences church leaders may have regarding the church, in-person participation, and online participation. | 3 | 5 |
| Member Lived Experiences | Experiences church members may have regarding the church, in-person worship, and online worship services. | 6 | 14 |
| Ministries since becoming leader | Determining how many ministries have been established illustrates the strides the church has made under the church's leader. | 5 | 6 |
| Vision for the church | A church leader's vision for the church is a window to the church itself through which one can see where that church is heading and how God's people are being led. | 5 | 5 |
| What Church Was Lacking | Developing the church to create better church surroundings and service to the membership body. | 2 | 2 |
| (RQ2) Primary Factors | RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | 13 | 102 |
| Effects of the COVID_19 Pandemic | COVID-19 and its effect on in-person church participation. | 10 | 13 |
| Being apathetic | Sometimes believers have no interest in attending church but rather worship according to their own ways. | 4 | 6 |
| Church support | Leaving the church because of a lack of support. | 3 | 3 |
| Developing New Habits | The forming of new habits after being away from in-person worship services for a long period of time. | 5 | 11 |
| Having reluctance to attend | Believers have a reluctance about coming back to in-person worship services. | 5 | 10 |
| Ideological differences | How individual differences affect church participation. | 3 | 5 |
| Moving away from biblical principles | Not following Scripture and God's instructions. | 1 | 1 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|--|-------|------------|
| No obvious reasons | Sometimes people leave in-person worship for no obvious reason. | 5 | 6 |
| No relationship building | A lack of connectivity with the church or its members. | 5 | 6 |
| Not utilizing church members | Church members not being used to move the church forward. | 2 | 2 |
| Rumours | How rumours may affect church participation. | 1 | 1 |
| Selfishness' | It is more about looking out for the benefit of one rather than for the benefit of the Body of Christ. | 1 | 1 |
| Taking precautions | How churches handled unavoidable social situations. | 1 | 1 |
| Teaching the children | Church leader and member views on Christian parent responsibilities. | 1 | 1 |
| Wrong doctrinal teachings | People often listen to bad teachings or views. | 4 | 7 |
| (RQ3) Curtailing the Exodus | RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida? | 13 | 140 |
| Bringing believers back to in-person | What churches can do to bring believers back after they have left the church. | 12 | 21 |
| Continuing the gospel | How churches continued to spread the gospel despite the loss of in-person participation. | 6 | 9 |
| Holding on to the human element | Holding on to traditional in-person worship. | 8 | 11 |
| In-person vs online | Pros and cons of in-person worship versus online worship. | 11 | 23 |
| Keeping believers from leaving | What can churches do to keep believers from leaving in-person worship. | 10 | 21 |
| Leading by Example | How church leaders perceive leadership responsibilities. | 4 | 6 |
| Percent of believers who found another church | Believers who went to another church altogether. | 4 | 6 |
| (RQ4) Better understanding | RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices? | 12 | 64 |
| Being judgmental | Passing judgment on believers who prefer online worship | 2 | 3 |
| Building communities | Developing ways in which online worshippers can create better communities. | 3 | 5 |
| Comfortable teaching online | Church leaders preferring to spread the gospel online. | 3 | 6 |
| Create opportunities | Develop opportunities for believers to become more involved in in-person worship. | 2 | 5 |
| Proper teaching of Scripture | Teaching the Scriptures properly | 6 | 10 |
| Recognition of online worshippers | Recognizing that online believers exist and are welcomed. | 1 | 2 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|--|-------|------------|
| Speaking softly to believers | Having caution when speaking to believers who have gone online. | 5 | 6 |
| Stop online worship | Discontinuing online worship so that believers would want to worship in-person | 6 | 8 |
| Younger Generation | How the younger generation is becoming more interested in in-person worship. | 4 | 6 |
| (RQ5) Lack of In-person Participation | RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | 13 | 176 |
| Attendance after COVID | How attendance was after secular government restrictions were lifted. | 8 | 15 |
| Attendance before COVID | How was church attendance before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. | 12 | 24 |
| Attendance currently | Church participation in current times. | 6 | 10 |
| Attendance during COVID | How attendance was during the crust of the COVID-19 pandemic. | 11 | 18 |
| Believer as the church | Church member views on what constitutes the church. | 1 | 1 |
| Benefits of online worship | Church member views on the benefits of online worship services. | 2 | 4 |
| Church members lost to COVID | Believers who succumbed to the effects of COVID causing church numbers to decline within the past four years (2019-2023). | 4 | 5 |
| Convenience of online teaching | Church leader views on the positive aspects of online teaching. | 5 | 6 |
| Illness and online worship | Church leader and member views on why online worship is necessary for some believers. | 3 | 3 |
| In-person teaching | Church leaders' views on in-person teaching. | 3 | 3 |
| In-person worship | Church leader and member views on in-person worship. | 10 | 21 |
| Negative feelings of in-person | Believers who have negative feelings about in-person services. | 1 | 2 |
| Negative feelings of online | How believers feel about online worship services. | 9 | 20 |
| Percent of believers who returned to church | Believers who returned to in-person worship services after going online or leaving the church. | 6 | 7 |
| Percent of believers who went online | Believers who went online for one reason or the other. | 9 | 10 |
| Rationalizing online worship | Church leader and member views on the rationalizing online worship. | 1 | 3 |
| Social issues and online worship | Church member views on society and the positives of online worship. | 1 | 3 |
| Wellness and online worship | Church leader and member views on being healthy and but deciding to worship online. | 2 | 6 |

APPENDIX N

CATEGORY FRAMEWORK

| | |
|--|--|
| RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today's Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida? | |
| Cluster 1 Lived Experiences | Cluster 2 Leader Vision |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Member lived experiences 2. Leader lived experiences | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Established ministry programs 2. Ministries since becoming leader 3. Vision for the church 4. What church was lacking |
| RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | |
| Cluster 1 Participation and illness | Cluster 2 Improper teachings |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effects of COVID-19 pandemic 2. Developing new habits 3. Having reluctance to attend 4. No obvious reasons 5. Being apathetic 6. Taking precautions 7. Selfishness 8. Rumors | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No relationship building 2. Wrong doctrinal teachings 3. Ideological differences 4. Church support 5. Not utilizing church members 6. Moving away from biblical principles 7. Teaching the children |
| RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida? | |
| Cluster 1 Differences in Worship | Cluster 2 Spreading the gospel |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bringing believers back to in-person 2. In-person vs online 3. Keeping believers from leaving 4. Percent of believers who found another church | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holding on to the human element 2. Continuing the gospel 3. Leading by Example |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices? | | |
| Cluster 1 Irrefutable Worship | Cluster 2 Embraced Worship | Cluster 3 Understanding |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proper teaching of Scripture 2. Younger Generation 3. Building communities | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stop online worship 2. Comfortable teaching online 3. Recognition of online worshippers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speaking softly to believers 2. Create opportunities 3. Being judgmental |
| RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | | |
| Cluster 1 Online Member Views | Cluster 2 In-Person Member Views | |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Negative feelings of online 2. Percent of believers who went online 3. Convenience of online teaching 4. Illness and online worship 5. Wellness and online worship 6. Benefits of online worship 7. Social issues and online worship 8. Rationalizing online worship | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attendance before COVID 2. Attendance during COVID 3. In-person worship 4. Attendance after COVID 5. Attendance currently 6. Percent of believers who returned to church 7. Church members lost to COVID 8. In-person teaching 9. Negative feelings of in-person Believer as the church | |

APPENDIX O
THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|--|-------|------------|
| (RQ1) Lived Experiences | RQ1. What are the lived experiences and meanings of church participation amongst in-person Baptist church leaders, online Baptist church leaders, in-person Baptist congregational members, and online Baptist congregational members, and what significance does church participation have on today's Baptist faith practice in Seminole County, Florida? | 12 | 60 |
| (RQ1 Theme 1) Lived Experiences | The lived experiences of church leaders and church members concerning the phenomenon under study. | 9 | 19 |
| Leader Lived Experiences | Any experiences church leaders may have regarding the church, in-person participation, and online participation. | 3 | 5 |
| Member Lived Experiences | Any experiences church members may have regarding the church, in-person worship, and online worship services. | 6 | 14 |
| (RQ1 Theme 2) Leader Vision | The vision that a church leader had for the study's participating church(es) when he first became the leader of the church. | 8 | 21 |
| Established ministry programs | Determining how many ministry programs were established illustrates the condition of the church when church leaders took over. | 6 | 8 |
| Ministries since becoming leader | Determining how many ministries have been established illustrates the strides the church has made under the church's leader. | 5 | 6 |
| Vision for the church | A church leader's vision for the church is a window to the church itself through which one can see where that church is heading and how God's people are being led. | 5 | 5 |
| What Church Was Lacking | Developing the church to create better church surroundings and service to the membership body. | 2 | 2 |
| (RQ2) Primary Factors | RQ2. What do Baptist church leaders in Seminole County, Florida believe are the primary factors leading to a lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | 13 | 102 |
| (RQ2 Theme 1) Participation and Illness | The effects and contribution of a social illness on a lack of in-person church participation in Seminole County's Baptist churches. | 10 | 49 |
| Being apathetic | Sometimes believers have no interest in attending church but rather worship according to their own ways. | 4 | 6 |
| Developing New Habits | The forming of new habits after being away from in-person worship services for a long period of time. | 5 | 11 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|-------|------------|
| Effects of the COVID_19 Pandemic | COVID-19 and its effect on in-person church participation. | 10 | 13 |
| Having reluctance to attend | Believers have a reluctance about coming back to in-person worship services. | 5 | 10 |
| No obvious reasons | Sometimes people leave in-person worship for no obvious reason. | 5 | 6 |
| Rumours | How rumours may affect church participation. | 1 | 1 |
| Selfishness | It is more about looking out for the benefit of one rather than for the benefit of the Body of Christ. | 1 | 1 |
| Taking precautions | How churches handled unavoidable social situations. | 1 | 1 |
| (RQ2 Theme 2) Improper Teachings | How teaching Scripture in a wrong manner possibly contributed to a lack of in-person church participation amongst Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida. | 10 | 25 |
| Church support | Leaving the church because of a lack of support. | 3 | 3 |
| Ideological differences | How individual differences affect church participation. | 3 | 5 |
| Moving away from biblical principles | Not following Scripture and God's instructions. | 1 | 1 |
| No relationship building | A lack of connectivity with the church or its members. | 5 | 6 |
| Not utilizing church members | Church members not being used to move the church forward. | 2 | 2 |
| Teaching the children | Church leader and member views on Christian parent responsibilities. | 1 | 1 |
| Wrong doctrinal teachings | People often listen to bad teachings or views. | 4 | 7 |
| (RQ3) Curtailing the Exodus | RQ3. What can in-person Baptist church leaders and congregants do to curtail the lack of church participation in Seminole County, Florida? | 13 | 140 |
| (RQ3 Theme 1) Differences in Worship | The pros and cons of in-person and online worship of God. | 13 | 71 |
| Bringing believers back to in-person | What churches can do to bring believers back after they have left the church. | 12 | 21 |
| In-person vs online | Pros and cons of in-person worship versus online worship. | 11 | 23 |
| Keeping believers from leaving | What can churches do to keep believers from leaving in-person worship. | 10 | 21 |
| Percent of believers who found another church | Believers who went to another church altogether. | 4 | 6 |
| (RQ3 Theme 2) Spreading the Gospel | Measures Baptist churches in Seminole County, Florida, took to continue spreading the gospel during a trying social situation. | 9 | 26 |
| Continuing the gospel | How churches continued to spread the gospel despite the loss of in-person participation. | 6 | 9 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------|------------|
| Holding on to the human element | Holding on to traditional in-person worship. | 8 | 11 |
| Leading by Example | How church leaders perceive leadership responsibilities. | 4 | 6 |
| (RQ4) Better understanding | RQ4. How can online Baptist church leaders and congregants in Seminole County, Florida, create a better understanding of in-person and online Baptist faith practices? | 12 | 64 |
| (RQ4 Theme 1) Irrefutable Worship | Contributions that in-person worshippers can make to create a better understanding with online worshippers. | 11 | 21 |
| Building communities | Developing ways in which online worshippers can create better communities. | 3 | 5 |
| Proper teaching of Scripture | Teaching the Scriptures properly | 6 | 10 |
| Younger Generation | How the younger generation is becoming more interested in in-person worship. | 4 | 6 |
| (RQ4 Theme 2) Embraced Worship | Participant views on the acceptance of online worship. | 7 | 16 |
| Comfortable teaching online | Church leaders preferring to spread the gospel online. | 3 | 6 |
| Recognition of online worshippers | Recognizing that online believers exist and are welcomed. | 1 | 2 |
| Stop online worship | Discontinuing online worship so that believers would want to worship in-person | 6 | 8 |
| (RQ4 Theme 3) Understanding | Participant views on how a better understanding can be created between in-person and online worshippers. | 7 | 14 |
| Being judgmental | Passing judgment on believers who prefer online worship | 2 | 3 |
| Create opportunities | Develop opportunities for believers to become more involved in in-person worship. | 2 | 5 |
| Speaking softly to believers | Having caution when speaking to believers who have gone online. | 5 | 6 |
| (RQ5) Lack of In-person Participation | RQ5. How are Baptist congregational members in Seminole County, Florida experiencing the lack of participation in in-person Baptist churches and the rise of participation in online Baptist churches? | 13 | 176 |
| (RQ5 Theme 1) Online Member Views | In-person worship participants give their views on online worship. | 13 | 55 |
| Benefits of online worship | Church member views on the benefits of online worship services. | 2 | 4 |
| Convenience of online teaching | Church leader views on the positive aspects of online teaching. | 5 | 6 |
| Illness and online worship | Church leader and member views on why online worship is necessary for some believers. | 3 | 3 |
| Negative feelings of online | How believers feel about online worship services. | 9 | 20 |

| Name | Description | Files | References |
|---|---|-------|------------|
| Percent of believers who went online | Believers who went online for one reason or the other. | 9 | 10 |
| Rationalizing online worship | Church leader and member views on the rationalizing online worship. | 1 | 3 |
| Social issues and online worship | Church member views on society and the positives of online worship. | 1 | 3 |
| Wellness and online worship | Church leader and member views on being healthy and but deciding to worship online. | 2 | 6 |
| (RQ5 Theme 2) In-Person Member Views | | 13 | 106 |
| Attendance after COVID | How attendance was after secular government restrictions were lifted. | 8 | 15 |
| Attendance before COVID | How was church attendance before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. | 12 | 24 |
| Attendance currently | Church participation in current times. | 6 | 10 |
| Attendance during COVID | How attendance was during the crust of the COVID-19 pandemic. | 11 | 18 |
| Believer as the church | Church member views on what constitutes the church. | 1 | 1 |
| Church members lost to COVID | Believers who succumbed to the effects of COVID causing church numbers to decline within the past four years (2019-2023). | 4 | 5 |
| In-person teaching | Church leaders' views on in-person teaching. | 3 | 3 |
| In-person worship | Church leader and member views on in-person worship. | 10 | 21 |
| Negative feelings of in-person | Believers who have negative feelings about in-person services. | 1 | 2 |
| Percent of believers who returned to church | Believers who returned to in-person worship services after going online or leaving the church. | 6 | 7 |