

UNDERSTANDING DECLINING CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH

Vanderbilt University – Peabody College

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Lawton, Michael P
Michael.p.lawton@vanderbilt.edu
Lawtonfamily1@yahoo.com

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Though this was a significant milestone, “God’s not Dead”, there is more good work to do...

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Executive Summary

Across America, church attendance is declining. Every Nation (EN), a growing North America based ministry of 84 churches, is interested in better understanding the decline so they can share practices for increasing church attendance with non-member churches. Every Nation was founded in 1994 with the express intent of strengthening the influence of Christianity in every country throughout the world. The foundational values of EN include preaching the gospel and conducting ministry to engage people outside of the Christian faith. EN focuses on three significant objectives: establishing churches, operating campus ministry, and conducting world missions.

EN spreads the Christian faith through its relationship with local pastors who establish Biblical foundations, equipping believers to minister and empowering disciples to make disciples. All EN organizational leaders are united within a single mission centered upon the same values. However, each separate EN church has the autonomy to make their own decisions about practices used to reach their unique goals, which allows them to be more responsive to their own culture and community needs. Since 1994, EN has planted at least one church in 81 different nations, and the number continues to rise. The leadership of EN believes their success is based on understanding the social composition of their communities and creating a congregation that reflects the community.

Two conceptual frameworks, change theory and servant leadership theory, guided my study of Christian church attendance and change. Change theory was used to address how church leadership adjusts to practices as community practices change. Servant leadership was used to

address the role and expectations of the church community. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews of pastors or senior church leaders (herein referred to as pastors) of various Christian churches within the United States, which were followed up with a quantitative questionnaire electronically sent to church attendees after each interview. The intent of this study was to identify trends or root causes of decline at the local churches participating in this study, with the goal of informing potential solutions. Three research questions were addressed:

1. What factors do pastors and congregants associate with the decline in church attendance?
2. What contextual factors and conditions do pastors and congregants view as inhibiting change for attendance growth in their churches?
3. What strategies do pastors and congregants believe have led to growth in their churches?

Five specific findings emerged from the data collection and analysis as connected to the research questions:

1. *Evangelism practices across participating churches leads to decline.*
2. *Pastors suggest social media contributes to a decline of in-person attendance for younger generations...*
3. *Data suggests that aging congregations correlate with decline*
4. *Pastors suggest that competing activities contribute to decline*
5. *Pastors suggest that entertainment as form of worship should be balanced with equipping.*

Based on these findings, two recommendations were offered to EN and one recommendation was shared to participating churches:

1. Consider developing an innovation hub intended to inform member and non-member churches.
2. Consider sharing the EN operating model as an open platform to all who are interested.
3. Regardless of each local church's growth trajectory, and where not already in place, participating churches should consider a more intentional approach to church growth using best practices shared by sister churches in this study.

Recommendations from this study were formed taking into consideration the organizational context of EN and the common themes that emerged from this study's findings. These recommendations were shared to support concrete strategies for not only increased church attendance, but also to support growth in Christianity overall. Ultimately, accomplishing this objective must start with young people.

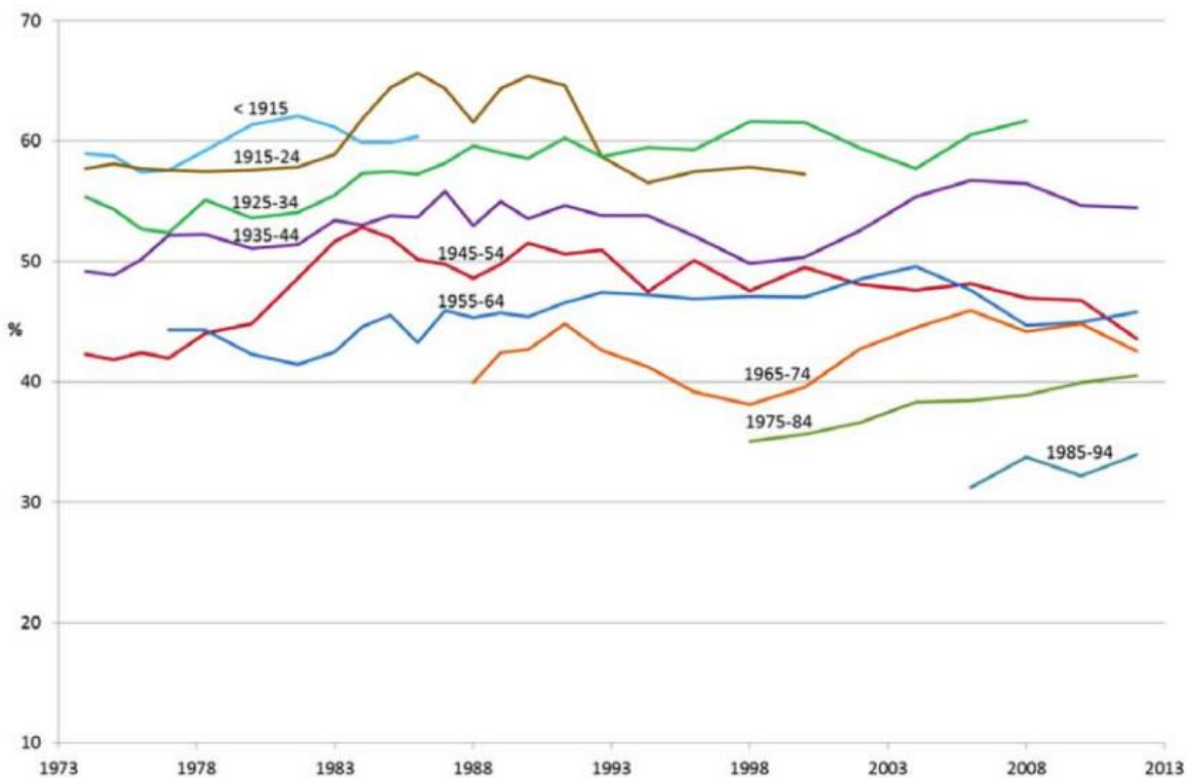
Introduction

Evidence of a decades-long decline in American church engagement is now undeniable (Voas, 2016). Sunday church attendance declined 12% from 2009 to 2019 (Pew Research, 2020). Each generational cohort attends church at a lower rate than their predecessors (see Figure 1, where each colored line represents a 10-year age period). Eighty percent of the approximately 400,000 churches (or 320,000 churches) in the United States have declined or plateaued in their regular attendance (Olson, 2008). These statistics present a major challenge to Christian organizations seeking to grow attendance.

Figure 1

Attendance of Religious Service by Age Cohort

American Journal of Sociology



Note: Attendance monthly or more often by the decade of birth, United States, 1973–2014. Data are from the General Social Survey, 1974–2014. Includes respondents aged 20–84 born in the United States. Three-survey moving average. To avoid overstating religious decline, the unusually religious 1972 GSS sample has been excluded.

Contrary to the attendance and involvement declines faced by so many churches, Every Nation's churches are largely experiencing growth. Every Nation was founded in 1994, as a church planting organization with a mission to plant at least one church in every nation of the world. As of today, EN has planted churches in 81 nations and has expanded to serve people in 84 North American church locations. EN's model for church planting is primarily driven through evangelistic efforts, where churches are started by ministering to non-Christian believers and further growth in membership occurs organically from there.

While the median weekly attendance of a typical congregation in the U.S. averages 75 regular participants (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2021), EN's church attendance averages approximately 450 by church, however many of churches planted within the last five years have attendance numbers under 100 but growing. EN is interested in learning about root causes as to why churches are experiencing decline. They hope to use this information to understand how they might share their practices with other Christian organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this capstone project is twofold: 1) understand factors that contribute to declining attendance at Christian churches across the United States, and 2) identify best practices that are informed by the results of this study to improve church attendance.

Considering the growing trend of secularism in today's society, churches cannot simply sit back and wait for people to attend (Voas, 2016). Instead, churches must articulate a clear mission and actively work to attract new congregants and engage existing ones. By

understanding factors pastors and congregants report related to attendance, change, and leadership, this study can provide EN with information to guide other churches.

Organization Context

Every Nation is a global Christian organization comprised of affiliated churches and campus ministries. Founded in 1994 by Evangelists, though it had grassroots beginnings as early as 1985, EN was established to strengthen the influence of Christianity around the world. As an evangelical organization, EN's mission is to plant at least one church in every nation of the world by reaching non-believers. Along with church plantings, EN has two other core competencies: campus ministry and world missions. EN serves its over 37,000 North American congregants as well as the communities in which churches are located through engagement with local pastors who establish biblical foundations and empower believers to become ministers or make disciples. Pastors appear to be very in tune with community needs and will change practices as the community changes. For example, a community where one of their participating churches in the SE region was having strong race-related tensions that appeared to be leading to physical or violent protests. The pastor worked with the local police to have meetings with protest organizers and diffuse tensions before they could erupt. This kind of effort was highly supported by their mixed-race congregation and the community at large.

Though it is an international organization united by a singular purpose, local pastors have the autonomy to make their own decisions as it relates to operating their church. Since its founding, EN has generated significant growth around the world and in the United States. Congregants affiliated with EN tend to be highly reflective of the community demographic. To operate such an expansive organization, EN's leadership structure is best understood as decentralized with the global home office in Nashville, Tennessee.

With this context in mind, there are many stakeholders, both involved within the Every Nation organization and outside of it, that are impacted by the scope of this study. Primary stakeholders include the EN organization itself, as well as Evangelists and local pastors. Secondary stakeholders include Christians equipped to evangelize, the communities in which local churches are located, and non-believers or people that identify as Christians though do not attend church.

Problem of Practice (PoP)

Decline in church attendance is an increasingly serious challenge for Christian organizations and the communities that host them. For example, there is a circular benefit where community attendees financially support the church and its programs. Therefore, the church as an institution provides a hub for the community's spiritual and emotional needs. Churches also serve as a hub for local community service. The number of people who never attend religious services has doubled in two and a half decades, going from 13% in 1990 to 26% in 2014 (Voas, 2016). Evangelical organizations like Every Nation are particularly concerned by statistics like these because an important tenet of their faith is personal conversion. Given the current socio-political climate within which American churches operate, many reasons for declining church attendance exist, including resistance to change, youth and young adult engagement, and lack of evangelism. Increased understanding of these declines and the contexts in which they are situated, may provide an explanation for growing secularism in America and potentially offer solutions to Christian organizations looking to increase engagement and attendance.

Though Every Nation churches overall are not experiencing declines in church attendance, the organization is still concerned about how this trend might impact other Christian organizations. Given EN's relative success in recruiting and retaining members, it appears

worthwhile to explore how EN might share its strategies and approaches with other Christian organizations looking for new thinking. Greater awareness and more widespread use of these approaches might lead to positive outcomes for all parties involved and the Christian faith more broadly.

With this in mind, the problem investigated by this study was the extent to which churches are experiencing changes in attendance and how church leaders are managing that change. This information will inform how Every Nation can best share its practices with other Christian organizations for growing congregations.

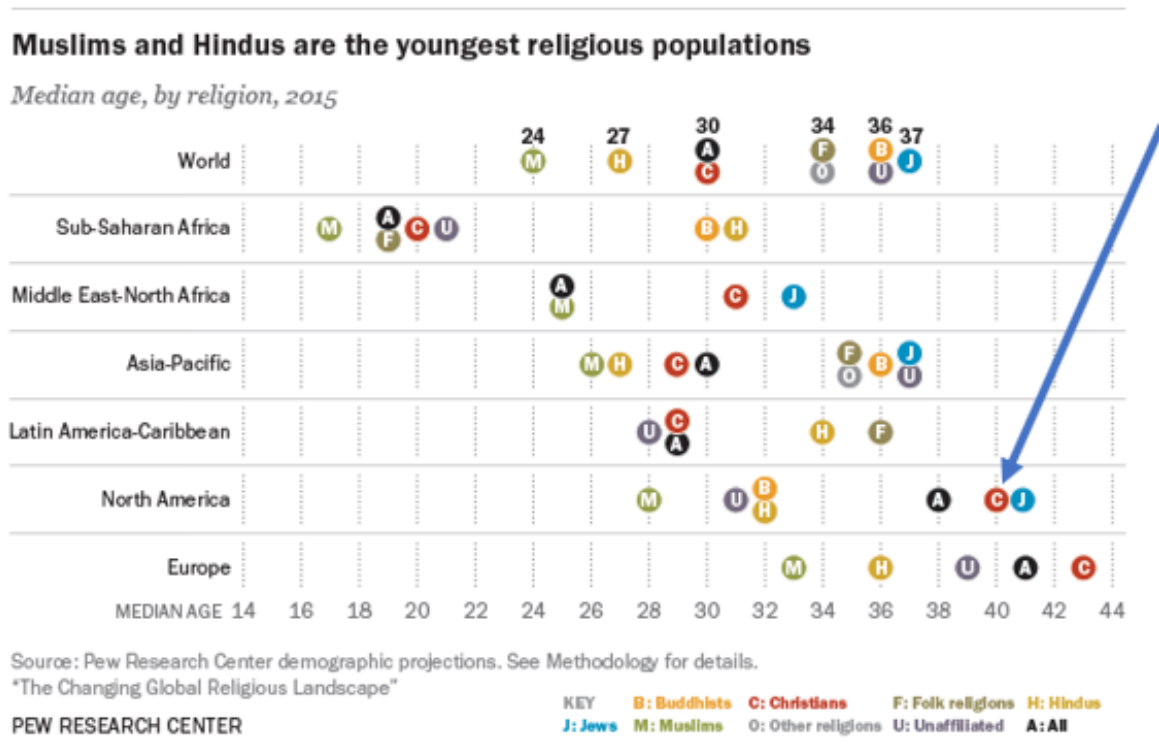
Literature Review

Interest in Christianity has been declining for decades, youth is not engaging as much as earlier generations, and therefore Christians are aging (Pew Research, 2018, see Figure 2). Only Judaism has a higher average age in North America. Lack of interest in religion is not the only reason why church attendance has simultaneously declined. Instead, it may be because the population that is interested in religion does not subscribe to a specific style or practices that a particular organization is currently using (Flatt, 2010). While churches tend to take different approaches to providing a Christ-filled experience, and each church may feel that their approach is appropriate for their community, this might not always be true. McMullin (2013) noted that part of the problem is that many people think that churches represent an antiquated institution that simply have no relevance in the modern world or to their everyday lives. When modern people have questions about life, it rarely occurs to them that a church might be a place to seek answers. Consequently, it seems that much of the recent decline in interest in the church stems from this widespread perception that church is irrelevant, antiquated, and obsolete rather than

individuals' lack of religiosity. There is therefore a growing need to understand the factors involved in this phenomenon.

Figure 2

Europe is the only region with a higher average age than North America



Over 30 peer-reviewed studies discussing declining church attendance, evangelism, change in church strategies, and church leadership attributed to this body of work. In reviewing these studies, I found evidence that led to four recurring themes, including: (a) the importance of a church's internal and external factors, (b) a church's resistance to change, (c) the importance of youth ministries, and (d) the church's use of evangelism. These four themes were used to help inform and direct the present study. These factors are interdependent and interconnected to one another, for example, if church leadership was open to change, chances are there would be more

flexibility to develop a plan to address topics such as outreach, evangelism and being intentional about growing youth ministries.

Internal vs. External Factors

Various stakeholders have proclaimed that “religious organizations can do little to reignite interest in attending church simply because external forces have eroded the religious desires of the entire population” (Flatt, 2018, p. 79). However, the issue is not so simple. Other distinct factors contribute to the decline in church attendance that are not connected exclusively with a decline in religiosity. These factors can be divided in to two general categories: internal and external. Internal factors can be defined as those which church leadership directly manages or influences. Conversely, external factors can be defined as those which are entirely outside the direct influence of the church.

The clergy and the congregation can sometimes have differing views on external factors related to attendance decline. As represented in Table 1, Flatt (2018) found that congregants perceive busyness, negative perception of churches, and secularization as being the most important factors related to church attendance decline. Both groups tend to agree that Sunday competition is the number one external cause. As far as internal factors (see Table 2), both the congregants and the clergy agree that resistance to change is a significant internal factor. However, neither clergy nor congregants consider a lack of evangelism to be a primary factor in church decline.

Table 1*External factors of Attendance Decline, (Flatt, 2018)*

	(CONGREGANTS) Decline due to...	(CLERGY) Decline due to...
EXTERNAL FACTORS		
Sunday competition	42%	46%
Busyness	34%	15%
Attitudes Towards Religion		
Negative Perception of Churches	27%	46%
Society is more secular	22%	54%

Furthermore, Flatt (2018) observed that individuals who belong to a church with declining attendance are more likely to blame external factors for the decline, while individuals in growing churches take credit for increased attendance. Members of declining churches who believe external factors out-of-their-control are to blame point to compelling evidence of societal changes. For example, they believe competing Sunday activities to be a significant reason for their decline in Sunday worship attendance (McMullin, 2013). The abolition of blue laws that kept stores and other activities closed on Sundays has led to more people doing their leisure activities and shopping on Sundays instead of attending church services. Children's activities, such as gaming and athletics, are also now routinely scheduled on Sundays. Even for many

Table 2*Internal factors of Attendance Decline, (Flatt, 2018)*

	(CONGREGANTS) Decline due to...	(CLERGY) Decline due to...
INTERNAL FACTORS		
Bad Attitude Toward Existing Members		
Too Inward Looking	25%	31%
Resistant to Change	27%	23%
Worship Service Problems		
Too Traditional or Formal	20%	31%
Outreach Problems		
Lack of Evangelism	0%	15%

practicing Christians, attending church on Sunday has shifted from being a “must-do” to being an option. “In many North American communities, Sunday is quite different than it was a generation or two ago” (McMullin, 2013; Gruber, 2008), leading Voas (2016) to note that the United States should no longer be considered a counterexample to secularism.

Though many changes in attendance are viewed as being affected by larger social forces and long-term external trends, there are also internal factors involved. One aspect of decline in church attendance relates to a lack of willingness on the part of the church in making changes needed to respond to external factors, even when people clearly have lost interest in the style, type, or version of religion currently employed by the organization. This presents an opportunity for churches to focus on what they can control in order to best advance their goal of growing their congregations.

Resistance to Change

Addressing resistance to change is one crucial way that churches can look internally to resolve ongoing issues that may be hindering church attendance. At both the individual and the organizational levels, resistance to change can impair concerted efforts to improve performance (Loerezni, 2000). Though resistance to change is not a phenomenon specific to churches, it does manifest in a church setting in interesting ways. Olson (2008) employs the useful analogy of thinking about the church as experiencing an aging process like that of the human body. The growth rate is higher in the early years and declines as the church enters its 40th year and beyond. As the church grows older, it becomes less flexible, operations slow down, and it becomes resistant to change. In other words, according to Olson, the primary cause of the adverse effects of aging upon established churches is their inability to adapt to change.

As any other type of organization, however, change is crucial in the growth and survival of a church. Inability to adapt to cultural change occurs when a church fails to find new ways to engage or involve people in the community or fails to find new and diverse forms of communicating the gospel. Olson (2008, as cited in Lawler & Worley, 2006), contends that the most successful organizations are those that remain responsive to external changes and challenges. They argue that “excellence is about change” and most organizations cannot sustain excellent performance unless they are capable of changing” (p. 27). Unfortunately, not all churches have the support of enough change agents who are willing to challenge the status quo in the face of resistance.

According to Olson (2008), the problem of the status quo, or homeostasis as he refers to it, arises due to the makeup of the congregation, where a small but influential percentage can thwart any plans for change. In a typical church, there are usually about 16% of members who seek to lead the charge for change—2.5% are innovators who offer and suggest a plan for a change and approximately 13.5% are early adopters who “cheerlead” for change. Another 68% of the members comprise the so-called “early majority” and “late majority,” who, after some hesitation and reluctance, eventually go along with the changes suggested by the more innovative factions. The remaining 16% consist of those who do not like change. A subset of this group, amounting to approximately 2.5% of the total congregation, are solidly opposed to any changes whatsoever. They strongly resist change, become hostile when change is recommended, and actively fight to prevent implementation. Change agents frequently face the challenge of active resistance from this highly vocal group. Because of this opposition, many proposals never make it beyond the initial planning stages. In this way, the ability of the leadership to orchestrate much-needed innovations is significantly hampered.

Another way that churches are failing to rise to the occasion and implement necessary change has to do with ineffective leadership. Hewitt (2014) notes that churches are failing to reshape their leadership for ministry and mission in response to the changing landscape and needs of their congregations. For instance, most churches have accepted the need for a full-time and full-salaried clergy, without questioning whether such a financial arrangement is actually an asset or a liability from the congregation's perspective. Such churches cause the congregation to conform to the needs and practices of the ministry rather than to the needs of the congregation. This structure is not conducive to change-oriented organizations.

Church leaders themselves can do a better job of leading change among their congregations. A change leader shows followers why change is required, encourages experimentation, helps followers get started in learning processes, experiments with new processes, stimulate new ideas, acknowledge changes, and see challenges from new perspectives (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; Yukl, 1999, 2013). Such structure and leadership styles are open to the adoption of new ministries or activities by being flexible and encouraging congregants to take ownership over implementing the change themselves. However, adopting change can also be difficult for leaders because it becomes more necessary to apply power to maintain direction in the organization. It also becomes more tempting for leaders to use power in ways that undermine Christian values" (Ford, Ford, & Amelio, 2008). Furthermore, failure to establish a sense of urgency by leaders is an additional reason why change efforts fail. Church leaders must therefore balance the need to promote buy-in among their congregation with the decisiveness and swift implementation necessary to successfully carrying out a major change.

The innovation competency of religious leaders may be limited by their beliefs about their religion, as well as their attachment to established procedures and conventional ways of

doing things, however. Innovational competency refers to the ability of an individual to identify opportunities for change, creative thinking, and ideas to improve processes. Limited innovational competency due to religious beliefs and an inflexible adherence to traditional leadership methods can restrict church leaders to obsolete and ineffective ways of performing their duties. Such deficiencies can negatively impact their churches. What is more, Christian leaders are more effective at identifying solutions to problems when addressing business needs. However, when dealing with the needs of church members, they demonstrate limited proactive expertise" (Austin, Regan, Gothard, & Carnochan, 2013; Choi, 2014) (Addai-Duah, 2020).

Church leaders successfully can manage change when they agree to modify their practices to align with the environment and the conditions that precipitated the change beyond simply tweaking organizational culture (Vila et al., 2014). Addai-Duah, Choi, and Ruona (2011), found that change episodes occur in one of two ways. They happen as either: (a) a change resulting from implementing new strategies within an organization caused by market forces; or (b) a change implemented to transform an approach via innovation to improve performance. One of the significant threats to any organization concerns how well they deal with change management—especially for leaders who are resistant due to loyalty to organization norms and beliefs. Without skillful change management, it is impossible to assure the survival of any organization. In order to effect change, Bielefeld and Cleveland (2013) suggest religious leaders must: (a) be flexible, (b) adopt new leadership abilities, and (c) be ready to set aside their operational beliefs, which means the willingness to change practices.

As the world continues to change, develop, and evolve, the performance of religious leaders will continue to have a significant effect on performance. Innovative ideas are essential to initiate the conversation about change. Though resistance is just one aspect that can hinder

religious institutions from making meaningful change, it is not an impossible barrier. Douglas (2019) found that modern societies value change and people who respond positively to change. However, individuals tend to resist change when the resulting benefits to the organization are not perceived to agree with their own interests. Therefore, for churches to end their stagnation and reverse their decline, churches must recognize the value of change, keeping in mind the expressed interests of their congregants.

Youth and Young Adult Engagement

Since the 1930s, youth ministry has focused on reaching young people who do not attend church. More recently, however, youth ministry has struggled as a concept. Moser (2019) said that the evangelical church in North America faces a crisis in its failure to retain young people and, therefore, its inability to produce the next generation of long-term members. A fair amount of research has shown that young people currently attend church at much lower rates than in earlier decades (see Figure 1 which shows a decline from older generations to younger generations). The general pattern reveals that once young people have stopped attending church, they seldom return later in their lives (Moser, 2019). Williams (2017) argues that a failure to integrate young people into existing churches and intentionally prepare them for leadership will likely facilitate church mortality.

Key statistics from the Barna Group (2006) highlight just how disconnected American youth are from religion, finding that just one-fifth of young people in their 20s have sustained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences. Additionally, only one-third of parents in their 20s regularly attend church with their children compared to two-fifths of parents in their 30s and one-half of parents who are over 40. This data signifies those young parents who are very involved in the church themselves are failing to actively transmit their own

enthusiasm for church participation on to their own children or other members of the next generation. Of those children who do regularly engage with religion as children, many fail to continue to continue this practice through adulthood. Thus, trends like those reported by the Barna Group bode poorly for long-term growth in church attendance.

One reason that young people are found to abandon religion in high rates upon entering adulthood may have to do with the reality that more students are receiving a college education. In fact, Mooney (2010) suggests that the college experience has a direct, negative impact on religiosity of young people. He argued that religious students might be less satisfied with their college experiences, given that college faculty are less likely to be supportive of, or claim adherence to a religion, and college students are more likely to experience hostility towards their religious beliefs (Ecklund, 2008; Tobin & Weinberg, 2007). This may create a conflict in which they feel they must choose between either continuing their academic career or continuing their involvement with the church. In some cases, this tension is resolved by students ceasing to attend church.

Apart from the secular influence of college, an additional factor that relates to low religiosity among young people is the perception that churches are out-of-touch. Jones (2020) argues that youth are walking away from the church because they no longer find the church to be socially and spiritually relevant to their lives. Specifically, young people are not being provided with theological and moral instruction that they can apply in their daily lives outside of a church context. For these reasons, Moser (2019) notes that youth ministers in North America are “failing at our calling,” advocating for a paradigm shift in the church’s assumptions, approaches, models, and methods to remedy this failure. Other authors concur, indicating that a general rethinking of the strategy of North American youth ministries is urgently needed. For example, Andrew

Zirschky (2012) claims that youth ministry is “broken,” and asserts that it is not working despite a great deal of guidance from educators and psychologists. Adolescents come to church in great numbers to play games and listen to sermons and Bible lessons, but nevertheless tend to eventually leave the faith.

An organization called *Youth for Christ* has offered a wide range of entertaining activities in hopes of enticing young people into church. The group leaders orchestrate a variety of “Christian” entertainment, including musical productions, comedic performances, magic tricks, and ventriloquism. All of these efforts were intended to capture and retain the attention of young children (Rice, 2010). In the minds of the leaders of this group, the solution to low church attendance by young people lies in the deployment of more attractive and entertaining program ideas. Rice described the influence of this organization as “staggering, impacting hundreds of thousands of youth leaders worldwide.” This methodology has been called “attractional ministry.”

While many have applauded the enthusiasm, boldness, and creativity of such efforts, they have also questioned the wisdom, validity, and effectiveness of this attractional ministry approach. On the surface, attractional ministry does seem to bring young people into the church. Still, it is questionable as to whether this method is succeeding on a deeper level. For example, Moser (2019) is quite critical of this “attractional ministry” approach, saying that instead of meeting the spiritual needs of young people and providing avenues that genuinely promote maturity, such efforts have merely provided entertainment in its place. Thus, Moser and those who share this perspective believe that while youth are looking for something or someone capable of “turning their lives inside out and their world upside down,” we have “offered them pizza instead” (Dean & Foster, 1998,1989).

Hewitt (2014) claims that in order to reach the new millennial culture in which young people insist on maintaining their own unique perspectives, interests, and passions for what makes sense to them, a fresh new approach must be used. For example, this younger generation wants a creative space built through trust and accountability and wants to conduct ministry without the micromanagement of church leaders. McMullin (2013) argues that this pattern reflects the reality of our present culture, and it needs to be addressed by providing options to young congregants. For instance, McMullin strongly encourages his congregation to be active in sports organizations because it is an option towards which many young people gravitate. Others have suggested that effective ministry strategy must be crafted through deliberate study of Scripture that is continually reexamined in light of modern-day realities (Wilhoit, 1991). Either way, research on the subject shows that more can be done by church leaders to engage young people without relying on attractional ministry techniques.

Furthermore, Hewitt (2014) found that church leaders must become open to new learning, for an absence of knowledge will be replaced with a fearful and reactionary response to change. The urgency and radical essence of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed needs to be translated into a form which can mobilize the millennials to become involved in the world agenda of the gospel. Such well-informed leaders should be able to “dream big” and motivate people to attempt great things for God. The talents and gifts of the people must be harnessed and unleashed to bear witness in every sphere of life.

Evangelism

“The majority of church growth in the top 100 fastest growing and largest churches is little more than "moving the deck chairs around" (Broocks, 2010). In other words, some churches are growing through the relocation of those who are already believers. Such churches

are increasing their own attendance by drawing existing Christians away from other established churches—not by making new converts through evangelism. Lack of evangelism involved in

What is Evangelism?

The word evangelism simply means to share any good news about Jesus. Evangelism is not a program or church ministry; it is any follower of Jesus telling their story in such a way that they are telling the good news about Jesus. Every believer is called to evangelize.
www.Christianity.com.

growing churches relates, in part, to poor understanding by evangelicals of “the Great Commission.” As proclaimed in *Matthew 28:19-20* and *Mark 16:15-18*, when Jesus Christ charged the Church with the Great Commission, he forever established evangelism as a significant priority for his people (Pollock, 2015). Despite being a crucial activity in the

Church, Barna Research (2018) reports that 51% of evangelicals do not even understand the Great Commission and as many as 64% of "Bible-minded" evangelicals have forgotten the meaning of this teaching. This apparent disconnect can explain why evangelism is being outpaced by relocation as one of the largest sources of growth for churches.

As evangelism has become less popular among Christians, Brooks (2010) finds that many emerging churches have a strong desire to distance themselves from the practice, viewing the prevailing models of evangelism to be intrusive and manipulative. Research from Barna Research (2018) concurs with Brooks, reporting that some Christians feel it is rude or even wrong to assertively share their personal beliefs with someone of a different faith with the intention of converting them to their own religion. To illustrate this point, Lewis (2016) shared an example from her study in which a congregant said, "I would never try to persuade someone to become a Christian. I would avoid talking about my faith." Lewis added that there is often a great reluctance in the West to speak about evangelism or engage in it, particularly among the more theologically liberal portions of the Church. This aversion to the possibility of knocking on their neighbor's door to tell them the gospel serves as a barrier which constitutes a serious

obstacle to the expansion of Christianity. Lewis suggests reframing the word “evangelism” by using softer terms and gentler concepts, such as “an offering of our faith,” which may seem less assertive and thus more palatable to many contemporary Christians

Moser (2019) offered an alternative way to think about evangelism. He noted that, by its very nature, the Church must be a place that is missional. If parishioners consider sharing the message or evangelizing as "being on a mission," it might feel more like they are being asked to do something good—something with a valid, meaningful, and worthwhile Godly purpose—rather than participating in a trivial, unnecessary chore someone else is trying to impose upon them. Moser, citing Grenz (1998), purports that this missional identity is the very foundation for our ministry worldwide. The ministry of evangelism, like various ministries of the Church, must form a unity that furthers the communication of the gospel in service of God, one another, and the world (Nel, 2015). Armstrong (1979), agrees, calling us to see that evangelism is at the heart of our mission; - it is not something we do, but rather who we are.

Perhaps one definitive cause of the lack of evangelism is described clearly by Brooks (2010). Brooks, noted a pastor mentioning that the lack of evangelism in America is directly linked to the general lack of recognition of the importance of evangelists and their value to the Church. The evangelist establishes the culture of evangelism in the local Church. The establishment of the culture of evangelism is essential if the Church is to become missional. Brooks continued by noting that much evangelism today is brash and unthinking. The intellectuals do not usually engage in it. This is a failure on two counts: The people who do practice evangelism have little knowledge of theology, and theologians who do have great knowledge do not engage in evangelism. The situation was quite different in the early Church. Green (2004) shows how flexible the early evangelists were, for they were able to get inside the

mindset of the pagans and Jews alike, and thus frame their communication of the gospel in ways that could intrigue and engage members of both groups. Churches looking to expand may want to reconsider the role of evangelism as it originally existed in the early Church.

However, revitalizing evangelism in churches can only be accomplished if church leaders are willing to lead these efforts. Hewitt (2014), citing William Burrows, argued that the ordained ministerial leadership of the church functions “like a chicken is to an egg.” In other words, without leadership there is no growth. Therefore, the witnessing capacity of the Church to grow spiritually and numerically is directly linked to the leadership quality that is equipping the Church for service and witnessing. Enlarging the Church will require leaders who are trained to respond with maturity and principled flexibility to people's quest for greater personal experiences with the Spirit (Hewitt, 2014). People are looking to the God of life for fullness of life (*John* 10:10), which is best expressed in the life and work of Jesus. Therefore, evangelism cannot be separated from the broader agenda of historical Christianity. It must go far beyond the narrow agenda of converting non-believers or people of other faiths to the religion of Christianity, but instead give high priority to the holistic salvation of humanity and creation. For this to happen, three non-negotiable prerequisites need to be fulfilled:

1. Authentic evangelism must be grounded in humility and respect for all.
2. Leadership formation must be infectiously relational.
3. The gospel must be communicated through genuine interpersonal and community-affirming relationships.

An example of this kind of evangelical outreach comes from Broocks (2010) who recounts the story of Steve Murrell, a pastor of a church planted by an evangelist in the early 1980s and co-founder of Every Nation. Though Murrell was only planning to conduct a one-

month outreach, he ended up remaining to help follow up with the hundreds of people who made commitments. Thus, the Church was born as a result of evangelism, and has maintained its evangelistic fire for 25 years. In an interview, Murrell (personal communication, 2010) stated that:

[T]he founding evangelist established the culture of evangelism.... The culture was set to reach the lost; I use culture, not DNA. I did not create the culture; I preserved it. The founding evangelist would return twice a year for the next ten years to continue stirring the people and doing outreaches..... The evangelists breathed life into the ministry and small groups and kept the ministry on the evangelistic forefront.

Murrell's story reinforces the idea that evangelical outreach is an important component of church expansion. However, without proper knowledge of the role of evangelism, some church leaders may not be fully ready to embrace this strategy. In those cases, education can be a powerful tool for equipping leaders to be effective witnesses to the gospel (Hewitt, 2014). Brooks (2010) agrees, noting that very few training curriculums for evangelism and evangelists exist—a notable deficiency in current Christian teaching institutions. Through increased education about evangelism, church leaders can better understand the relevance of evangelism to their goal of church expansion and use what they have learned to advance their congregations in strategic ways.

Conceptual Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide this study: Kurt Lewin's (1947) Change Model and Dirk van Dierendonck's (2011) Servant Leadership Model. Van Dierendonck's framework focuses on developing a culture of humility and service. This model places the

highest priority on service, which is already a prime value of pastors and church leaders. Lewin's model focuses on organizational change and describes the movement of an organization from the known (current) state to the unknown (desired future) state, helping to explain some of the resistance to change observed among churches and church leadership. These frameworks complement each other, such that Dierendonck found that servant leadership is positively correlated to a commitment to change, and Lewin found that change requires engaged leadership. When taken together, these models provide a preliminary framework for church leaders to consider when implementing innovations to church practices and procedures.

Dirk van Dierendonck's Servant Leadership Model

The servant-leader model emphasizes the primacy of service to one's organization or team. Such leadership begins with a spontaneous impulse towards being of service to other people. Subsequently, the person may make a conscious choice to fulfill this desire and take the actions necessary to become a servant-leader. Servant-leadership must be measured by a different standard than other models of leadership. For example, questions one might ask to assess servant leadership include: Do the people being served by the servant-leader grow as persons? While being served, do they become healthier, wiser, more accessible, more autonomous, and more likely to become servant-leaders themselves? Furthermore, the effectiveness of any servant-leader must be evaluated in terms of the impact of their activities upon the least privileged members of their community and society. Will these people benefit from the actions of the servant-leader, or at the very least, will they not be further harmed? A servant-leader would be considered a failure if the people they serve and influence do not benefit from their leadership, even if the leader technically accomplishes their chosen goals.

According to van Dierendonck (2011), servant leadership includes six important characteristics (see Figure 3).

1. Empowering and developing people,
2. Humility,
3. Authenticity,
4. Interpersonal acceptance,
5. Stewardship, and
6. Providing direction.

Van Dierendonck (2011) asserts that humility refers to the ability to put one's own accomplishments and talents in a proper perspective. True servant-leaders actively seek the contribution of others and acknowledge the benefits they receive from those contributions. Humility is demonstrated by the extent to which a leader puts the interest of others first, facilitates their performance, and provides them with essential support while taking responsibility for the ultimate outcomes. Humility is also about modesty. A servant leader retreats into the background when a task has been accomplished. Furthermore, Van Dierendonck describes authenticity as being true to oneself, accurately representing—privately and publicly—one's own internal states, intentions, and commitments. A servant leader's authenticity manifests itself in various ways: Doing what is promised, visibility within the organization, honesty, and vulnerability or all ways that a servant leader can demonstrate authenticity.

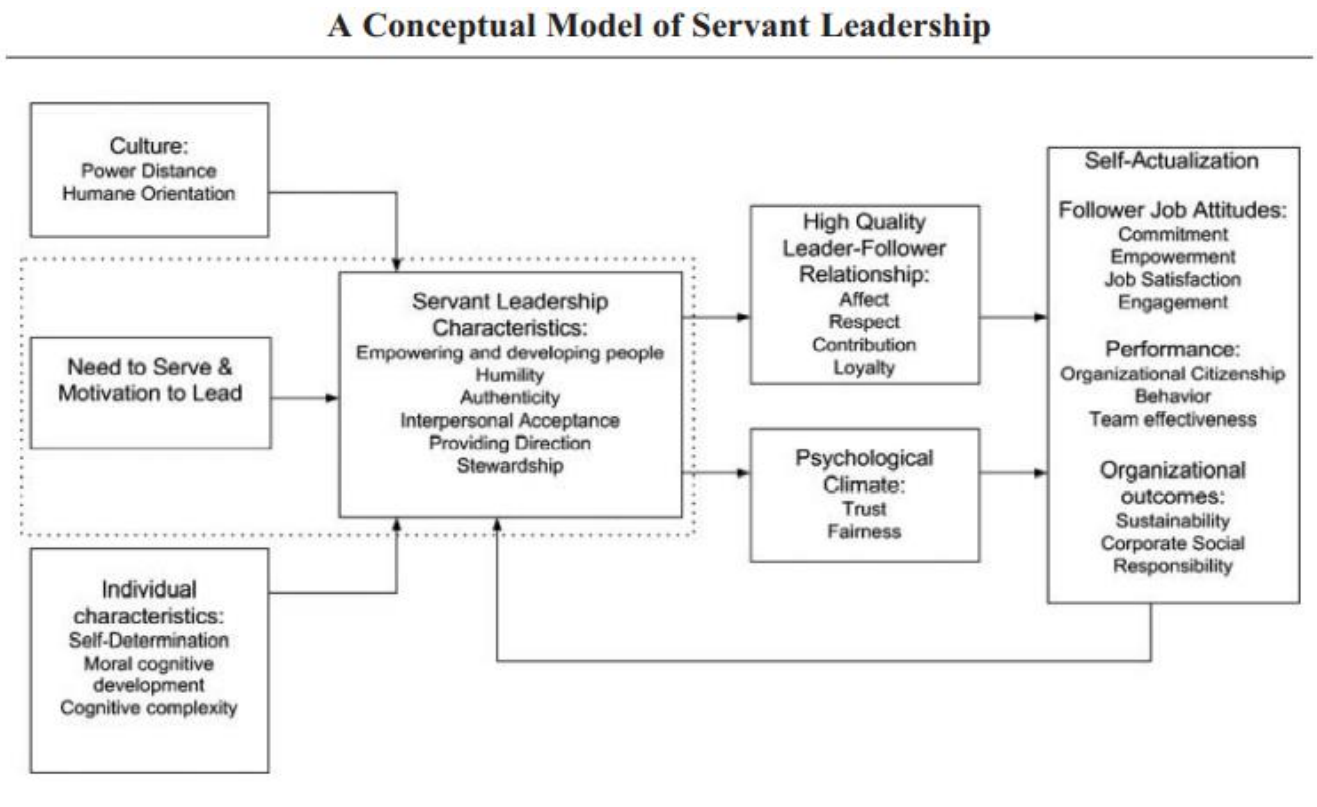
Leader outcomes are displayed in Figure 3. Follower outcomes of servant leadership include:

- Satisfied employees, committed, and higher performing
- Positive job attitudes create a great place to work

- Build excellent relationships with all stakeholders
- Contribute to the community
- Focus on the high quality of life

Figure 3

Servant Leadership Conceptual Model



Note: Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership (Dierendonck, 2011)

To build high-quality relationships, servant-leaders rely on humility and persuasion in their communications with followers. There must be a strong focus on striving toward consensus within the teams they lead by combining several influence tactics, such as explanations, reasoning, factual evidence, apprising, emotional appeals, and consultations. Servant-leaders must also provide direction by emphasizing the goals of the organization, its role in society, and the separate roles of each employee. Providing direction ensures that people understand what is

expected of them, which benefits both employees and the organization. A servant-leader's understanding about giving direction must be to make assigned tasks dynamic and "tailor-made" (based on follower abilities, needs, and input). Viewed from this perspective, providing direction is about giving the right degree of accountability, which has been suggested as a salient dimension of high-quality dyadic interpersonal relations.

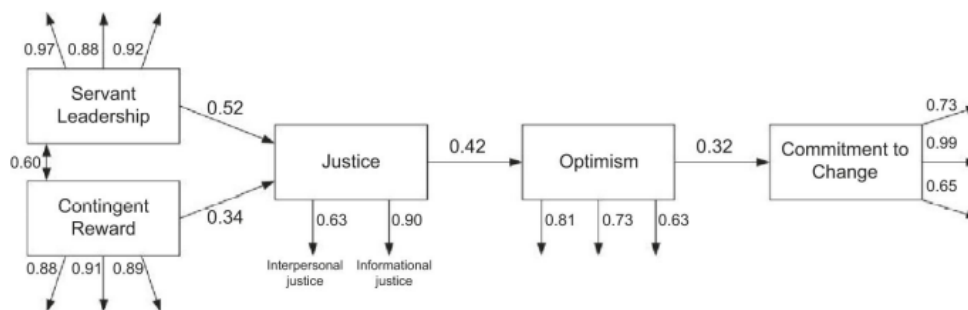
The creation of a safe psychological environment plays a central role in accomplishing this. Not only does this involve transparency about organizational strategy, but it also means creating an atmosphere where there are opportunities to learn, and it is safe to make mistakes. In the end, people follow a servant-leader "voluntarily, because they are persuaded that the leader's path is the right one for them" (Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1247). Followers can also be motivated by the stewardship displayed by servant-leaders. Stewardship is the willingness to take responsibility for the larger institution. According to this model, leaders should act not only as caretakers, but also as role models for others. By setting the right example, leaders can stimulate others to work in the common interest.

The occurrence of servant leadership is influenced by two cultural dimensions: humane orientation and power distance. *Humane orientation* is the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others. *Power distance* can be defined as the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences, and status privileges orientation. In cultures with high power distance, one is expected to be more obedient to authority figures such as parents, elders, and leaders. Conversely, a culture with a low power distance is expected to encourage the development of servant leadership within an organization because the relationship between leader and follower is based on an equal footing and the leader can focus less on self-protection

(Dierendonck, 2011). With a greater emphasis on equality between leader and follower, a reciprocal relationship with a strong focus on personal growth is an essential element of servant leadership. Such a relationship must be centered upon the leader's belief in the intrinsic value of each individual, recognizing and acknowledging each person's abilities and growth areas. Servant leadership is also an effective strategy for leading organizational change. In fact, Kool and van Dierendock (2012) found that commitment to change is positively correlated with servant leadership. The standardized latent variable model used to illustrate this relationship is depicted in Figure 4. The arrows that point away from the model represent the linkages between latent and manifest variables. All coefficients are standardized, which means they can potentially range between -1 and 1, in which the larger the numerical value, the stronger the correlation, and with a negative sign indicating a negative correlation and a positive sign indicating a positive correlation. The standardized solution of the final model shows a confirmation of the hypothesized relation between servant leadership, contingent reward leadership, and justice. Following this, justice is correlated with optimism, which is in turn correlated with commitment to change. The correlation between commitment to change and servant leadership is a motivating factor for the conceptual framework adopted by the present study.

Figure 4

Servant-leadership correlation model



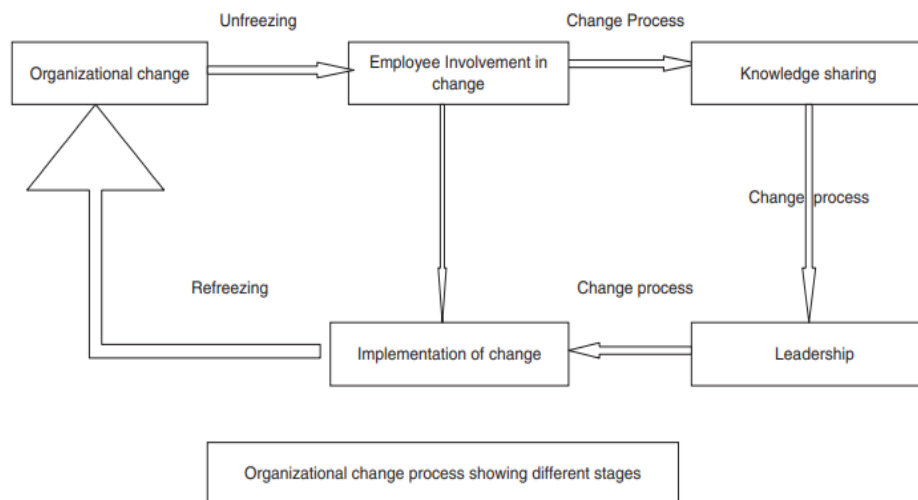
Kurt Lewin's Change Model

Lewin's organizational change model explains the movement of an organization from the known (current) state to the unknown (desired future) state. Because the future of most change is uncertain and may concern people's sense of worth, coping abilities, and feelings of competency, the model underscores the idea that people within an organization will not support change unless they perceive the proposed change to be better for them than the status quo. Another consideration is that the organization itself may have invested heavily in the status quo and will subsequently resist change in order to avoid an uncertain future for the organization (Hussain et al., 2018).

Change management is the process of continually renewing the direction, structure, and capabilities of an organization to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers (Hussain et al., 2018). The world changes very rapidly, so organizations must also be prepared to change and develop rapidly if they are to survive and experience sustainable growth. According to Lewin, this requires the system to be "unfrozen." Lewin's model, as depicted in Figure 5, suggests that in order for progress to occur, the forces working to maintain the status quo must exert less influence than the forces working in favor of change. However, a well-constructed and well-communicated plan is not enough to accomplish this. The organization must also outline the need for organizational change as well as the intended outcomes and potential areas of impact for stakeholders to help minimize the defensiveness of those in favor of maintaining the status quo. Taking this approach, organizations can move away from the status quo to achieve desired change.

Figure 5

Organizational change process showing different stages



Employee engagement during the change progress is a pivotal component of a successful change management strategy. Meaningfully engaging employees involves increasing the input of members on decisions that affect organizational performance and employee wellbeing. It also involves empowering employees to take responsibility over the change process. The key elements of employee engagement include empowerment, information, knowledge, and skills and reward. Each of these factors promote worker or employee involvement (Hussain et al., 2018). Effective employee engagement can decrease the doubts and fears among the workers and will help them to overcome their resistance during the implementation stage. This, in turn, increases the cooperation of the members with the proposed changes, and increases the probability the change effort will be successful.

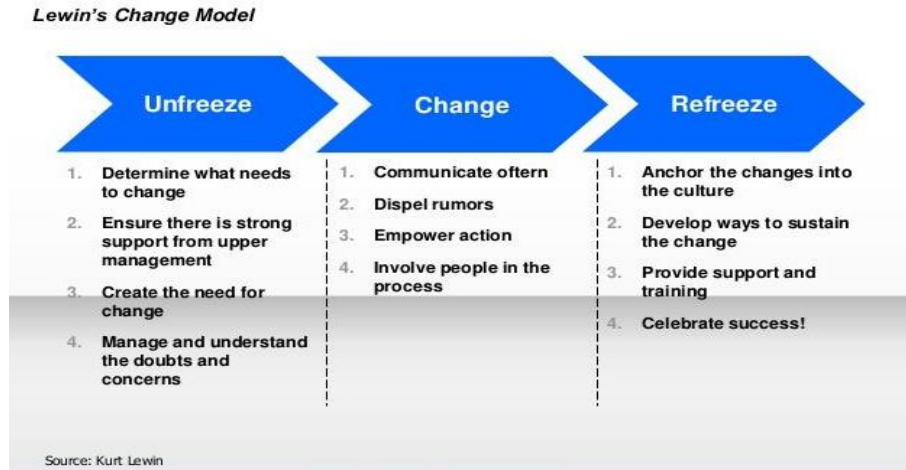
Throughout the change process effective communication is essential. Leaders will need to educate, communicate, participate, involve, task support, and provide emotional support and incentives to employees. The transparency of the leader in all communications is therefore critical because it reaffirms and enhances the trust of employees, encouraging them to feel

comfortable expressing their opinions and enabling them to achieve a better sense of control over the process. One way that transparency in communications is achieved is through knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing must be done simultaneously at the individual level, the group level, and the organizational level. During the change process, when employees contribute, the knowledge they share can generate enormous value for the organization. By engaging in transparent communications and encouraging knowledge sharing among employees, organizations can bolster employees' acceptance of the change process (Hussain et al., 2018).

Leaders themselves shape the change process by the activities and behaviors that they engage in to facilitate change. Namely, Hussain identifies five key activities of leadership during the change process: (a) motivating change, (b) creating a vision, (c) developing political support, (d) managing the transition, and (e) sustaining momentum. Motivating change and creating a vision show people the current state of organization, and what changes are being considered as an alternative to the status quo. Developing political support and managing the transition refer to the moving stage of change. Finally, sustaining momentum refers to the implementation of the change and the “refreezing” or establishment of a “new normal” regarding a new process (see Figure 6). These leadership activities contribute to the direction of the change process.

Figure 6

Lewin's stages



Leadership style further impacts how an organization experiences the change process (Hussain et al., 2018). For example, whereas transactional leaders focus on rewards and punishments of workers to encourage performance and transformational leaders charismatically inspire followers to perform, a servant-leader will approach the change process from a somewhat different perspective. A servant-leader will first identify the stakeholders for the change process who are best positioned to support change (e.g., departmental managers, staff groups, and top-level executives). Using this insight, servant-leaders can maximize the probability of success and minimize the risk of resistance by determining who within the organization is likely to perceive the proposed change as a benefit and who will likely perceive it as a loss—and why they are likely to feel this way. Additionally, leaders can take different approaches to motivating employees to carry out change. The literature points to three basic methods for motivation during the change process: (a) playing it straight; (b) going around the formal system; and (c) using social networks (Hussain et al., 2018). These methods can be used to form alliances and coalitions with key decision-makers, influential individuals, groups, and informal and formal contacts for acquiring information. This knowledge can be used to build the necessary

relationships, and conduct the communications and negotiations needed to successfully accomplish the desired change.

Implementation strategy is the final element of the change process. The implementation of the desired change requires three activities: (a) activity planning; (b) commitment planning; and (c) changes in the management structures. Activity planning involves devising a road map or path for organizational change. Commitment planning identifies and gains the support of the persons and groups whose commitment is needed for organizational change to occur. The changes in management structure identifies the ambiguity, direction, and structure for managing the change process, which includes resources to promote change, the current leadership structure, change consultants, and interpersonal and political skills needed to initiate the change process. Ultimately, Lewin's model of organizational change demonstrates that implementation is an integral step in the change process, and that leadership, employee involvement, and the sharing of knowledge are all equally critical components that contribute to the efficacy of that change.

Research Questions

This study intended to illuminate the environment in which the decline of church attendance is occurring, and the potential factors involved in this decline. The project questions were selected to better understand the internal and external factors pastors and church members associate with church attendance decline. The research questions also represent an effort to contextualize these factors in terms of church organization and to understand potential change inhibitors so that best practices could be adopted to improve the situation. The following three research questions were addressed:

1. What factors do pastors associate with the decline in church attendance?

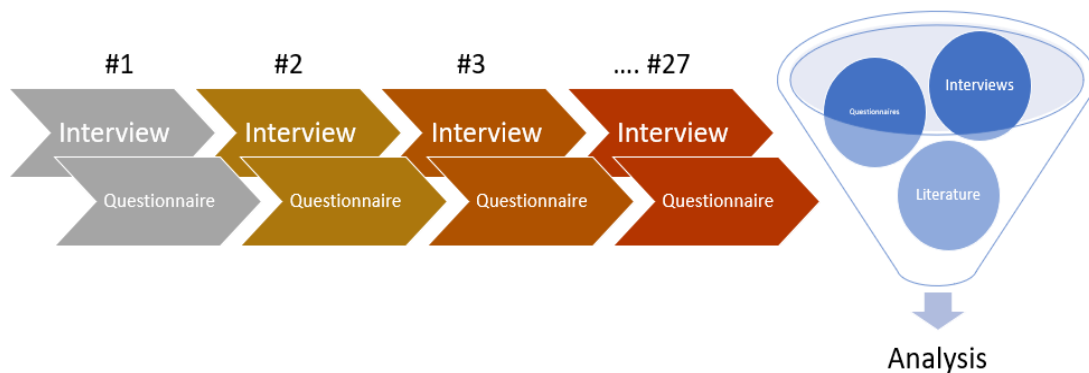
2. What contextual factors and conditions do pastors view as inhibiting change in their churches?
3. What strategies do pastors and congregants believe have led to growth in their churches?

Study Design and Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined interview and survey data to address the three research questions. Figure 7 illustrates the study design, whereby questionnaires were sent to church members following each of the 27 pastor interviews.

Figure 7

Study Design



Participating Churches

As I prepared this study, I assumed that Christian practices and participation differed by region within the United States. I therefore felt it was important to capture data from different regions. Ultimately, I interviewed 27 pastors in each of the six regions shown in Figure 8. To start, introductions with churches were accomplished through personal contacts and cold calling. Once a pastor agreed to participate in the study, I asked them for recommendations of other

pastors they believed would consider participating. Most participating churches were referred by previously participating churches. Overall, I contacted over 40 pastors, and 27 agreed to participate.

All participating churches were from the many existing Protestant denominations. This study sought to capture a broad representative reflection of Christian churches, ethnic communities, growth, and church “age direction” across the United States (see Table 3). The study was not inclusive in church affiliation, ethnicity, age, or growth direction.

The study was intended to capture data from 2015 through 2021. A church was deemed to be growing if attendance was higher in 2021* than it was in 2015. Conversely, a declining church represents declining attendance from 2015 to 2021*. A church with the same attendance numbers from 2015 to 2021 would be considered maintaining attendance. The same logic applies to church “age direction”, where a congregation would be considered trending older if the congregation was older in 2021 than in 2015. Though this study intended to understand factors of declining churches in order to help illuminate the effects of contrasting practices and policies, churches with increasing attendance during this same time period were included. Churches participating in this study may not reflect the opinions of the overall Christian community, as only a subset of churches, church affiliations, and regions were captured. As nearly all interviews were conducted in person, I would first secure one or two interviews before traveling to a region. While there, I would work on securing additional interviews in the area.

Table 3

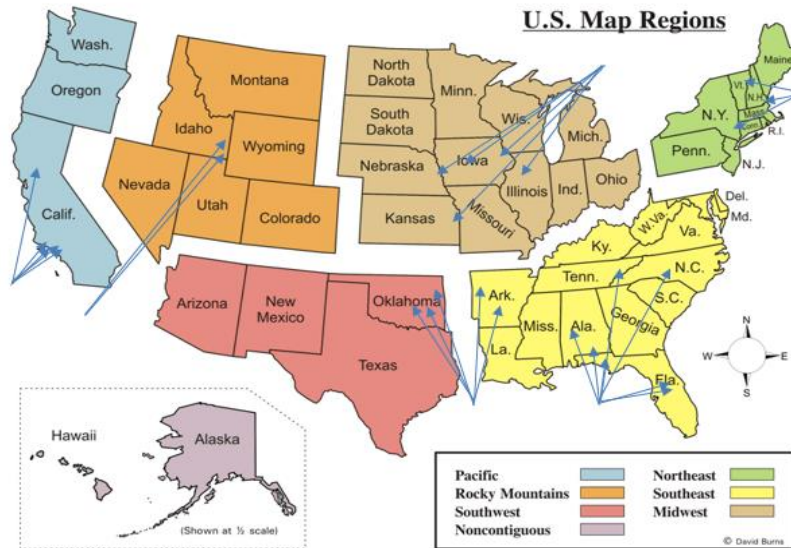
Demographics of study by region

Region	Church Affiliation	Ethnicity	Attendance Direction 2015 - 2021*	Age Direction 2015 - 2021*	Pastor / Church Leader Interviews	Church Congregants Questionnaire Responses
SE	Every Nation	Mixed	Growing	Younger	2	44
	Every Nation	Mixed	Growing	Younger		
SE	Baptist	Predominately White	Declining	Younger	5	59
	Baptist	Predominately White	Declining	Younger		
	Community	Predominately White	Declining	Older		
	United Methodist	Predominately White	Growing	Maintaining		
	United Methodist	Predominately White	Declining	Maintaining		
SW	Bible	Predominately White	Declining	Older	5	62
	Non-Denominational	Predominately White	Growing	Maintaining		
	Pentecostal	Predominately Black	Declining	Maintaining		
	Pentecostal	Predominately Black	Maintaining	Older		
	Pentecostal	Predominately Black	Declining	Older		
MW	Bible	Predominately White	Declining	Older	5	63
	Community	Predominately White	Growing	Maintaining		
	Non-Denominational	Predominately White	Growing	Maintaining		
	Pentecostal	Predominately Black	Declining	Older		
NE	Reformed	Predominately White	Declining	Maintaining	3	36
	Community	Mixed	Growing	Younger		
	Baptist	Predominately White	Declining	Maintaining		
NW	Congregational	Predominately White	Declining	Older	2	119
	Presbyterian	Predominately White	Growing	Younger		
Pacific	Reformed	Predominately White	Declining	Maintaining	5	37
	Bible	Predominately White	Declining	Younger		
	Church of Christ	Predominately White	Maintaining	Maintaining		
	Community	Predominately White	Growing	Maintaining		
	United Methodist	Predominately White	Declining	Older		
	United Methodist	Predominately Asian	Declining	Older		
		TOTALS			27	420

** Note: The intent was to reduce the impact of covid as a factor of decline or aging, to do this I captured the higher of pre-covid (December 2019) or current 2021 data.*

Figure 8

Geographic location of participating churches



Note: For purposes of this study, Arkansas was included in the Southwest Region.

Participating pastors agreed to distribute an electronic attendee questionnaire link, which I developed (see Table 4 and appendix D), to their congregation, after the completion of the interview. Within a few days after the interview, each pastor was provided with a link to the questionnaire.

Table 4

Survey and questionnaire details

	Questions	Strategy	Source
Pastor Interview - Survey	25	Qualitative - Focused on leadership, change, evangelism, worship service, and major events effecting the church	Informed by literature
Attendee Questionnaire	27	Quantitative - Focused on attendees' "view" on faith, church leadership, church change, and trends in church attendance	In part from the Beeson Church Health Questionnaire In part informed by literature

Note: See appendix x and x for full set of questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each pastor was interviewed and recorded using an audio recorder. After the interview was completed, the questionnaires were distributed, with the consent and assistance of the pastor, to the members of the congregation. Follow up was needed with 15 of the 27 pastors to ensure distribution of the survey link to attendees of their congregation. Once distributed, additional follow up was needed with nine of those pastors to ensure 10 responses. All data collection was conducted in a confidential manner. Neither names of pastors, names of specific churches, names of members of the congregation, nor other personally identifying information were collected, recorded, or stored.

Table 5*Data source and volume collected*

Data Source	Target	Conducted/Collected	Notes
Every Nation organizational artifact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization structure • Organizational model • Growth data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All expected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable
Pastor Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target - 5 Interviews with church leaders in each of the 6 US regions. Refer to Figure 3 for a detailed breakdown
Attendee Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 per congregation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 420 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Received an average of 15 responses per congregation. • 2 congregations recorded zero responses

Pastor Interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was created and used when conducting the interviews, (see Appendix B). Open-ended questions were used, which allowed the interviewees to openly express their thoughts. The first set of questions focused on the pastor’s education and history with the church, as well as church demographics. The second set of questions focused on details effecting attendance at this particular church. For instance, it included questions about significant events that may have impacted the church, the approach the church uses for evangelism, and whether evangelism efforts impacted church attendance. The third set of questions focused on concepts related to church practices. The fourth set of questions focused on “change,” and how the church made decisions, (see Figure 9). Each set of questions was intended to provide insight to the leadership and change conceptual frameworks and how effectively each was applied at the

local church. A copy of the informed consent form used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

Approximately 2,400 hours of interviews were conducted in 17 different states, and over 2,200,000 words also were collected and transcribed. Upon completion of the recorded interviews, I used the “Otter” software program to transcribe each interview into text format. After loading text files in Dedoose, interviews were coded and excerpted to begin the qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis. Excel was also used to assist with graphing. Table 6 displays identified codes regarding how often a given code was mentioned by participants during the interviews. Coding is a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments. Coding requires constantly comparing and contrasting various successive segments of the data and subsequently naming them using a code or category. For purposes of this study, I used a deductive coding approach meaning that I started with a predefined set of codes, then assigned those codes to the new qualitative data.

The qualitative analysis proved helpful in determining the relative frequency a specific topic was mentioned. For example, on 21 separate occasions, “change” was mentioned as an “impactful event.”

Table 6

Qualitative Coding Excerpts

	Codes										
Codes	Change	Evangelism	Great Quotes	Growing	Impactful Events	Inclusion	Scripture Referenced	Social Justice	Strategy	Worship Service	Totals
Change		2	44	7	21	5		1	13	2	95
Evangelism	2		21	3	1		6	6	33	5	77
Great Quotes	44	21		14	15	16	8	36	50	28	232
Growing	7	3	14		3	1			9		37
Impactful Events	21	1	15	3		4		1	10	3	58
Inclusion	5		16	1	4		2	2	3	1	34
Scripture Referenced		6	8			2		4	2	2	24
Social Justice	1	6	36		1	2	4		6	7	63
Strategy	13	33	50	9	10	3	2	6		10	136
Worship Service	2	5	28		3	1	2	7	10		58
Totals	95	77	232	37	58	34	24	63	136	58	

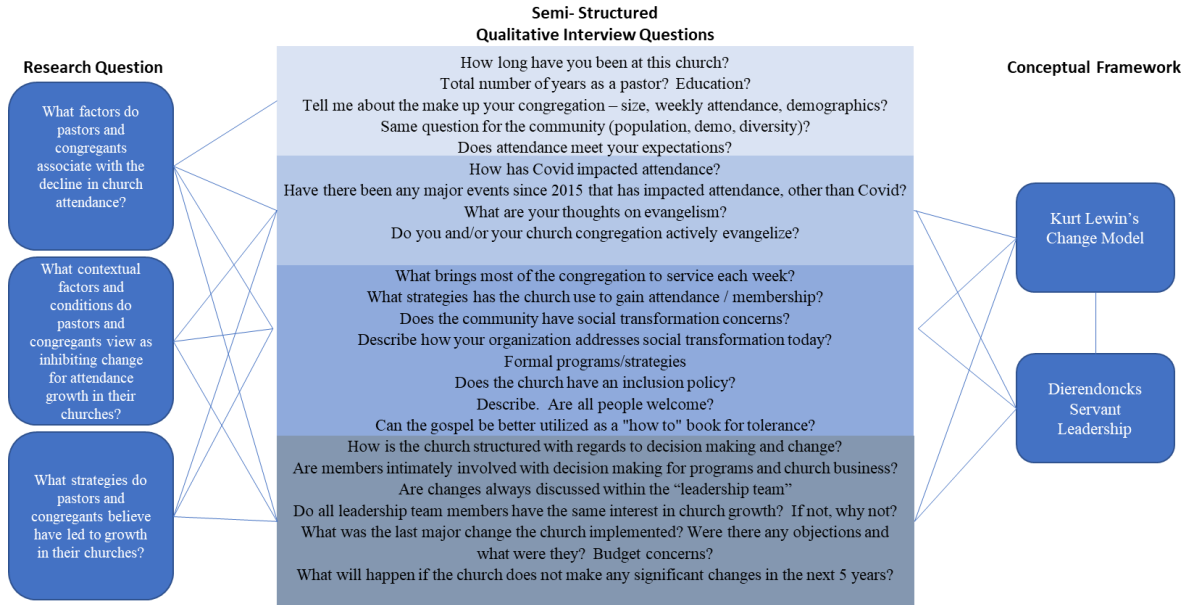
Note: color coding excerpts help direct attention to code frequency. Dark blue is lower volume to red, which is higher volume.

The thematic codes represented factors I discovered in literature other than the Bible (I added “great quotes” to help me collect particularly impactful comments from pastors) while I was researching declining attendance.

Figure 9 represents a matrix displaying the interconnectivity between the research questions, interview questions and the conceptual frameworks. The two frameworks of change theory and servant leadership are also connected. Following Lewin, change will not be sustainable without high quality leadership.

Figure 9

Interconnectivity matrix – see Appendix B for full set of questions



Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed for church attendees. The questionnaire was intended to build upon or explain interview responses and to triangulate all data in order to better understand Christian church decline. The questionnaire provided a view into the practices and activities of the church from the attendee's perspective. Once the interview was completed, the questionnaire link was sent to the pastor for general distribution to church attendees. I requested that a minimum of 10 responses per church be received to ensure minimum attendee participation. It is important to note that the questionnaire was distributed at the pastor's discretion and therefore findings are not based on random results. See Table 7 for response demographics.

Qualtrics was used to develop the questionnaire and capture responses. The questionnaire was structured with the intent of capturing attendee responses in the following areas: (a) personal

faith, (b) view of church data, (c) view of church leadership, (d) view of worship service, and (e) view of church ministries. See appendix D for the full questionnaire.

Of the 420 questionnaire respondents, 401 chose to note their gender and 395 chose to supply information about their ethnicity (see Table 7).

Table 7

Questionnaire respondent demographics

Target Field Groups	18-25	26-40	41-60	61+	Total
Gender					
Female	8 (3.2%)	58 (20.7%)	99 (39.41%)	92 (36.7%)	251
Male	3 (2.1%)	19 (13.1%)	58 (40%)	65 (44.8%)	145
Prefer not to say	0	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	5
Ethnicity					
Black or African American	0	9 (20%)	25 (55.6%)	11 (24.4%)	45
White	11 (3.3%)	53 (16.1%)	123 (37.4%)	142 (43.2%)	329
Hispanic or Latino	0	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	0	12
Asian	0	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	4 (50%)	8
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific	0	1 (100%)	0	0	1

A total of 420 church members responded to the survey. See Appendix E for a list of responses by question. During analysis, I compared the differences between several factors and each survey question, for example:

- Attendance growth direction versus any question,
- Church age (getting younger or older) versus any question
- Age of attendee's versus any question
- Whether an attendee is satisfied with attendance versus any question

Data can be found throughout the Findings section.

Findings

The data collected through pastor interviews, with pastor surveys and the attendee questionnaire, informed key findings that related to each of the three research questions. While the findings primarily reflect data that shows churches in decline, for the purposes of contrast and best practices, growing churches were also included.

Q1. What factors do pastors and church members associate with the decline in church attendance?

Analysis of the survey and interview data revealed five factors pastors associate with the decline in church attendance: (a) Evangelism practices across participating churches leads to decline, (b) Pastors suggest social media contributes to a decline of in-person attendance for younger generations, (c) Data suggest that aging congregations correlate with decline, (d) Pastors suggest that competing activities contribute to decline, and (e) Pastors suggest that entertainment as a form of worship should be balanced with equipping parishioners with the gospel. Each of these factors are, in part, adding to the overall average age of USA-based Christians that Pew Research (see Figure 2). In this section, findings are described as related to each of these themes.

Evangelism practices across participating churches leads to decline

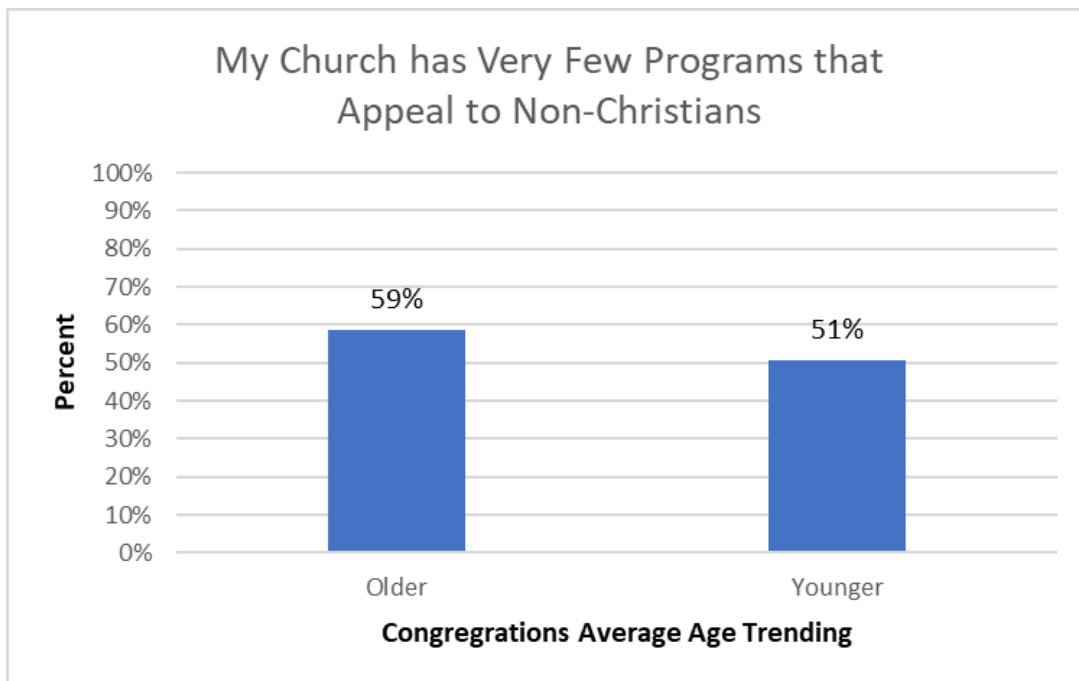
Each pastor interviewed had a clear perspective of the concept of evangelism, however not every pastor agreed on its practices. Recall that Brooks (2010), Moser (2019) and Barna Research (2018) all suggested that many churches today take a more passive approach to evangelism given that many today feel it intrusive or rude to express your religious views to another person. This section will detail how different pastors and congregants view how church programs impact growth or the trending age of the congregation.

Evangelism practices that hinder growth

Churches grow their attendance two primary ways. The first approach is to contact parishioners attending a nearby church and persuade them to relocate to your church. The second approach is to grow through finding those who do not currently attend any church and persuade them to attend your church. Sometimes, those not attending churches may be those who consider themselves to be non-Christian or Christian but choose not to attend. With the goal of driving attendance through finding the non-attenders, church leaders must take an active evangelical approach if they are to pursue the second avenue for growing church membership. Yet, as represented in Figure 10, many churches, especially those which are getting older in age between 2015 and 2021, do not offer programs that appeal to non-Christians.

Figure 10

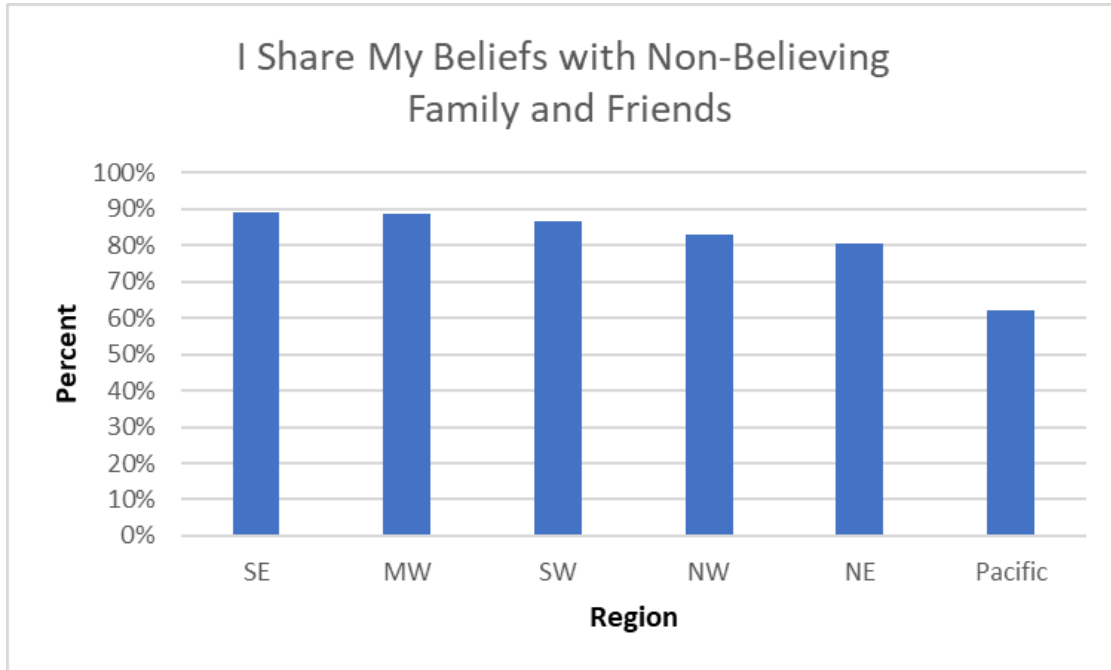
My Church has a Very Few Programs that Appeal to Non-Christians



In contrast to findings from Broocks (2010) and Moser (2019) where the intent of evangelism should be approached as missional. Churches included in this study tended to take a passive approach to evangelism. For example, a pastor from the MW stated that 100 percent of his congregation was interested in growth. However, of the 100 percent, 35 percent of the congregation reported that they preferred not to be directly involved with supporting change efforts to grow. Although many of the pastors in this study shared that every Christian is called to evangelism and to actively share Christ's work, some still view the practice as overly aggressive and even rude. A pastor in the Pacific region, for example, explained that "We are pretty uncomfortable with overt evangelism per se. But invitational, yes." This could be in part due to the cultural context of the church, as the pastor went on to describe Los Angeles as "not very religious at all, to the point of pretty skeptical and distrustful of religion." Though the results in Figure 11 show that the Pacific region lags behind other regions in terms of the commonality of faith sharing, this perception of evangelism is pretty widespread. To confront this perception, Broocks (2010) and Moser (2019) found that it is helpful to approach evangelism as "missional." Doing so can shift the perception of evangelism from being something intrusive to being something helpful.

Figure 11

I Share My Beliefs with Non-Believing Family and Friends



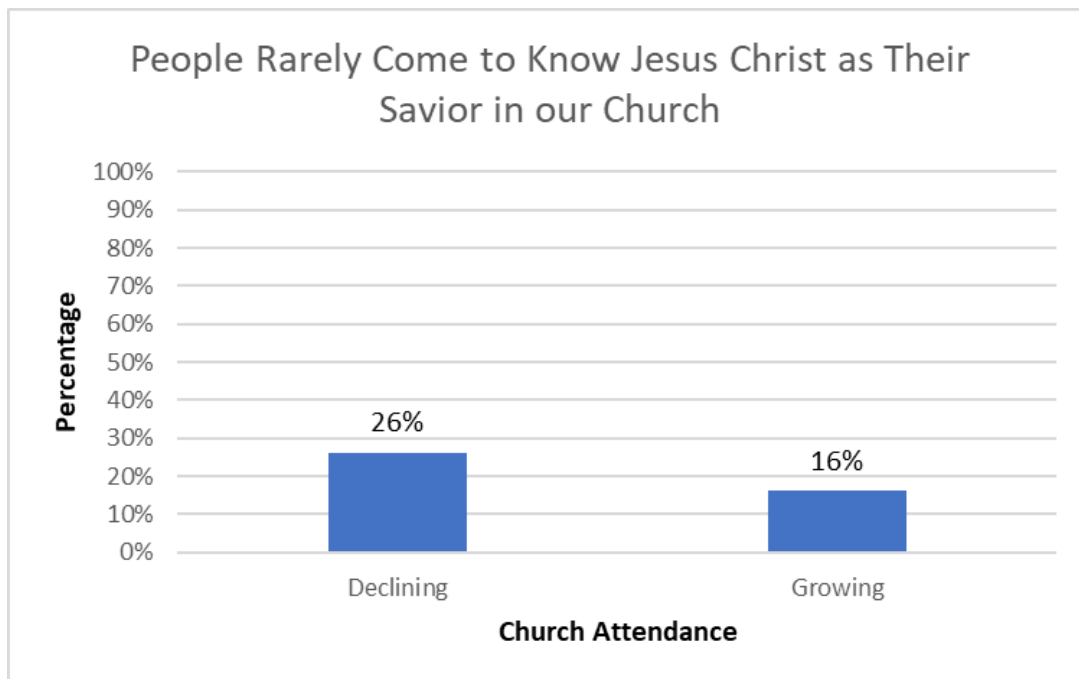
Even if a church member wants to be involved in evangelical activities, they may not feel comfortable doing so because of lack of knowledge or experience. A pastor from the NE region noted, “I think that most adults that I know today are simply afraid, because they're ill-equipped to share that faith. And they can't defend why they believe what they believe. And so, they don't.” When I asked if the church promotes evangelism, he responded by saying, “yeah, it is not something that we do effectively, I will be completely transparent. It's something that we're still growing in.” This might help explain why respondents of declining churches were more inclined to recognize that people rarely come to know Jesus Christ as their savior. A pastor from the SE region similarly observed (see Figure 12):

We had one of our older ladies, at the end of church say, you know, I want to go through that evangelism class because I don't know how to share the gospel. I've never been

taught how. The pastor continued, “I think that's one of the biggest issues. For so many years, we've had this idea of church evangelism... let's just get them to church and the preacher can tell them about Jesus.

Figure 12

People Rarely Come to Know Jesus Christ as Their Savior in our Church



Evangelizing is not easy, and some may avoid the practice out of fear of being challenged or faced with hostility. A SE pastor shared that a lot of the questions that are brought up when evangelizing, are meant to try to trip you up or to at least be argumentative. The pastor goes on to explain that pastors should train their congregations to know how to handle difficult situations like these. The pastor explained that “If the Holy Spirit's not moving in someone's life, we kind of train them to...understand when it's time to...move on to the next person, this conversation is really going nowhere, that if the Holy Spirit doesn't move a person to salvation, and we're wasting our time. Relatedly a NE pastor noted, “I found a lot of Christians in the area are for

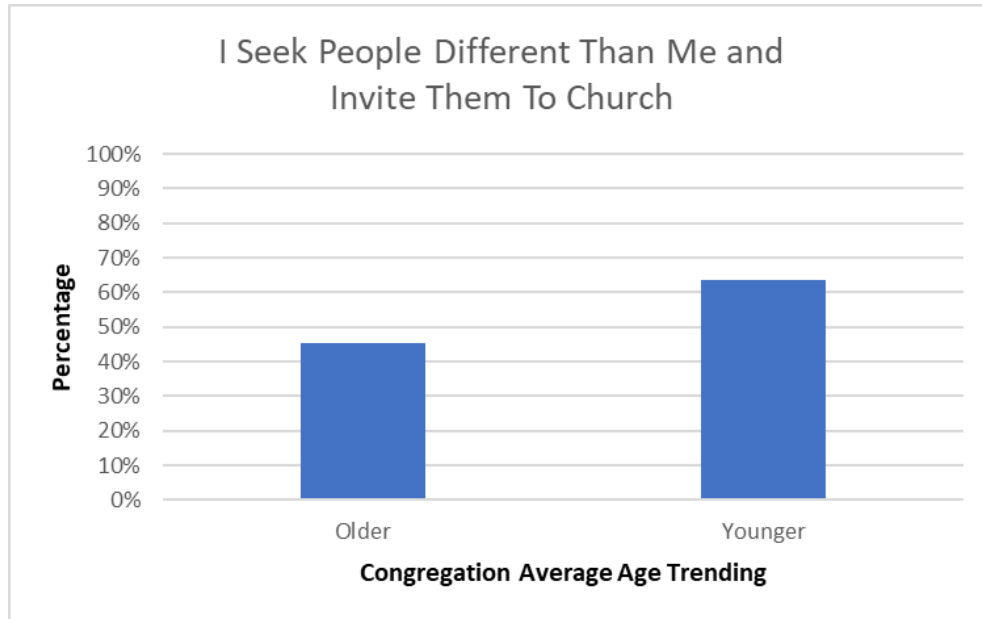
evangelism, but only in their way. If you try to do something that's outside of their box, it doesn't usually sit very well.”

Of the churches practicing evangelism, they are getting younger and appear to be more active. Churches trending younger are more open to seeking others to invite to church than the older generations (see Figure 13). To put the concept of evangelism in context and describe how people view it today, one pastor from the Pacific region noted:

I'm preparing a sermon for Sunday. One of the things that I was thinking through is, I think that there are a bunch of really important religious or Christian words that have fallen out of favor. Okay. I think humility, it has fallen out of favor and evangelism has fallen out of favor. Not because there's something wrong with the word. I think there is something wrong with our approach to it. I think that we're still in the in the baby steps in Christianity right now.

Figure 13

I Seek People Different Than Me and Invite Them to Church



Pastors participating in this study felt differently regarding how to define and carry out evangelism, especially as it relates to their role as a pastor. One NE pastor noted that evangelism is a term not explicitly mentioned in the Bible: “So already, we're imposing something on the Bible that may not be there. I'm not into that. My job is to read the scriptures, have them come alive in my own mind and heart and communicate them through an experience of prayer and spiritual interaction with that, that's my job. Another pastor from the SE believed his role in evangelizing to be much more natural than the stereotypical “banging the Bible” on the street corner. This sentiment was shared by several pastors and reflects the prevailing perception of evangelism today. Of the churches that were less hesitant about promoting evangelism among their congregations, leadership style was an important component of how they motivated their congregations to engage in the practice. For example, a pastor in the NW region suggested that they use a “Leadership by example model, let the Lord compel them. Like, as opposed to you got to ‘repeat after me’.”

Evangelism Practices that Drive Growth

Churches, in which the leaders choose to execute a biblical, culturally-relevant community evangelism strategy, are more likely to survive than churches that do not (Williams, 2017). Interviews with church leaders who exhibit these qualities in their communities affirm this strategy as key to driving growth. To remain relevant, pastors must employ the gospel to help solve people's problems. A SE pastor reflects that:

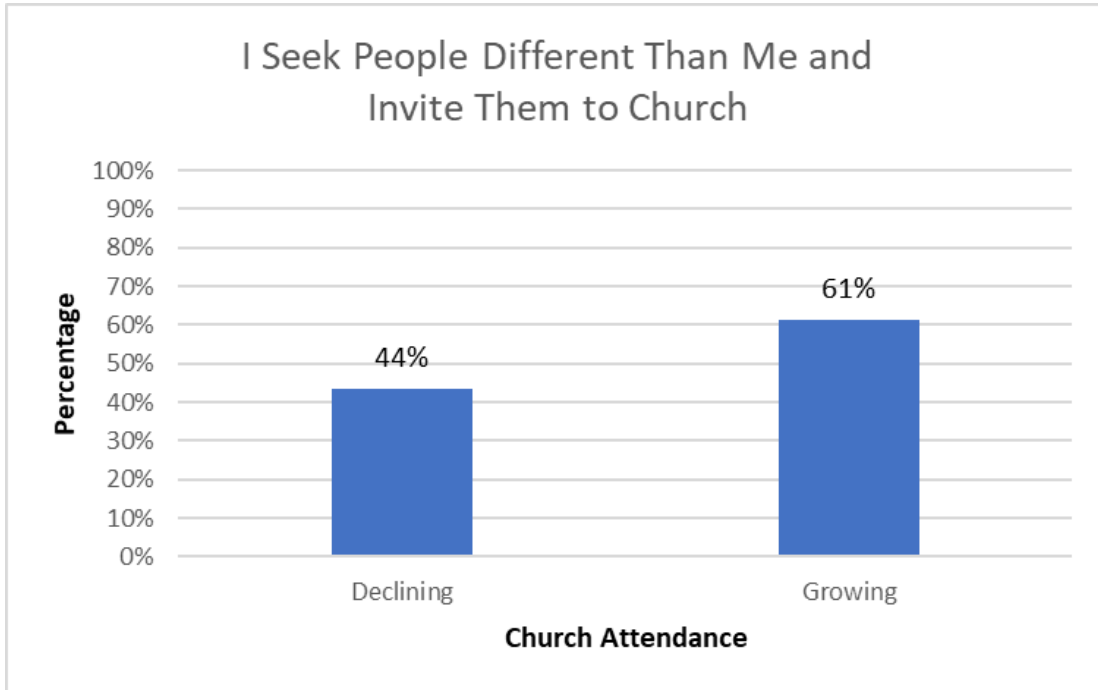
All of us are called to be ministers, all of us are called to the ministry. I'm an equipper, I'm a trainer and a teacher, because I'm the pastor. You need to be the hands and feet of Jesus, the eyes, and ears of Jesus, when you hear someone hurting. You need to be the first person to listen, and to absorb what pain it is that they're going through.

A SW pastor agreed, noting that churches must appeal to all groups of people to grow their congregation. In fact, a majority of study participants confirmed that growing churches seek out people different than them to invite to church (see Figure 14):

We all got to approach people and draw people to Jesus. There are some rich and very wealthy people right now that would not listen to me because that's just a different circle. There are some people that are white, that would listen to me. It's just a different circle. There are some people that are black, they won't listen to me. So, when I'm saying evangelizing, we have to evangelize everywhere. All people in the body of Christ should evangelize. So, we can go and get everybody for Jesus.

Figure 14

I Seek People Different Than Me and Invite Them to Church



When I asked how a church can recognize progress with evangelism related efforts, a NE pastor shared:

Anytime someone from the church family is involved in some way with leading someone to Christ, we light a candle. We encourage people to praise the Lord with a round of applause for that person. We don't give any details or anything because I don't want to get into competition, or we don't communicate names or anything. But we want people to know, evangelism is a part of worshipping God, and bringing people to Christ.

According to one SE pastor, evangelism and discipleship must go hand and hand. Church members must look to their circles of influence, such as hospitals, universities, or places of employment to reach those who are likely not affiliated with any church. From the pastor's

perspective, it is not the preacher's job to go out and find folks to come to church...[it] is the church's [job]." When I further asked if he equips his congregation for this task, he responded that "ownership of attendees is the congregation's," meaning that leadership of the church is on the congregation and not the pastor. While the pastor can facilitate and aid in any way that he or she can, it is ultimately the congregation's responsibility to direct the church.

Pastors suggest social media contributes to a decline of in-person attendance for younger generations

In interviews with pastors, social media, and media in general were mentioned repeatedly as a significant factor that is having a negative impact on church attendance. This issue also been noted in the literature, which finds that pastors and members of declining congregations commonly attribute the decline in membership and attendance to social media (Flatt, 2018). A SE region pastor noted:

The fear of God is not in this generation. It's just different. The older generations feared God, there were just certain things we wouldn't do. It is not a matter what color you are. We were just taught, you don't do "bad things." This generation is not like that. Social media is providing younger people with everything they need. These last two generations, they are more selfish. They are more on what they can do for themselves, I'm gonna make sure I am okay first.

When describing the impact of social media on the church as it relates to political polarization, a different SE pastor noted that:

Every four years during the election cycle, I either want to be raptured, or take an eight-month sabbatical. It's tense. Yeah. And social media makes it worse. Yeah, algorithms

are designed to divide and polarize. It's been increasingly difficult, especially and, and in multi-ethnic churches.

Other pastors discussed the impact of live streaming service on social media platforms, and although they do recognize the benefit for those who cannot make it to church in person, they also emphasize the importance of being in church. For example, a SW pastor said: "I want to be able to do what God's called me to do. Social media is not building a church. What builds churches is somebody saying, I go to 'church' [church name – hidden for anonymity]. I enjoy going there.

Another SW pastor agreed:

I think it's been accessibility to other forms of like, the proliferation of social media of all types. I have spent the last two years trying to get ready for what's coming with all new cameras and lights, preparing for social media side of ministry which I will always disagree as I think you should come to Christ's house.

Media in general was also often mentioned as a factor contributing to decline in church attendance and the decline of Christianity in general. For example, a NE pastor said:

I think the trends emerged from the northeast, it really began with elite universities, and corporations, elite universities feed into corporate CEOs, they set the tone for the decline. I think traditionally, you know, back in the 1950s, corporate America, you could see and feel that your Christian values in large parts were supported in various ways, by news media, at the university level, there were morality clauses, even actors had morality clauses, how they conducted their life, there were sensor type codes on television, so that Christian values were maintained.

This decline in Christian values that many pastors attributed to the role of social media raises an important issue: Can a proactive approach to social media with a plan to address the negative impacts of media be effective? Church leaders must consider the growing presence of social media and media polarization more generally when grappling with declining church attendance in their organizations.

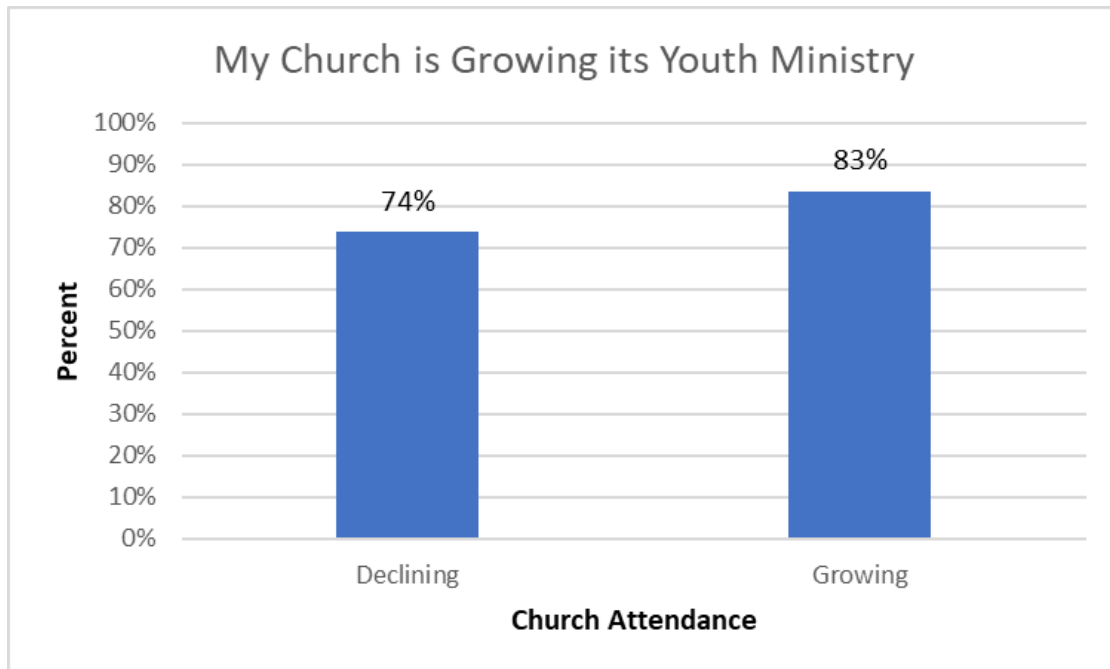
Data suggests that aging congregations correlate with decline

Congregations are aging due to a lack of younger generations joining the church. Therefore, even if people do not leave the church, attendance will continue to decline if new generations do not replenish the aging membership. Referring to Figure 1, a study published by the American Journal of Sociology found that younger generations are joining the church at a declining rate and growing churches are growing their youth ministries at a higher rate than those churches in decline (see Figure 15). When I visited with a SE pastor, he mentioned that he just lost his youth director, which he said was the result of a decline in younger people attending church. Responses from other participants in this study reflect that same concern. A MW pastor, for example, concurred with the report from Pew Research:

One of the things I'm looking at is my age, right now I've been here all these years. A lot of studies will say you look at the age of the pastor, and you know the age of the congregation. So older pastors have older people. So, I've watched that over the last 10 years in particular, as I've gotten older, and I'm watching that, if the church starts to age, then then I'm going to have to probably back out, because I don't think that I should let the church get old. And that's not happening. In fact, in recent years, last two, three years has gotten younger. Therefore, I'm bringing in staff and leadership that is younger.

Figure 15

My Church is Growing Its Youth Ministry



A different MW pastor expressed a related opinion:

I think the elders really believe because they don't have a young pastor, they don't have a lot of young people here. What I've noticed in all the churches that I've pastored, what I've noticed in my church, and what I've noticed in other churches around here is it's my generation (generation X) that's dropping the ball.

Generational differences may be what is at play in creating a congregation composition that skews heavily in favor of older adults. A MW pastor who supports this explanation explained that "it is part of the younger generation's culture. They are in no rush to get married or start families." He also believes that "younger people are not coming because they believe the church "is doing something wrong, this maybe in part that they are more interested in giving to projects rather than institutionally. Younger people feel they need a cause to rally around.

To address this perception, church leaders have adapted to offer programming that better aligns with the interests of today's youth. Though some older members of the church have been resistant to these efforts because, according to one SW pastor, "they see their power and their influence beginning to wane," most have been supportive of investing in the next generation of church attendees. When asked how millennials and generation X are responding to such programs, a NW pastor stated:

Yeah, I think they dig it...and the older people, this, this was a big shift that I had to make. I'm like, look, you're 65. You're retired. You're in West Palm Beach. You're in San Diego. You're in Houston. Now, it's time for you to turn around and look over your shoulder and say, "How can I nurture and care and love and serve this younger generation of Christians?" Right? You know, that saying the church is only one generation away from extinction at all times, every time. And so, I had to like, kind of combat the selfishness of the boomers. Because they're super selfish, and it's really all about them and their titans of industry and they built the country and whatever. And a lot of older people did make that shift, and they love, they love being near the young people. They love being near the young, such good young people energy. Yeah. So, I think it wasn't a challenge for me to like, package something to sell to a millennial.

Churches also have had to address the lack of exposure to religious influences that many young people encounter while attending college. A SE pastor, for instance, described a relationship with students at a local college that has now been severed because of the decision by the college to halt Bible studies. Before this policy change, over 70 students from the college were participating in the church in some capacity. It only took a couple years after this policy

took effect for there to be no more students introduced to the church from within the college, resulting in lower rates of participation from young people in the community.

Countering the narrative that external forces are the driving cause for declining church attendance by young people, a MW pastor noted:

My theory has always been and ever since I was a youth pastor myself, is if you give people something of substance and you do it well, they will come. That's always been the main strategy that we've used here. And it is, it is proven to be useful and successful for us in that regard. I mean, as far as people coming and staying in our church, and the kids that come, especially these kids that are newer kids and so forth, they have not been around the teaching of the word. They are staying. They're not coming for a couple of weeks and walking away. They're staying around.

Growing churches must address the problem of aging congregations by seeking new avenues for recruiting young people, even in the face of the external pressures that turn young people away from the church.

Pastors suggest that competing activities contribute to decline

Competing Sunday activities such as youth sport requirements, shopping, and “busyness” are frequently mentioned as factors that may be contributing to the decline in church attendance. Though most of the churches included in the study also offer alternative options for youth at other times, these competing activities have nevertheless had a negative impact. Gruber (2008) found that a policy-driven change affected the opportunity cost of religious participation based on state laws that prohibit retail activity on Sunday, known as “blue laws.” Many states have repealed these laws in recent years, raising the opportunity cost of religious participation. Variety

of data sets demonstrate that when a state repeals its blue laws, religious attendance falls, and that church donations and spending fall as well.

A SE pastor noting this trend recalled:

There were no kids sports on Sundays when I grew up. Nowadays, you can go to any ballpark in America and find kids on Sundays playing sports. You know, 20 years ago, you didn't have sports on Sunday, but 30 years ago nothing was open on Sunday. That has been phasing out, though some states don't have anything open.

Pastors suggest that entertainment as form of worship should be balanced with equipping

Many who attend church go to feel engaged by the spirit and inspired by the content of the sermons. In today's society, where most modern people have shorter attention spans, it can be difficult for congregations to remain engaged in a traditional lengths service. Rather, many seek out church as a form of entertainment. This approach can have benefits and drawbacks as it relates to growing congregations. For instance, one SE pastor commented:

We are an attractive church. A lot of people did come here. A lot of people came here for the "show." We're like, okay, but that's not going to be what we put our effort into. We do want to worship God together, but we want to serve people. That dynamic of gathering to worship and to serve is an incredibly important part of our engine.

Unfortunately, we realized that we sort of missed the equipping step a lot along the way. We didn't necessarily make disciples or teach or train people as much as we should have. We say, people get excited about God and come here and worship. And then we'd say, go serve your neighbor. And, and they'd go out and they get burned out because they weren't relationally connected or equipped with the word and so we had to retrofit and revisit.

A different SE pastor offered another pertinent example:

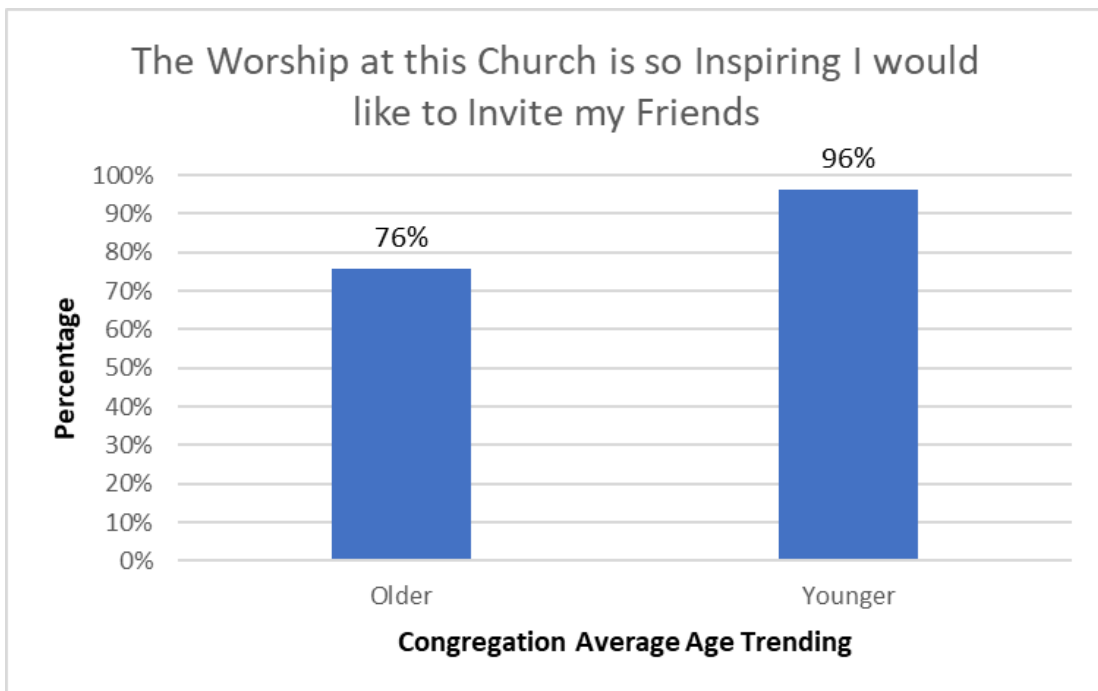
You have to kind of navigate it and make it where it's an enjoyable experience, but like they are getting spiritual feeding out of it. Some people who are just like, asleep. They're just here. And then there are other people who genuinely are here just for the growth and to hear the message and for the opportunity to go to Sunday school. So, it's trying to figure out how to engage without making it too much about entertainment, like, church should be fun. It should be wonderful. But also, it can't just be about consumerism, yeah, it's not to entertain. I would say our contemporary service was very consumeristic. I think they are more engaged when they're singing, they're being more vocal. They came in, they wanted to see the band play three songs, sat down, and listened to a 20-minute speech, because that's what they paid for, right? It's very consumeristic. Whereas church for me was very interactive, seeing people's joy.

Entertainment has even extended beyond church walls to events such as concerts, trips to amusement parks, and costume parties. One SE pastor mentioned that their church has a man who does “Christian” birthday parties, at which he dresses up like Spider Man. Another MW pastor talked about his use of a cleverly-trained horse, and how this horse was taught to recognize certain cues from its human handler. People would ask the horse a question, and it would give answers by “stamping out” Bible verses using its feet. All such entertainment efforts are intended to provide an initial momentary engagement, and, more critically, inspire members to return to the church. Churches, which are growing and getting younger, are providing an inspiring service through their entertainment strategy (see Figure 6). However, not all churches are in alignment. One SW pastor said:

We do have a lot of fun things for kids to do. But we're not putting on rock concerts. We're not bringing in clowns. We're not doing a big entertainment production. We're attracting them, strangely enough, through the teaching of the Word. And we're doing it well. We are teachers, and that is very good.

Figure 16

The Worship at this Church is so Inspiring I would like to Invite my Friends



The churches included in this study often had resistance to trying new strategies to recruit and retain members. The next subset of findings relates to why these change efforts may or may not be successful.

Q2. What are the contextual factors and conditions inhibiting change?

Nothing new happens without change. It is either inhibited or accelerated. All too often churches in this study chose to inhibit change rather than accelerate it. One pastor calls it

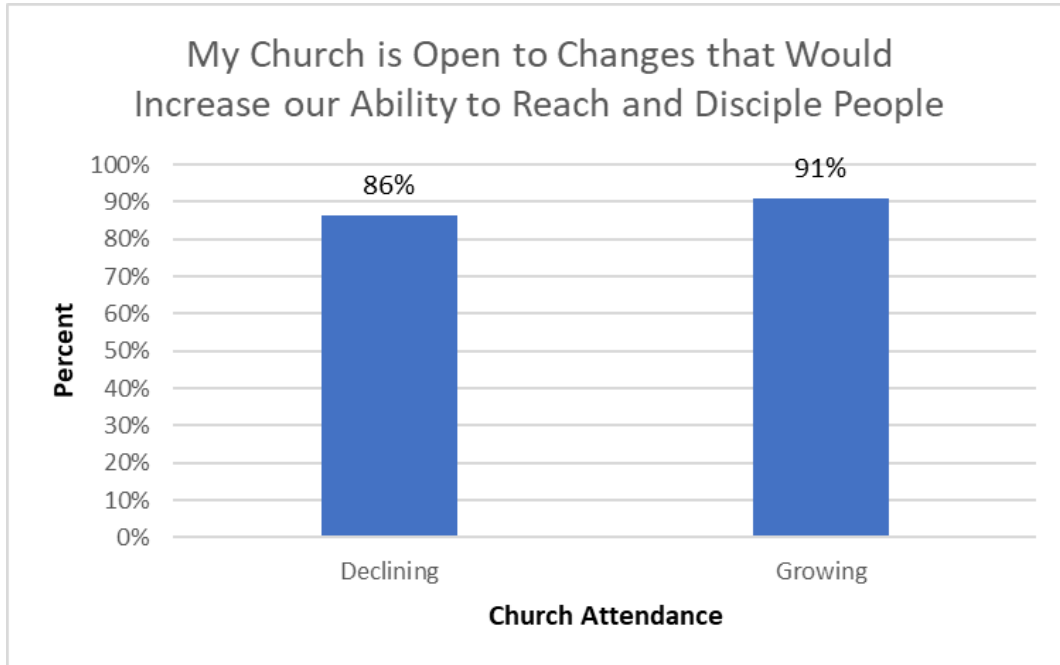
terminal niceness, where leadership are comfortable and don't feel the need to be disruptors even though congregants are willing to participate.

Churches suffer from "Terminal Niceness"

Change can be difficult and disruptive. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, 26 of the 27 pastors interviewed noted their belief that 60 percent or more of their congregations want attendance to grow. Of those pastors asked why they believed the number was not 100 percent, the answer was almost unanimous: It would be 100 percent if the church attender did not have to be involved with the change. The results from this study suggest that declining or growing churches have congregations that are almost unanimously open to changes to that would increase their ability to reach and disciple people (see Figure 17). Over 40 percent of all churches do not find it easy to add new programs leading to question why (see Figure 18). Is leadership an inhibitor?

Figure 17

My Church is Open to Changes that Would Increase our Ability to Reach and Disciple People



Most pastors recognize that lack of change will prevent them from growing their congregations. In fact, when asked what would happen if their church did not make any changes within five years, 25 of the 27 pastors said their church would die or at least be in severe decline. One of the exceptions to this response was a SW pastor who believed that church attendance was not in his control:

It's in God's hands what happens in five years. You continue to be here, the pastor keeps preaching, but there's not a strategy to get out there and to try to bring more people in, like from an evangelistic point of view. You got to work on faith. I look at it this way. I was without a job for one year and He took care of me. I'm not worried about the next 40.

However, the process whereby change is implemented can be uniquely difficult for churches where the decision-making structure does not support decisiveness or a sense of

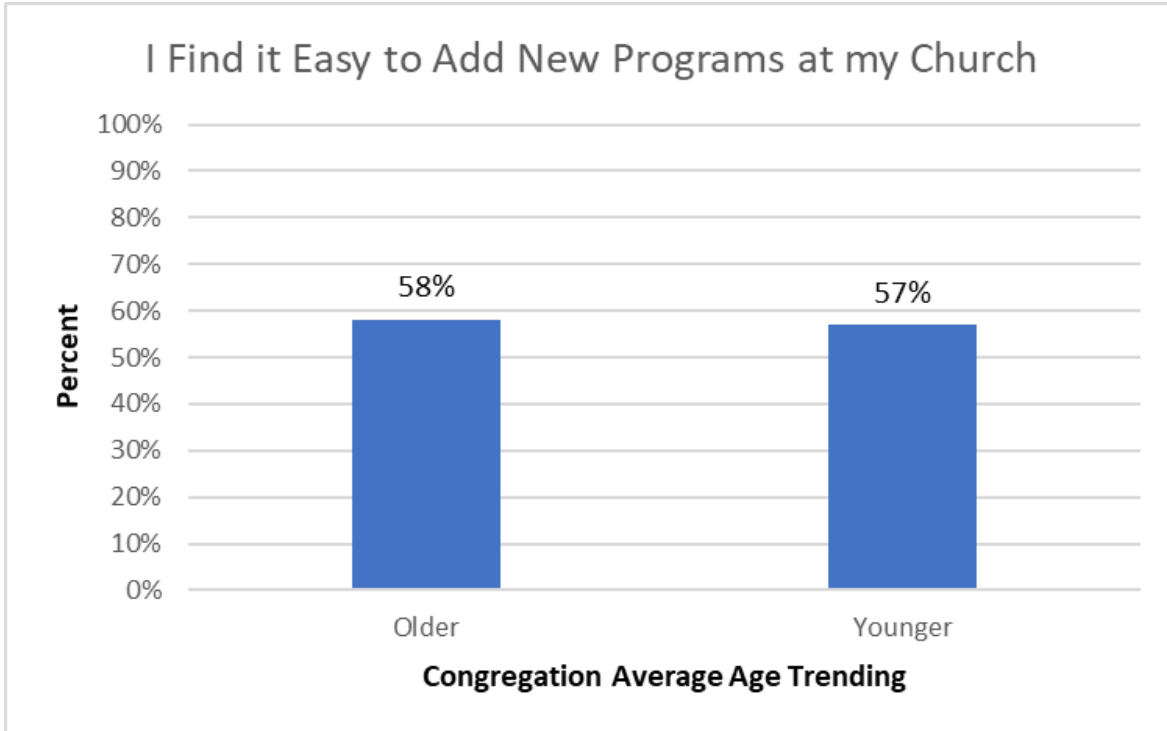
urgency. When asked about why change efforts are delayed at his church, a SW pastor mentioned that change is repeatedly put off simply because the group is uncomfortable in deciding:

Change is too messy. It's too hard for people...Churches sometimes have a problem of what I call "terminal niceness." I think this church historically has been kind of anti-change on anything. People just want things to stay the way they are. They are comfortable.

Just like any organization, churches invest heavily in the status quo to avoid facing what can feel like an uncertain future (Hussain, 2018). Even when some members of the congregation are willing to accept a proposed change, many will still avoid being involved in bringing about that change, which hinders the change process. To address this kind of scenario, Hussain (2018), citing Lewin's conceptual change model, asserts that as long as "doubts and concerns" are being managed during the unfreezing stage, the forces of the people who prefer the status quo will create less resistance than the forces applying for change. In other words, leaders must actively manage perceptions and address fears at the start of the change process if they are to effectively overturn the status quo.

Figure 18

I Find it Easy to Add New Programs at my Church



The concerns of existing congregation members about implementing change are valid.

Implementation can be difficult to execute once the decision to make a change is made. For

It is easy to change the things that nobody cares about. It becomes difficult when you start to change the things that people do care about—or when they start to care about the things that you are changing. — LORENZI AND RILEY

example, over 40 percent of churches participating in this study reported that they do not find it easy to add new programs. A NE pastor expressed a similar sentiment, saying that the elders really wanted the church to move

forward with their plans for “getting out into the community. However, if you try to do something that's outside of their box, it doesn't usually sit very well.” Ultimately, it is the buy-in of the congregation that decides whether any progress is made on implementing a change.

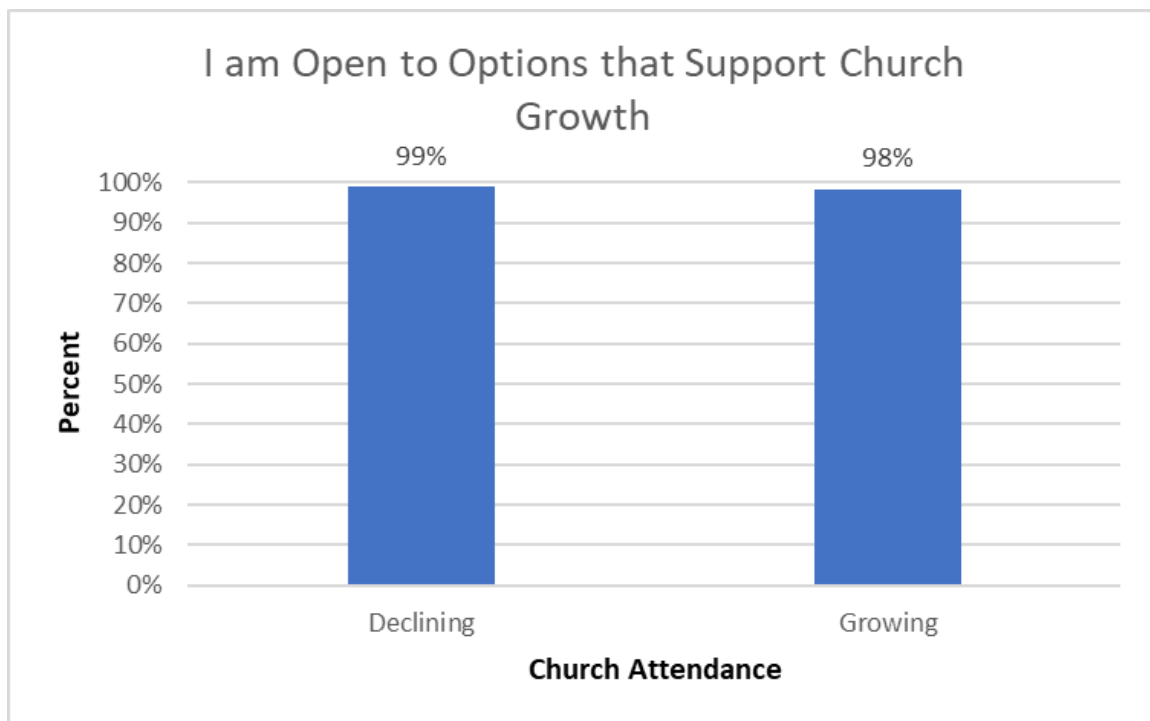
The type of change can matter in terms of generating buy-in. However, even though it is generally easy to make superficial changes, those changes can end up setting the wrong tone for the organization. A SW pastor described such a scenario he encountered at his church:

Let me tell you what I think happened, the people must be comfortable. The people must have their needs met. The people must, they must be able to park easily. The people must be able to see beautiful buildings. The people must be able to make sure that they're going to get out on time and not going to have long services. That's what I feel that we all begin to cater to – what people want. What I think our downfall is, is that we were catering. I mean the church as a whole. We were catering to people and getting away from what Jesus was telling us to do. We cannot try to satisfy people's flesh, instead of just preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the love of God, which is the kingdom of God, which is that God designed you to be able to do the supernatural. And if we preach the word, and we really show the benefits of Jesus Christ, those that really want him and asked, and we got to ask God. I don't mean not trying to deal with people's needs, but we went more toward their flesh, instead of speaking to that spirit man. At the same time trying to make the church grow. From a natural standpoint, with fleshly things. Not only did we did we design the wrong thing we trained people think about what they want first. At the same time, we as leaders, since we were gravitating toward that, at teaching the church to grow, and not necessarily grow spiritually, we also as a whole, got less and less spiritual. And we begin to fall more and more into sin and sinful things and worldly things. And then in turn, my guess what happened? The people had an excuse not to come.

The world changes very fast. Organizations must be willing to adapt quickly for the development and survival of the organization (Hussain, 2018). Congregations are open to options, though changes are not happening quickly enough (see Figure 19). Churches who act decisively to plan about change, and strategically to implement such change, are poised to overcome challenges in the long run.

Figure 19

I Am Open to Options that Support Church Growth



Congregants are willing to change but leadership may not be ready

People are inherently uncomfortable with change but are open to options. That is why strong leadership is necessary to help lead the way of change. When describing the impact that a change in leadership had on attendance, a MW preacher added that leadership change itself can

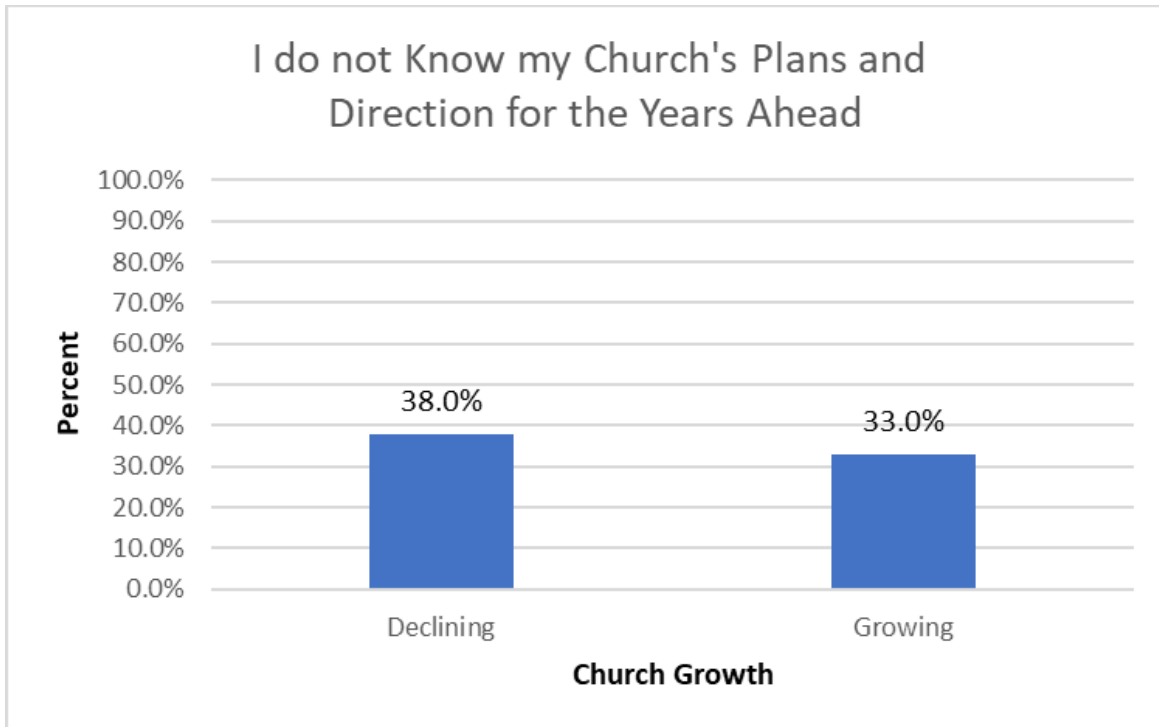
help by bringing in new strategies and ideas. Research shows that being inwardly focused is a significant factor in church decline (Flatt, 2018). By looking to outside leadership to support change, churches can benefit from the fresh perspective of someone less invested in maintaining the status quo. A NE pastor offered a prime example of this approach:

When I first came to this church, I realized the church was largely inward focused. I spent a lot of time helping the church to see and understand that the community is our mission field. It's been difficult because it's been a long transition. Our church has grown [to] accept that people [have] differences. But knowing how to minister to them is not always easy. Because they bring a whole - they bring a lot of baggage with them that most people have never had to administer to or deal with. And so, helping people to learn how to walk through that is of great difficulty.

Leadership is a critical component of change and change management. However, through interviewing pastors for this study, I found that every church views leadership differently. As leaders within the Christian faith, pastors must be deeply committed to the teachings of the Bible in all aspects of their leadership approach. This is not only important for legitimizing their authority, but strict adherence to genuinely Biblical theology is actually a predictor of church growth (Flatt, 2018). Since the results of this study indicate that attendees believe the church has an almost unanimous openness to change (see Figure 17), the question becomes: Does the current church leadership style support change in a way that the church as a whole will accept? Results from this study indicate that either plans are not communicated with the congregation, or that leadership does not have a plan (see Figure 20). Leaders of over 30% of participating congregants are not setting expectations.

Figure 20

I do not Know my Church's Plans and Direction for the Years Ahead



Dierendonck (2011) offers one framework for leadership with his servant leadership model that can be particularly useful when applied to the context of change within the church. According to this model, in addition to letting their followers clearly know what is expected from them, servant leaders are strongly focused on the feelings of their followers. This establishes trust and enables followers to feel committed to the change at hand. The pastors interviewed for this study had varying levels of experience implementing a servant-leader approach.

Consider, for example, a situation where a church recently voted to change pastors because it was believed that the practices of the former pastor led to the exodus of over 150 members from the church. At this church, the new pastor was not actually a minister, but rather a

lawyer with minimal training on leading congregations. He assumed a leadership position within the church, expressing a desire for changes and improvements, but took a very rigid and authoritarian approach to decision-making, policies, and procedures. Others summed up his overall attitude with the phrase “It's my way or the highway.” He was very committed to making changes, but his ideas about what changes were to be made—and *how* they were to be implemented—were quite different from those of the rest of the church. This attitude and approach to change did not work well in the church setting, especially since the church had an older and more established congregation. A better approach in this scenario would have been that of a servant-leader. Instead of being authoritarian about decision-making, the new pastor could have taken the time to show people *why* change is necessary and treat any concerns with sensitivity, compassion, and patience. This pastor did none of those things, and quite predictably, the result was disastrous.

This particular case may be representative of many churches with aging congregations in which the spiritual gifts of the people are not being properly developed. A SE pastor noted the approach of the board of elders made the situation even worse because of the lack of communication, explaining “Our elders didn't do a whole lot of communicating to the congregation. The congregation was not clear on church values. We lost maybe 100-150 people to that event.” In other words, a lack of coherence between the church's values and the actions and communications exhibited by the new leaders appeared to have contributed to the leader's failure to initiate change. Although few accounts are as dramatic as this one, similar patterns can be identified across many churches struggling with declining attendance.

Churches could also benefit from examining the concept of “power distance” within their organization's structure (Dierendonck, 2010). A culture with a low power distance is expected to

be more encouraging toward developing servant leadership within an organization because the relationship between leader and follower is based on a more equal footing. One SE pastor described a situation where he is in a “higher” power distance situation, which is not unique to his particular church. As with many others, this church was managed by a board of elders:

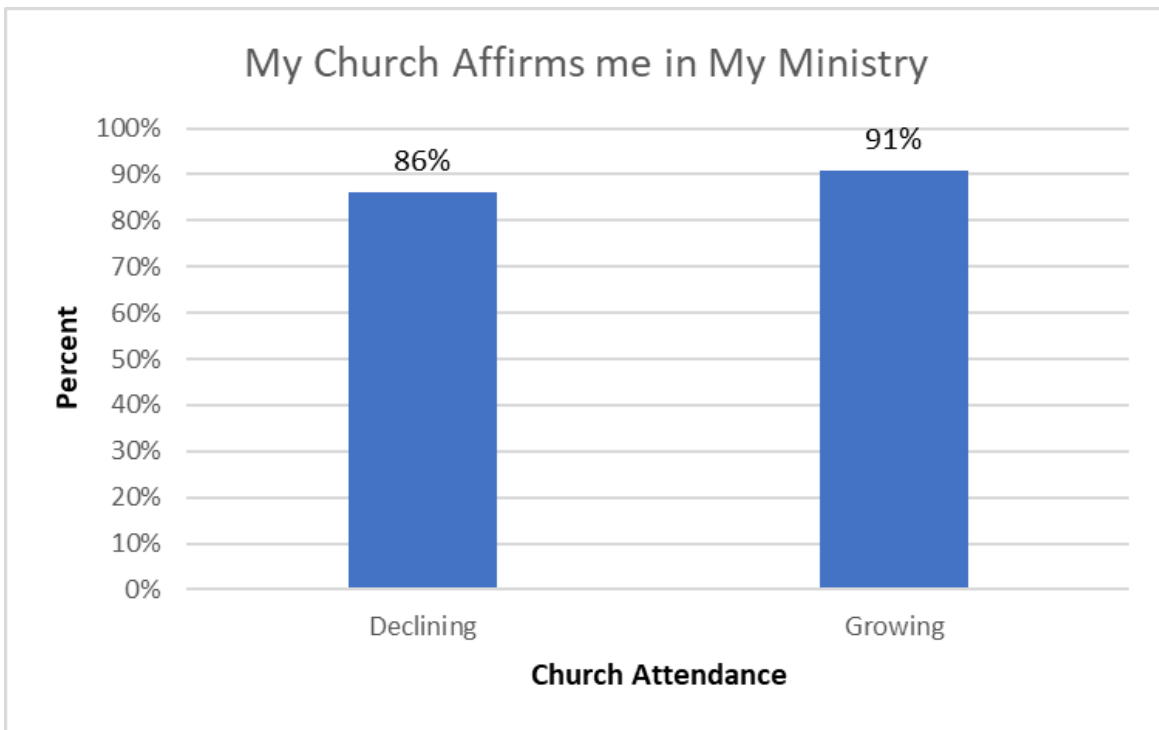
Basically, the pastor almost felt like he was answerable to this board. But we've really tried to over the past several pastors to have them understand that I really have a servant heart that we're here to serve the community, and we're supposed to serve our congregation.

The elders of this declining church were not affirming to the pastor’s ministry. Churches experiencing decline are not affirming congregants as much as growing congregations, and though the differences do not seem great, it matters (see Figure 21). Dierendonck shares that a servant leader needs to create an engaging environment and provide empowerment. A lack of doing so will inhibit a person’s commitment to change. This episode also calls into question whether the congregation understood the direction of the church. Churches in decline were less likely to understand the direction the church was moving or the direction in which it wanted to be moving (see Figure 21). A MW pastor shared a similar experience in which the church decided to engage in community outreach to the Latino community, but the outreach ultimately did not happen. When asked what the argument was against proceeding with the outreach, the pastor responded by saying: “There is no argument from the elders, but it just doesn't get done. We got a mission field. We're sitting. We're mission searching. We're sitting in a mission field.” A different MW pastor has a contrasting approach. He believes some churches can be led by a pastor, while others can be led by consensus:

There are some churches where the pastor is the man. He makes the decision - that's not us. Our board and I work on a consensus basis. No major decision is going to be made without a consensus of the elders. Sometimes, some of the elders might not be as much as in favor of something as others, but they're always agreeable.

Figure 21

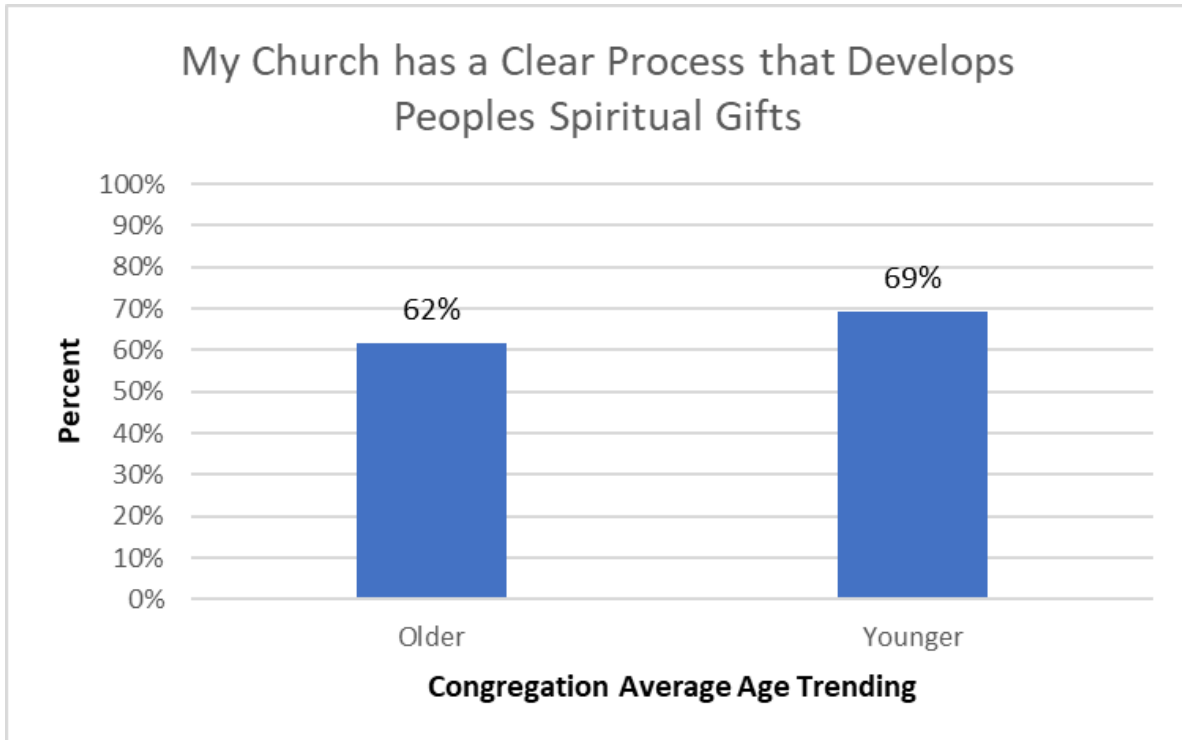
My Church Affirms me in My Ministry



Regardless of how decisions are made in a particular church, it is important that churches recognize how leadership structure and style can influence change efforts within their organizations. Over 30 percent of all participating churches did not have a clear process that develops people's spiritual gifts – and that number was even higher for congregations trending older (see Figure 22). Leadership has an opportunity to more fully equip its congregations.

Figure 22

My Church has a Clear Process that Develops Peoples Spiritual Gifts



Q3. What strategies do pastors and congregants believe have led to growth in their churches?

For purposes of this study, the following strategies can be viewed as best practices for those churches successfully deploying them. The concept of “best practices” seems to be an overused and frequently misunderstood term. For the purposes of this study, participating churches shared examples, which reportedly moved the needle toward growth. To help frame what a best practice might look like, one SE pastor in a growing church put it this way:

If the oppressor and the oppressed are in the same living room having a meal together, I would call that significant forward progress. You see in the church of Philippi where

Lydia was an Asian fashionista, she was the first to get saved and comes to Christ, the next was a Roman jailer is like a blue collar, Roman cop, he gets saved. And then the slave girl with no name totally at the lowest spectrum of the society, and they all come to Christ, and they're in the same church. And Paul's talking about honoring and serving one another in *Philippians* chapter two that don't, don't consider yourself as important, but look, for they see what others are concerned about being concerned about their needs. It's like that the whole universe has been turned upside down in the local church. That's what I see at our church, there are homeless, there are their poor inner-city kids that are here, they are being given not just a fish, they are getting the proverbial take him fishing, you know, don't give a fish take him fishing. We're, we're trying to inspire them for pond ownership. Let's go after you can do this and win. I think we're making great progress there.

A MW pastor had a different perspective:

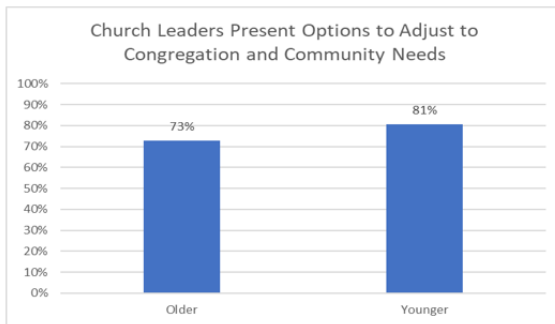
We want to be a church where Democrats and Republicans can be in the same building, have strong differences in their political beliefs, but be united in Christ enough to say, “we don't agree on a lot of things, but we do agree on this: We agree that Jesus is the is the Savior of the world. The church is the hope of the world. Through the ministry of the church, you can come to know this Christ. And that's, and that's what matters. In both examples, these church leaders structured their practices to the needs of the community to inspire discipleship which resulted in church growth.

Congregations that are growing report “intentionally making internal changes in order to remain religiously meaningful and relevant” (Flatt, 2018). Best practices (see Figure 23) from participating churches intended to enable growth. These practices are employed by congregations

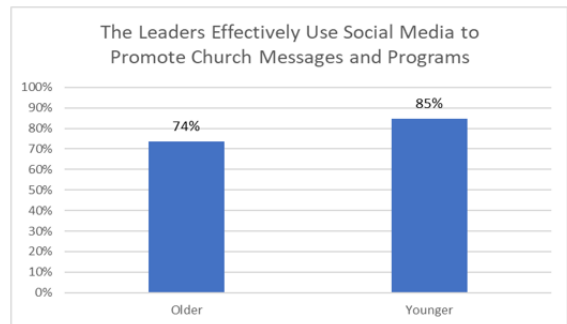
trending younger. Each of these practices has a better chance of success when leaders deploy servant-leadership and change techniques by engaging, equipping, and empowering congregants for success. Notably churches trending younger are adjusting to congregation and community needs. For each individual local church, it is the community that needs to be heard and practices adjusted for engagement to be more successful.

Figure 23

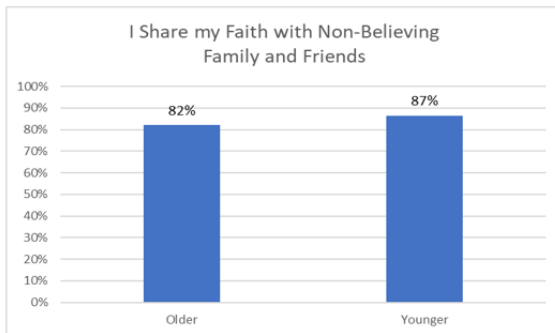
Data Showing the Benefit of Congregations Trending Younger



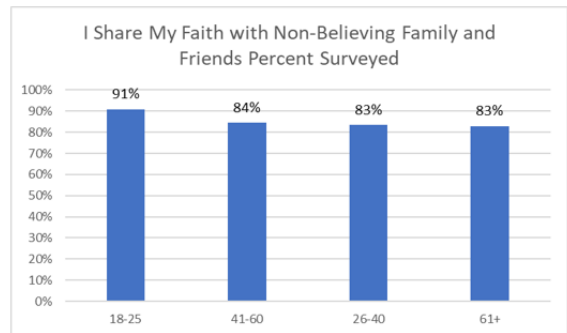
Churches getting younger present options to change practices reflecting congregation and community needs



Churches getting younger more effectively use social media



Churches getting younger more effectively evangelize with non-believing family and friends



Younger generations are more likely to share their faith, providing another benefit for growing youth ministries

Churches experiencing decline can therefore learn from these growing churches through information-sharing of best practices. For this reason, the present study will not only inform other participating churches of factors related to a decline in attendance, but it also will act as a repository for shared best practices to promote growth. While reviewing best practices in Table 8, it will be important to consider how the conceptual frameworks of leadership and change can

help guide and replicate future growth. To minimize confusion and increase sustainability of the new practice, it is always helpful to follow a conceptual framework. A SE pastor noted that without change, we are all just one step closer to death. If I understand discipleship correctly, we are supposed to grow more and more like Christ each and every day of our lives.

Table 8

Best practice and conceptual framework integration reference table

			Conceptual Framework Reference	
Pastor / Region	Need	Best Practice Example	Dierendonck (outcomes)	Lewin (change engagement factors)
Southeast	Evangelism - Equip the congregation	We train people on something called the two-minute miracle. How can you talk to people in two minutes and share your story? The two minutes miracle shows how God saved you. How did God change you? Most believers don't know how to do that. They go on and get lost in the details. We mastered the art of training people on a two-minute miracle.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Contribution High quality of life	Empower action Provide training
Southeast	Evangelism - Reaching the community	How do you reach the surrounding community? We don't. They reach us. How do they do that? Through our campus ministry and involvement in the local schools, simply because people become your biggest billboards. When people experience true transformation, that becomes the magnet that attracts other people.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Contribution High quality of life	Empower action Involvement
Southeast	Evangelism – Develop discipleship outreach programs	Victory Day is coming. Last event we had 140 people; this event will probably be a little over 200 people from 6 different states. <i>What is his Victory Day?</i> Victory Day is for people that finished 12 weeks of “foundations.” In foundations we have this, if you would, a very private day that is consecrated and dedicated to encounter the Lord in a personal way. Victory Day is for people to experience the victory that they have in the cross of Jesus. For 12 weeks, they've been learning all kinds of stuff in that leads them to get rid of the junk in their life. Foundations prepare them to be ready for an encounter that changes them from the inside out. Victory Day is a day from 9am	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Build relationship	Anchor changes to culture Provide training

		<p>to 6pm. We have breakfast and lunch. But it's all day that is dedicated to focus on the Lord. We set up the atmosphere for people to be able to walk through that. Victory day is a big day because you see people breaking out of depression breaking out of addictions. <i>It sounds like some of those people may or may not even be churchgoers.</i> Most of them are not. Many of the people come from other churches. <i>How do you get people to join the foundations program?</i> It's not a program. It's not a class, okay? It's, it's part of our discipleship journey. We're heavy on promoting the discipleship culture. <i>How do you find people for foundations?</i> It's almost like an evangelistic kind of thing where attendees in the congregation knows it's coming. They might have someone in mind that they want to sponsor to come into foundations, so they invite them. It has raised dramatic results - people's marriages restored, breaking free from addictions, overcoming pornography, or deep dark things that the church will not talk about. <i>Why is it successful?</i> It's deeply relational. By the end of foundations, they are so connected to their table and to the table leaders. They are walking, they are doing life together. The Bible comes alive in people's personal walk and real everyday life like never before.</p>	High quality of life	
Southeast	Leadership - engaging the congregation	<p>To be a disciple of Jesus you must be immersed in serving. All the disciples served. We teach people what is it like to serve. We don't call them volunteers. That's a dirty word around here. At least half of our church, I will say comfortably, are servant leaders.</p>	<p><u>Leader</u></p> <p>Empowering</p> <p>Stewardship</p> <p><u>Follower</u></p> <p>Contribution</p> <p>High quality of life</p>	<p>Empower action</p> <p>Anchor changes to the culture</p>
Midwest	Leadership – Importance of the relational nature of attending church in person	<p>If you don't have the congregational life you don't have the body of life. There are smaller churches where people don't know each other. They don't get involved in each other's lives. We are very relational. Right now, we've got a major crisis going on with a very sick baby. We got another one having a baby and we got an older person who is very sick. The whole congregation is praying for them all. Just before our meeting, I sent out a voicemail that goes out to everybody in the church as well as a network we have much like Facebook, but it's private that everybody in the church knows about this and we're and they're praying. They're concerned.</p>	<p><u>Leader</u></p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Humility</p> <p><u>Follower</u></p> <p>Contribution</p> <p>Build relationships</p>	<p>Communicate often</p> <p>Anchor changes to the culture</p>
Pacific	Leadership – Developing a leadership team	<p>Reflecting servant leadership qualities, a Pacific region pastor new in his post described his approach to welcoming new people into leadership posts where church growth is a major focus. He said, "I'll say this, I don't believe that many church members, even those in leadership positions, have a really concrete understanding of what church growth is. We've literally been in this process of asking members if they would be willing to be on this leadership team. However, before they got an opportunity to say yes or no, I had 90-minutes of time with each of them, including prayer. We discussed what church growth looks like. What the implications are of saying yes or no to a role as an elder in our church. One</p>	<p><u>Leader</u></p> <p>Empowerment</p> <p>Providing direction</p> <p><u>Follower</u></p> <p>Contribution</p> <p>Build relationships</p>	<p>Empower action</p> <p>Anchor changes to the culture</p>

		of the key elements of being an elder is growing spiritually so that you can take leadership, emphasizing that you are accepting leadership to grow the church. I share frameworks of growth and provide a set of definitions from church growth and spiritual formation.		
Multiple Regions	Leadership – Providing transparency of progress through reporting	Find a good way to display those activities that impact your church most. This helps attendees understand progress and results of activities and programs related to church health and church growth. Most measurements should have a timeline and target. Metrics that I captured during this study includes: weekly attendance, membership, giving, baptisms, evangelism efforts, outreach ministries.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Committed Contribution	Create need for change Involvement
Southwest	Aging congregations - Focus on youth ministries	Raise up a generation of a younger generation and empower them for ministry. Think of a relay race, picture the handoff, to hand off that baton. I've seen some of our older congregants, the older ones by the 70s, and 80s they're all about that, because they see it, a real clear strategy is to raise up younger people.	<u>Leader</u> Providing direction <u>Follower</u> Contribution	Empower action Skills and rewards
Southeast	Aging congregations – Develop or expand campus ministries	We have several campus ministries. They all they have staff. They have outreaches. They're making disciples. They're doing a lot of extraordinary work on campus.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Contribution High quality of life	Empower action Involvement
Southeast	Social Media – using it to your advantage	Our announcements are pre-service and post-service on videos, video loops. We use technology, social media, websites and email all tools to make our announcements. We don't want to take too much time during the service for announcements. I have a creative art person that in charge of social media, graphic design who also leads worship. All are servant leaders.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering Stewardship <u>Follower</u> Committed Positive Attitudes	Communicate Involvement
Multiple Regions	Entertainment vs. Teaching	We do have a lot of fun things for kids to do. But we're not putting on rock concerts. We're not bringing in clowns. We're not doing a big entertainment production. We're attracting them, strangely enough, through the teaching of the Word. And we're doing it well. We are teachers, and that is very good.	<u>Leader</u> Empowering <u>Follower</u> Committed	Communicate Training (Equipping)

Recommendations

Every Nation and each pastor participating in this study have one thing in common: their goal is to grow Christian church attendance by making more disciples. They all know "what" needs to be done, but "how" it is done varies from community to community. As identified by this study, many best practices for Christian growth are working well for the communities that employ them. However, just because a practice is helping one community grow does not mean that it will generate the same results for another community. The pastor's and leadership team's awareness of the local community's needs are critical in determining the most appropriate strategy for growth.

In consideration of the conceptual frameworks that guided this study, as well as the wealth of educational resources that Every Nation has built to serve as training programs for its churches, the following section represents concrete policy and practice recommendations designed to promote growth in Christian church attendance across the United States.

A. Consider developing an Innovation Hub intended to inform member and non-member churches.

The present study's findings suggest that churches need to find ways to better listen to the needs of their community. Considering a host of external factors that have been identified as barriers to church attendance, such as aging congregations, social media, competing activities, and declining evangelism, churches who fail to adapt to these changes will lose out on a large segment of potential new members as they seek to grow their organizations. Establishing an Innovation Hub is one solution to improving Christian organizations' capacity to implement innovations and embrace change. Though EN itself has created a significant level of knowledge

capital available through many outlets such as in person training, books, published research, and social media, those resources do not seem to be connected to an Innovation Hub where member and non-member churches can access education and training, but also make contributions. A designated Innovation Hub grounded in innovation and knowledge transfer principles would establish a centralized resource for churches to learn how to apply change management or leadership frameworks to add best practices that enable growth.

Richard (2019) found that many organizations have adopted the strategy of open innovation over the last ten years. This approach that searches outside its boundaries to find breakthrough solutions to challenging problems. Implementing this approach at EN means enhancing their current model by adding a Christian Center of Excellence as a fourth pillar. In addition to the pillars of church planting, campus ministries, and world missions, an Innovation Hub could be a fourth strategy for growing Christianity by supporting the needs of non-member churches to grow their attendance and discipleship.

B. Consider sharing the EN operating model as an open platform for all who are interested.

To be a leader within the EN community, you must share a strict belief in the gospel. EN offers no deviation from this commitment. However, other than a unifying belief in the gospel, the EN operating model is totally decentralized. This means that local pastors and church leaders have the autonomy to make changes to their practices based on the community's unique needs. Sharing this decentralized model in a meaningful way might provide a model for leadership and change that local non-member church leaders could benefit from. The literature further supports knowledge sharing in this context. Sharing pioneered by non-profit organizations is more likely to foster social cohesion. It enhances a sense of belonging to a community or advances social justice and inclusion by providing free access to assets for all (Zvolska, 2019). Given EN's

success in operating a decentralized model, EN should consider sharing its experiences with interested organizations.

C. Regardless of each local church's growth trajectory, and where not already in place, participating churches should consider a more intentional approach to church growth using best practices shared by sister churches in this study.

Christian leaders should develop a vision and a strategy for their organization and then set stretch goals to continuously improve their activities, processes, outputs, and outcomes. As part of this ongoing growth strategy, leaders should expect every person in their organization to do their work and grow (Parris, 2020). Similarly, pastors and leadership teams will need a clear plan for implementation that is consistently examined and adjusted based on changing community needs. Although this study found that some pastors put growth in "God's hands," where they believe that if they are preaching the gospel, God will bring the people, this may not be a sufficient strategy for sustaining long term growth. The best practices outlined in this study provide options that church leaders can consider incorporating to take a more intentional approach to growing their organization. Rather than sitting back and waiting for their congregations to grow, church leaders must actively seek new ways to engage people outside their existing congregations.

McMullin (2013) says that in light of the changing realities of today's society, churches cannot simply sit back and wait for people to come to church. Instead, churches must actively make efforts to attract people, articulate a clear mission, and effectively use the arts to engage people in worship.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the following problem of practice: What strategies can Every Nation use to share its practices with other Christian organizations? Three research questions were asked to understand factors of declining attendance, inhibitors of growth, and recommended best practices. The findings revealed five sources of declining attendance:

- (a) Evangelism practices across participating churches leads to decline,*
- (b) Pastors suggest social media contributes to a decline of in-person attendance for younger generations,*
- (c) Data suggest that aging congregations correlate with decline,*
- (d) Pastors suggest that competing activities contribute to decline, and*
- (e) Pastors suggest that entertainment as form of worship should be balanced with equipping.*

Inhibitors to growth factors indicate that leaders are not effectively developing the spiritual gifts of their congregations. This finding can have a negative and exponential impact on growth since each attendee is called to disciple others and evangelize to non-believers. In addition, leaders are suffering from “terminal niceness” by church leadership, inhibiting the making of difficult but necessary decisions and resulting in a lack of change. Finally, this study identified 12 best practices and initial guidance on replicating those practices. This study relied on existing research and both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the decline of church attendance. I also discovered that the tenures of pastors can vary from six months to 40 years. Therefore, finding “the one single factor” that can be identified as *the* missing ingredient to growth is probably not possible. However, finding a set of pertinent factors is. This

study found that leadership effectiveness and how change is managed can play a significant role in the growth trajectory of any church.

Delimitations

During this capstone project, a major external disruptor in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated quarantine negatively impacted Christian church attendance across the country. Therefore, this study intentionally does not directly include the impacts of the pandemic, though it is worth noting that most communities around the country were significantly impacted during this time. Most of these community-based programs or activities were paused or eliminated due to imposed Covid requirements and could be further studied for their impacts on communities and church attendance:

- Fields (2016) Research points toward positive mental health outcomes related to religious involvement, including lower incidence and accelerated recovery from depression and anxiety. Research indicates that attending worship services and receiving visits from religious leaders may also improve the overall well-being of older adults.
- Fields (2016) cited that several studies link religious involvement in older adulthood with a higher quality of life (Cnaan et al., 2005), life satisfaction (Ayele, Mulligan, Gheorghiu, & Reyes-Ortiz, 1999), subjective well-being (Jackson & Bergeman, 2011), life purpose (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), hope (Koenig, 2009), and optimism.
- Williams (2017) Faith-based social transformation activities, if left unaddressed, racial tensions pose a severe threat to the survival of communities and churches.
- Addai-Duah (2020) Religious leaders are involved in social services programs, including (a) shelters for deprived people in poor neighborhoods, (b) food for prisoners, (c)

clothing donations, and (d) other essential needs for the people that support governmental social programs (Einar, 2013).

- Schwadel (2016) church attendance moderated the association between in-church friends and secular civic activities. High attending churchgoers with few in-church friends were far less likely to participate in secular civic activities.

Furthermore,, there are some additional major themes outside of the parameters of this study that could be more fully developed in future studies (see Table 9). One theme that stands out is the potential for churches to play a greater role in social transformation efforts on a local level. Gerber (2016) found there is a large body of work documenting correlations between church attendance and various pro-social behaviors. Attending church has been linked to lower levels of criminal activity, lower rates of delinquency, lower rates of substance abuse, better health status and outcomes, and greater marital stability. Further exploring these themes could be useful to researchers’ ability to understand how churches can grow attendance by engaging in work that has a positive impact on the community.

Table 9 – Additional themes		
Pastor / Region	Theme	Feedback
Southwest	Access to the Bible is no longer assumed.	There is no longer a Bible in every home. In the not-so-distant past there used to be a Bible in every home, every hospital, every hotel, but now there's not a Bible. I mean there are now some people that have never even read the Bible. Some kids have never been to church.
Southeast	Social Justice – The Gospel should be a growing component of social transformation	The answer to social issues such as racism, divisiveness, everything that we see today - the answer to that is Jesus. If we are out there sharing our faith, and lives are being transformed truly with the Gospel, Jesus said, they're going to know you're my disciple, by the way that you love others. Not by whether you go to church, not by how much money you give to the church, but by the way you love others. We are not in a place to be racist at all. We're not, because Jesus loves the Black guy across the street as much as he loves the White guy here. No different.
Southeast / Pacific	Inclusion -	All churches in this study invite and welcome all to worship. Some church groups are still in the process of determining how to approach topics such as gay marriage. For those churches, there appears to be divisiveness, and until decisions are made, questions will linger. Church groups that have either made their split to fully

		accommodate the LGBTQ community or not, or other independent churches typically have policies that will either allow or deny gay marriage – which provides a person with a clear and informed choice.
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Limitations

The nature of the questionnaire distribution is a significant limitation in this study. The questionnaire was sent to pastors for distribution to their congregation but not directly to the congregation members. As a result, the pastor had the autonomy to send the questionnaire to attendees of their choosing leading to 48 percent of the respondents with a leadership or church employed position. I took this approach for two reasons:

1. Pastors did not know me and may have been more reluctant to participate
2. Ensure a minimum response of 10 responses per church unit

This presents a potential for a higher level of bias.

Conclusion

The direction Christian church attendance is trending does not portend a healthy future for Christianity in the United States. The data on church attendance is troubling to church leaders like those at EN who, despite seeing growth in their own organization, have a vested interest in expanding Christianity through evangelism. Therefore, by understanding the real-world experiences of participating churches in tandem with best practices supported by the literature, the present study aimed to elucidate strategies that struggling organizations can adopt to lead necessary changes. The issue is not so much about the attendance numbers of any church; rather, it is about reaching more non-believers and non-attenders through practices that engage and resonate with people, creating the kind of cultural change that will support long-term growth.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent - Interviews

RECRUITMENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN CAPSTONE INTERVIEWS

(Church leadership only)

You are invited to participate in a study to learn more about how your church has approached attendance and change over time. Data received from this interview will be used to understand sources and context of membership stagnation or decline. This interview should take about [90] minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary and responses will be kept anonymous.

You have the option to refrain from response on any question. As a participant, you will be provided with a copy of the capstone upon completion.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact Michael Lawton, via email at michael.p.lawton@vanderbilt.edu.

*I have read the above information and agree to participate in this capstone project.

Appendix B

Pastor Interview Guide

Introduction

- Thank the participant for agreeing to be involved.
- Explain the purpose of the study.
- Review informed consent and ask about recording the meeting.

Demographic Information

1. To get started, tell me about your experience as a pastor.
 - a. How long have you been at this church?
 - b. Total number of years as a pastor?
 - c. Education?
2. Tell me about the makeup of the congregation.
 - a. Size?
 - b. Weekly attendance?
 - c. Demographics? Diversity?
 - d. Same question for the community (population, demo, diversity)?
3. Does attendance meet your expectations? If no, what strategies have you considered or attempted?

Context

1. How has COVID impacted attendance?
2. Have there been any major events that have taken place during your time here as a pastor that would have impacted attendance, other than COVID?
3. What are your thoughts on evangelism?
 - a. Do you and/or church members actively evangelize?

Church

1. What brings most of the congregation to service each week?
 - a. Worship, Sermon, Children ministries, Something else?
 - b. How do you know this?
2. What strategies has the church use to gain attendance / membership?
3. Does the community have social transformation concerns?
4. Describe how your organization addresses social transformation today?
 - a. Formal programs/strategies
5. Does the church have an inclusion policy?
 - a. Describe. Are all people welcome?
6. Can the gospel be better utilized as a "how to" book for tolerance? For example – a couple passages...

Change

1. How is the church structured with regards to decision making and change?
2. Are members intimately involved with decision making for programs and church business?
3. Are changes always discussed within the “leadership team”
4. Do all leadership team members have the same interest in church growth? If not, why not?
5. What was the last major change the church implemented? Were there any objections and what were they? Budget concerns?
6. What will happen if the church does not make any significant changes in the next 5 years?

Other

Is there anything you would like to tell me about attendance and change management in your church? Anything I forgot to ask?

Survey

On a scale of 1 – 10 where 10 is the highest, what is your interest in growing the congregation?

On a scale of 1-10 where 10 is the highest, what is your congregation’s interest in growing the congregation?

Appendix C

Questionnaire Recruitment Letter

Note: Questionnaire was distributed through each pastor

Email Subject Line:

Church Questionnaire

Participant Invitation

I am a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University conducting a study understanding church attendance and change in the United States. I am seeking current attendees of [x] church willing to complete a one-time online survey questionnaire. Estimated completion time is about 10-15 minutes. Survey questions ask about your perceptions of church vision and attendance.

To participate, click on the following link.

Responses are anonymous, and participation is voluntary. If you have any questions, please contact me at michael.p.lawton@vanderbilt.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix D

CHURCH QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTIONS: Listed below are 31 statements that describe characteristics of our church and your relationship to it followed by 14 personal questions. Please rate your perceptions of the strength of each characteristic by using the scale provided and writing the appropriate number in the box to the right of the statement. Your responses will be treated confidentially, and your participation will help our church leaders be better informed as we seek to discern future strategic initiatives for our church.

CD.0 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding church data.

CD.		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	Our church is growing in weekly attendance over the past 5 years	1	2	3	4
2	The average age my church members has increased over the past 5 years.	1	2	3	4
3	My local church reflects the diverse demographics of the community.	1	2	3	4
4	My local church actively reaches out to its neighborhood through spiritual and community service	1	2	3	4

FD.0 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your faith.

Fd.		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	I would describe my personal spiritual life as growing	1	2	3	4
2	I feel that my role in the church is very important	1	2	3	4
3	I share my faith with non-believing family and friends	1	2	3	4
4	I enjoy getting together with other people from my church outside of church events	1	2	3	4
5	My prayer life reflects a deep dependence on God concerning the practical aspects of life	1	2	3	4

LD.0 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding church leadership.

LD.		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	The leaders of our church seem to be available when needed.	1	2	3	4
2	We have an effective and efficient decision-making process in my church.	1	2	3	4
3	Church leaders present options to adjust to congregation and community needs	1	2	3	4
4	I am open to options that support church growth	1	2	3	4
5	The leaders and members of our church enjoy and trust one another.	1	2	3	4
6	I have confidence in the management and spending of our church's financial resources.	1	2	3	4
7	Our church is led by individual(s) who articulate vision and achieve results.	1	2	3	4
8	I do not know my church's plans and direction for the years ahead	1	2	3	4
9	Our church has a very clear purpose and well-defined values.	1	2	3	4
10	The leaders effectively use social media to promote church messages and programs	1	2	3	4

SD.0 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding church services.

SD.		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	The worship at this church is so inspiring that I would like to invite my friends.	1	2	3	4
2	I find the sermons convicting, challenging, and encouraging to my walk with God.	1	2	3	4
3	People rarely come to know Jesus Christ as their savior in our church.	1	2	3	4
4	In our church the importance of sharing Christ is often discussed.	1	2	3	4
5	When I leave a worship service, I feel like I have "connected" with other worshippers.	1	2	3	4

MD.0 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding church ministry.

MD.		STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	I find it is easy to add new programs at my church.	1	2	3	4
2	My church affirms me in my ministry tasks...	1	2	3	4
3	Our church has a clear process that develops people's spiritual gift(s).	1	2	3	4
4	Our church has very few programs that appeal to non-Christians.	1	2	3	4
5	Our church embraces solutions to fill social injustice gaps.	1	2	3	4
6	I seek people different than me and invite them to church	1	2	3	4
7	My church is open to changes that would increase our ability to reach and disciple people	1	2	3	4

PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. The following are a regular part of my spiritual life. **Check all that apply.**

- 1. Bible Study.....
- 2. Devotional times.....
- 3. Family devotional time
- 4. Ministry.....
- 5. Prayer.....
- 6. Sharing my faith with others
- 7. Other spiritual disciplines (fasting, etc.)

2. Which best describes your current involvement with the local church you attend most? **Check only one.**

- 1. Attendee only
- 2. Leadership board member
- 2. Ministry leader/teacher
- 3. Pastoral Staff.....

3.. Are you a member of this church?

- 1. Yes.....
- 2. No

4. Approximately how many years have you been involved with this particular church?
1. Less than 2...
2. 2-5...
3. 6-10.....
4. Greater than 10.....
5. Which of the following best describes how often you attend weekend worship services? **Check one.**
1. Visitor
2. Less than once a month.....
3. 1-2 times a month
4. 3 or more times a month.....
6. In the past year, what percentage of your total income from all sources did you give to your local church (approximately)?
1. Less than 5%.....
2. 5-10%.....
3. Greater than 10%.....
7. Our current church staff is _____ for the ministries of our church. **Check one.**
1. understaffed.....
2. adequate.....
3. overstaffed
7. I actively participate in a small group or ministry team.
1. Yes.....
2. No
8. How would you describe the community environment within which your church is located? **Check one.**
1. Growing and thriving
2. Plateaued.....
3. Declining

9. The size of our church facility is adequate for our current ministries.
- 1. Yes.....
 - 2. No

10. Your age
- 1. 18-25.....
 - 2. 26-40.....
 - 3. 41-60.....
 - 4. 61+.....

11. Gender
- 1. Female.....
 - 2. Male.....

12. Ethnicity
- 1. American Indian or Alaska Native.....
 - 2. Asian.....
 - 3. Black or African American.....
 - 4. Hispanic or Latino.....
 - 5. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.....
 - 6. White.....

13. Marital status
- 1. Single
 - 2. Married.....
 - 3. Widowed
 - 4. Other: _____

4. Number of children.....
- 1. None.....
 - 2. 1.....
 - 3. 2.....
 - 4. 3.....
 - 5. 4.....
 - 6. 5.....
 - 7. 6.....

8. More than 6.....

Thank you very much for your participation in this important study of our church!

Appendix E

Questionnaire Results

Displayed by region:

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
Region							
SW	62						62
Pacific		37					37
SE			103				103
NW				119			119
NE					36		36
MW						63	63

Church Attendance is Trending...							
Declining	57	15	44	100	26	38	280
Growing		11	59	19	10	25	124
Maintaining	5	11					16

Average Age of Church is Trending...							
Older	41	15			11	24	91
Same	21	22	66	100	15	39	263
Younger			24	19	10		53

I would describe my personal spiritual life as growing							
Strongly agree	46	21	71	65	22	43	268
Somewhat agree	10	12	24	50	10	17	123
Strongly disagree	3		1	1	2	1	8
Somewhat disagree	2	4	5	3	2	1	17

I feel that my role in the church is very important							
Somewhat disagree	2	2	6	10	1	7	28
Somewhat agree	15	8	35	61	12	15	146
Strongly agree	40	25	57	43	22	37	224
Strongly disagree	4	2	3	4	1	2	16

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
I share my faith with non-believing family and friends							
Somewhat agree	21	19	57	58	17	31	203
Strongly agree	31	4	33	40	12	23	143
Somewhat disagree	4	11	9	18	4	7	53
Strongly disagree	4	3	2	2	3		14

I enjoy getting together with other people from my church outside of church events							
Somewhat disagree	5	1	1	10	3	2	22
Strongly agree	36	17	70	70	22	46	261
Somewhat agree	18	17	30	37	11	12	125
Strongly disagree	2	1		2		1	6

My prayer life reflects a deep dependence on God concerning the practical aspects of life							
Strongly agree	43	17	60	69	21	33	243
Somewhat agree	13	11	34	38	10	22	128
Strongly disagree	4	3	3	3			13
Somewhat disagree	1	5	4	9	4	6	29

Our church is growing in weekly attendance over the past 5 years							
Somewhat disagree	22	16	32	15	14	11	110
Somewhat agree	21	5	28	55	11	26	146
Strongly agree	6	1	26	45	4	12	94
Strongly disagree	11	14	13	4	6	12	60

The average age my church members has increased over the past 5 years.							
Somewhat disagree	13	8	32	52	9	26	140
Somewhat agree	29	13	35	46	13	22	158
Strongly agree	13	12	26	11	11	12	85
Strongly disagree	4	4	7	7	3	1	26

My local church reflects the diverse demographics of the community.							
Strongly disagree	8	6	11	11	2	8	46
Somewhat agree	19	12	32	54	16	24	157
Somewhat disagree	22	16	21	23	8	22	112
Strongly agree	12	3	37	28	10	7	97

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
Weekly congregational attendance meets expectations							
Strongly disagree	6	4	8	3	2	7	30
Somewhat agree	22	8	42	61	11	31	175
Strongly agree	15	4	26	46	9	12	112
Somewhat disagree	17	20	24	7	14	10	92

The leaders of our church seem to be available when needed.							
Somewhat disagree	5		4	3	4	2	18
Strongly agree	39	28	58	86	23	48	282
Somewhat agree	15	5	35	27	9	10	101
Strongly disagree	2	2	3	2		1	10

We have an effective and efficient decision-making process in my church.							
Somewhat disagree	10	6	14	4	3	5	42
Strongly agree	24	12	45	66	22	29	198
Somewhat agree	24	15	38	43	10	23	153
Strongly disagree	2	3	3	2	1	3	14

Church leaders present options to adjust to congregation and community needs							
Strongly disagree	4	2	4	1	1	4	16
Strongly agree	25	14	42	70	17	21	189
Somewhat agree	24	13	39	38	13	25	152
Somewhat disagree	5	7	14	9	5	10	50

I am open to options that support church growth							
Strongly agree	49	27	82	94	32	39	323
Somewhat agree	11	9	18	24	3	18	83
Somewhat disagree					1	3	4
Strongly disagree						1	1

The leaders and members of our church enjoy and trust one another.							
Somewhat agree	28	18	42	32	20	19	159
Strongly agree	27	13	51	79	14	41	225
Strongly disagree	3			1			4
Somewhat disagree	2	5	7	6	2	1	23

I have confidence in the management and spending of our church's financial resources.							
Somewhat disagree	5	3	6	5	2	4	25
Strongly agree	40	23	76	87	26	46	298
Somewhat agree	15	10	18	23	6	11	83
Strongly disagree	1			2	2		5

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
Our church is led by individual(s) who articulate vision and achieve results.							
Somewhat agree	19	15	29	30	16	24	133
Strongly agree	35	14	56	84	17	29	235
Somewhat disagree	4	5	14	3	2	4	32
Strongly disagree	2	2		1	1	4	10

I do not know my church's plans and direction for the years ahead							
Somewhat agree	17	17	36	22	11	9	112
Strongly disagree	20	6	28	58	11	19	142
Somewhat disagree	16	9	28	28	10	26	117
Strongly agree	8	3	9	9	4	7	40

Our church has a very clear purpose and well-defined values.							
Somewhat agree	17	13	28	17	10	12	97
Strongly agree	38	14	60	95	23	47	277
Somewhat disagree	5	7	13	5	3	2	35
Strongly disagree	1	1		1			3

The leaders effectively use social media to promote church messages and programs							
Somewhat agree	18	7	29	41	14	21	130
Strongly agree	32	15	56	58	15	23	199
Somewhat disagree	6	10	15	12	4	9	56
Strongly disagree	3	2	1	5	3	8	22

The worship at this church is so inspiring that I would like to invite my friends.							
Somewhat agree	20	12	36	46	12	20	146
Strongly agree	37	9	52	53	16	30	197
Strongly disagree	2	6	1	4	2	5	20
Somewhat disagree	2	6	10	15	6	6	45

I find the sermons convicting, challenging, and encouraging to my walk with God.							
Strongly agree	49	21	64	84	24	43	285
Somewhat agree	10	4	28	27	10	12	91
Somewhat disagree	1	4	8	4	2	4	23
Strongly disagree		4		3		2	9

People rarely come to know Jesus Christ as their savior in our church.							
Somewhat disagree	17	17	30	37	11	23	135
Strongly disagree	24	5	41	61	22	20	173
Strongly agree	6	2	5	4		5	22
Somewhat agree	13	8	22	14	3	12	72

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
All people regardless of race, age, or sexual orientation are welcome at my church.							
Strongly agree	42	24	65	75	19	29	254
Somewhat agree	12	6	27	35	5	20	105
Somewhat disagree	5	2	8	4	1	9	29
Strongly disagree	1	1	1	4		2	9

In our church the importance of sharing Christ with 'non-believers' is often discussed.							
Strongly agree	32	1	58	42	18	30	181
Somewhat agree	23	5	29	58	11	20	146
Strongly disagree	2	12	2	5	1	3	25
Somewhat disagree	4	15	11	13	6	8	57

I seek people different than me and invite them to church							
Strongly disagree	6	8	7	21	8	9	59
Somewhat agree	22	9	39	38	12	11	131
Strongly agree	11	2	24	13	6	8	64
Somewhat disagree	19	14	28	45	10	32	148

When I leave a worship service, I feel like I have “connected” with other worshippers.							
Somewhat agree	22	13	42	46	14	26	163
Strongly agree	32	14	39	47	17	25	174
Somewhat disagree	6	3	14	22	3	8	56
Strongly disagree	1	2	5	3	2	2	15

I find it is easy to add new programs at my church.							
Somewhat disagree	21	8	27	27	8	20	111
Somewhat agree	26	18	49	56	22	23	194
Strongly agree	11	5	11	24	2	8	61
Strongly disagree	2	3	12	4	4	7	32

My church affirms me in my ministry tasks...							
Strongly disagree	2	2	5	5	1	2	17
Strongly agree	25	21	45	43	19	36	189
Somewhat agree	29	9	36	57	9	18	158
Somewhat disagree	3	2	12	7	5	4	33

Our church has a clear process that develops people’s spiritual gift(s).							
Somewhat disagree	12	14	20	16	9	17	88
Strongly agree	20	8	33	33	7	18	119
Somewhat agree	27	6	37	59	19	20	168
Strongly disagree	2	6	10	7		5	30

	SW	Pacific	SE	NW	NE	MW	Total
Our church has a clear process that develops people's spiritual gift(s).							
Somewhat disagree	12	14	20	16	9	17	88
Strongly agree	20	8	33	33	7	18	119
Somewhat agree	27	6	37	59	19	20	168
Strongly disagree	2	6	10	7		5	30

Our church has very few programs that appeal to non-Christians.							
Somewhat agree	22	12	36	25	13	22	130
Somewhat disagree	21	10	30	47	8	15	131
Strongly disagree	6	8	19	40	5	9	87
Strongly agree	11	3	15	5	9	13	56

Our church embraces solutions to fill social injustice gaps.							
Strongly disagree	6	1	5	6	1	16	35
Strongly agree	17	10	16	42	3	6	94
Somewhat agree	20	17	51	43	9	25	165
Somewhat disagree	17	5	27	18	11	12	90

My church is growing its children and teen ministry.							
Somewhat disagree	12	5	15	6	7	11	56
Somewhat agree	21	14	28	23	13	15	114
Strongly agree	11	7	49	86	12	29	194
Strongly disagree	16	8	9	2	3	4	42

My church is open to changes that would increase our ability to reach and disciple people							
Somewhat agree	24	18	34	47	21	25	169
Strongly agree	24	10	52	62	10	28	186
Somewhat disagree	9	2	13	6	5	7	42
Strongly disagree	3	3	1	1		1	9