

When To Stay, When To Go:  
A Cost-Benefits Analysis of Church Membership and Regular Attendance

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(ABSTRACT)

The membership numbers of most of the Protestant denominations in the United States have been decreasing for a number of years. Much of the research studying this phenomenon has used demographic data and surveys of former members to understand reasons for leaving. This qualitative study uses a phenomenological perspective to understand the lived experience of eight former members of the Sunrise Mennonite Church. One former leader and three current church leaders from the Sunrise Mennonite Church were also interviewed for their perspective of the costs and benefits of church membership. The findings of this study were consistent with the literature across two main themes. First, a significant attraction and benefit of church membership is the support and fellowship experienced from close friendships within the church. Relationships as a whole are important, and negative interactions within the church can serve to damage one's satisfaction with a church as a whole. A second factor affecting church membership is the change experienced by church members and the change that occurs in the culture of the surrounding community. These changes lead to new and different preferences of the church members, and if these can not be incorporated into their churches, these members may leave their church.

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## Chapter I. Introduction

### Problem and Setting

The United States was founded by people who claimed strong faith in God, and this was reflected in the fundamental components of the government they established. The earliest settlers of this country were enticed by the concept of religious freedom, some even escaping persecution. These groups included the Pilgrims, the Quakers and the Mennonites among others. The United States was unquestionably a Christian nation and active church membership was commonplace.

As recently as 1990, 88.3% of Americans considered themselves Christian, but in the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) that percentage was down to 79.8% (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, 2001). Similarly the percentage of those claiming no religion increased from 8.4% to 15% of the population. Of the 16 Christian denominations listed in this survey, all experienced little or no growth in proportion to the United States population of adults 18 years and older. Several decreased in proportion to the population and even lost membership. In the 2001 ARIS Baptist and Methodists actually lost 0.4% and 0.2% of their members respectively. According to the Lutheran World Federation website, membership in the Lutheran Church in North America decreased 1.16% from 2004 to 2005 (<http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwi/en/1823.en.html>). Similarly, the Presbyterian Church USA reported that the church has a 30-year trend of losing membership and has averaged a yearly loss of 1.27% since 1986 (Marcum, 1997). In an article entitled *Recovering Stray Catholics*, Father C. John McCloskey (1997) reported that of 60 million Catholics in 1997, only 25% attended regular Sunday mass and yearly confession. In the United States it is clear that denominational church attendance has

reached a level of stagnation, if not decline. However, not all churches are experiencing membership loss.

For the last seven years my wife and I have attended a church that markets itself as a nondenominational church. Since we have been a part of this church we have seen it grow from 200 people to over 1700 people. While there are a good number of people who were never part of a church before, many others have come from denominational churches where they were no longer feeling fulfilled. As I ponder the amazing growth of my current church, I question what is happening in the denominational churches of this country, many of which are actually decreasing in size, while others are barely maintaining their proportion of the United States population or experiencing minimal growth.

In a recent conversation I had with some other young men from my church, we discussed the frustration and disinterest we all experience when we go back to the denominational churches in which we grew up. I believe what bothers us most is that we have changed and grown but our “home” churches have not. Those churches that helped form our foundations are no longer relevant. If this sentiment continues, it would seem we need only to look to our “relatives” in Europe to predict the future of the Christian Church in America. The Lutheran World Federation website reported a loss of nearly 600,000 members in Europe in 2005 (<http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwi/en/1823.en.html>). In addition, the World Christian Database’s latest report shows only 4.2% of Europeans claim to follow “Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior”, which is the foundation of Christianity. This is a lower percentage than those in India, China, Latin America, and Africa.

George Barna, founder of the Barna Research Group, recently completed a study on church attendance. The Barna Group (2001) reported that the average number of adults

attending the typical Protestant church service dropped from 100 adults in the year 2000 down to 90 in 1997, a 10% decrease. Similarly, this reflects a 12% decrease from 1992. The greatest decline in church attendance was experienced in the Northeast and West regions of the United States. Each region averages only 80 adults per service.

A separate study from the Barna Group (2005) reported a shift in the religious landscape of America. They noted that while in the year 2000 most organized religious activity took place in local congregations, participation in newer forms is quickly increasing. Barna discovered “that discontent with congregational churches, changes in lifestyles, and a burgeoning desire to get closer to God, have caused many people to seek new ways of being in a relationship with God and other God-seeking people.” Thus more and more people are either leaving churches altogether or are supplementing their regular attendance with things such as house churches, connecting with other groups of people in their daily lives, known as marketplace ministries, and even using the Internet as a foundation for interactive faith experiences

(<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=85>).

My interest in people leaving the church lies in the Mennonite Church USA. I can trace my Mennonite heritage back to the 1780's when my earliest ancestor in this country was a practicing Mennonite. For the first 24 years of my life I was a member of a Mennonite church, until I moved away and got married. My wife and I initially settled in a part of the country that was culturally different as was the population and variety of denominational churches. After some “church shopping” in different denominations we found a small Mennonite church thirty miles away. We soon realized this would not meet our needs either, but because of a few good friendships and the fact we knew we would



soon be moving again, we remained there. Upon resettling again, we decided we would only try non-denominational churches, and after trying out the first church we picked, we never left. Eight years later, when I return to my hometown to visit the church where I grew up, I recognize that dozens of families and individuals have left, including many of those with whom I grew up. A number of others left while I was still attending there. Some new families and individuals have joined the church over the years but those new members have been balanced out by those who have left and the average attendance has remained largely unchanged.

Despite the experience of my home church, the overall population of Mennonites in the United States has actually been increasing slightly. According to the 2001 ARIS, there were 235,000 Mennonites in 1990 and 346,000 in 2001. These numbers, however, are misleading. As Ivan Kaufman (2003) notes, “the Mennonite community in North America would today number in the millions ... given its high birth rates, its family stability, and its three century existence here.” Therefore the Mennonite Church faces the same question as the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, and other Christian denominations: why are our members leaving?

### Significance

As more and more people withdraw from church, they are confronted with a significant loss of resources and support that are often a part of these communities. Numerous studies such as those done by Ellison, Levin & Chatters, and Levin & Taylor ( as cited in Nooney & Woodrum, 2002), have shown that greater church and religious involvement is associated with more positive mental health outcomes and fewer instances

of mental illness. Ellison and George (1994) developed a theoretical model that linked church participation and attendance with individual social resources. They found that those who attend church regularly have a larger network of friends, have more frequent in-person and phone contact with others, experience a greater variety of support, both instrumental (things such as money and services), and social and emotional support, and are more likely to report feeling valued and cared for. While Ellison and George completed their study solely in a group of five North Carolina counties, Bradley (1995) completed an identical study using a national data set and found the same positive association between frequency of church attendance and social resources.

Mental health professionals should be aware of a client's church involvement and how dissatisfaction with or withdrawal from their church affects their well being and support system. Likewise, churches and church leaders need to understand the responsibility they have not only to church members' spiritual health, but also to their physiological and emotional health. Leaving a church community is a significant loss even if it is by choice. Transitioning from one church to finding another can also be stressful and unpleasant. While being a member and having a healthy relationship with a church can be a source of great support, having left a church, or being part of an unhealthy, unfulfilling church relationship may have an equally negative impact on one's life.

#### Rationale

In surveying the literature done on decreasing church membership and why people leave church, several common approaches are used. One approach is for pastors or other church leaders to share or list the top reasons they have been given that people leave or

drop out of church. For instance, John Duncan, a Texas pastor, published a list of six reasons congregants had given him most often for leaving. This list included members desiring a different ministry style, not appreciating the preaching or teaching, or being uncomfortable with the size of the church (Duncan, 2004).

Another common method has been to survey church members who have left in an attempt to create a profile. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1993) used telephone surveys to find the top reasons individuals who were confirmed in the Presbyterian Church in the 1960's no longer attended. Some of these reasons were that they had lost faith, had become too busy, or felt conflict with the church. Other studies have used demographic data to try to build a profile of what one who leaves a church is likely to look like (Wilson & Sherkat, 1994). Similarly, McKinney and Hoge (1983) used demographic data of churches themselves to profile what kind of churches experience growth or decline.

Religious scholars have used a variety of different sociological theories to guide their research and understanding. Erich Goode (1966) explored how social class affected church attendance and participation. More recently, Grotenhuis and Scheepers (2001) looked at how modernization, or rationalization, has led people in the Netherlands to disaffiliate from the church. Other contemporary changes in society, including higher education levels, the rise of socialism, and increased welfare, are often hypothesized to affect church involvement.

While previous research looks at very concrete reasons people have for leaving church or categorizes those who leave, or even the churches that have been left, very little has been done to explore the process and emotional experience behind making the decision to leave a church. Hendricks (1993), a journalist by trade, listened to the stories of

individuals from all over the country who had become disillusioned with the church. His book included two dozen interviews with people who had discouraging experiences in their churches, Christian colleges, in the mission field, and in other Christian organizations. At one time they were all very involved in their faith communities but all told a story of separation. Marilyn McNaughton (2002) also focused on the experiences of 16 individuals who decided to leave their Presbyterian church. McNaughton used a psychoanalytic approach as she paid attention to both conscious and unconscious material when listening to the memories of the participants' experiences in their churches.

McNaughton and Hendricks both focused on the end of the participants' time of church involvement. They detailed the negative events and occurrences experienced by these former church members. The current research model explores church membership in greater depth and detail, focusing on the entire lifespan of the participants' membership in the church. This study fills in the gaps of the church-church member relationship by discovering how the church members experienced disappointments, were let down, or were even hurt by the church community or leadership, deteriorating a once healthy and fulfilling relationship, and leading to its end.

### Theoretical Framework

In order to gain an understanding of the individuals' experiences in deciding to leave their Mennonite church, I will use two theories to form the framework for my research: social exchange theory and phenomenology. Research that is done using the phenomenological framework is guided by several basic assumptions. First, the researcher cannot just be the objective observer from the outside because the researcher and all his

feelings, beliefs, values, and responses become part of the research as well (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). A second assumption of phenomenology is that the subjects who are interviewed are considered experts in their experiences and it is important to interact with them in an environment in which they are most comfortable, such as their home (Sprenkle and Moon, 1996). As the researcher I must remain attentive to all reactions and responses, verbal and non-verbal, and ask questions that may arise during the interview that were unplanned. Finally, when using the phenomenological framework the researcher must take care to listen to a variety of sources, hearing different perspectives, in order to observe the phenomenon in its entirety.

Social exchange theory is commonly used to explore individuals and their relationships with others. The idea that social behavior is based on interpersonal exchanges was introduced by George C. Homans (1958). Social exchange theory looks at the costs and benefits involved in a person entering into a relationship, maintaining the relationship, and choosing to end the relationship. The basic assumption of this theory is that people are in a given relationship because they are rewarded by it in some way (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As long as this reward is greater than any cost, the relationship will continue. When the cost becomes greater, the individual may choose to end the relationship.

Em Griffin (1994) also noted that one's satisfaction in a relationship is based upon their expectations, which are built on prior experiences. Griffin explained what John Thibaut and Harold Kelly describe as the *comparison level*. Thibaut and Kelley, professors at North Carolina and UCLA respectively, were convinced that everyone's relational outcomes are connected to the actions of others. A person's comparison level is

the point to which an outcome remains attractive or desirable and is based on what the individual is accustomed to. Another component of satisfaction described by Thibaut and Kelly is the *comparison level alternative* (Griffin, 1994). As more and more attractive possibilities exist outside the current relationship, the relationship becomes more unstable. In this study, social exchange theory will help guide the line of questioning as the research seeks to understand what the individuals find rewarding as well as costly when considering their church membership. Social exchange theory will also frame the individuals' reported experiences in the church, as having beneficial or detrimental effects on their relationship with the church.

### Purpose

Much like Hendricks (1993) did in his book, this study will reveal the stories of persons who decided to leave a church, specifically Sunrise\* Mennonite Church. In listening to their stories of deciding to leave, I have sought to find how the benefits of belonging to Sunrise Mennonite Church were exceeded by the costs and understand what happened to the member-church community relationship over time. I agree with Hendricks statement that such a compilation of exit interviews from a single congregation will not only improve Sunrise Mennonite Church's "core business," but also be a valuable tool for the greater Mennonite Church USA, and perhaps other denominational churches as well.

\*Sunrise is a pseudonym for the actual community.

This project will have one predominant difference from Hendricks's work. While his project involved Christians from around the country from various faith and denominational backgrounds, mine will be focused on one denomination and one church within the denomination. The Mennonite Church makes up less than two tenths of one percent of the Christian population of the United States (Kosmin, et al., 2001). It has been a religious group that has held its identity in being separate and different, not only from society in general, but even from other Christians. The Mennonites are a very distinct and loyal denomination and the stability and history of this group will provide an excellent laboratory to study the decline of traditional Protestant churches in the United States.

The questions addressed in this case study within the Mennonite Church sought to understand both what members who left valued and appreciated in the church, and what causes frustration and disillusionment with the church. These questions included:

What first attracted you to the church?

How did you benefit by being a church member?

What initial disappointments did you have with the church?

When did you know it was time to leave the church?

The overriding question that I asked of the participants however, was what led them to ultimately leave the Sunrise Mennonite Church.

## Chapter II Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter will begin by reviewing the history of the Mennonite Church and provide a description of the structure and organization of the Mennonite denomination. Following this will be a presentation of the benefits of belonging to and participating in a church community. The remaining sections will detail various explanations for decreasing church populations. These include analysis of demographic data, theories of cultural and societal change, and interview data from former church members.

### Mennonite Background and History

The Mennonite church grew out of the greater Protestant Reformation during the sixteenth century in Europe. A group of people who came to be known as Anabaptists disagreed with the more famous leaders, Martin Luther and John Calvin, on two key issues. First, Anabaptists believed that baptism was for those who voluntarily and consciously committed themselves to the faith, as opposed to infant baptism. In addition they believed that the Church should be separate from the State and not be guided or influenced by the government. The earliest followers were in Switzerland, Germany, and Holland. These Mennonites, as they were named after one of the early leaders and former Catholic priest, Menno Simons, were severely persecuted for their differing beliefs. From 1531 to 1597 more than 1500 Mennonites were killed while many others scattered in all directions in search of safe haven (Frankovich, 2001).



Eventually Mennonites began to disappear from Western Europe. As early as 1633, the earliest Mennonites were in what is now New York, and the first Mennonite church was established in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1683. William Penn and George Fox, both Protestant leaders, had recruited the Mennonites to Pennsylvania with the promise of religious freedom and good farming. In 1786 Catherine II of Russia invited Mennonites to settle there, free of persecution (Frankovich, 2001).

The majority of European Mennonites found their way to North America, primarily the United States, in four waves of immigration. The first two waves were mostly German and Swiss, with the first landing in eastern Pennsylvania and the second settling in the Midwest between Ohio and Illinois in the mid 1800s. The last two waves were Russian Mennonites who settled in the north central U.S. and Canada (Frankovich, 2001)..

Wherever the Mennonites went, they remained separate from the culture of the country in which they lived. As a result, they did not intermarry with the local citizens. All four waves of Mennonites that established themselves in the United States were of the same Swiss and German descent. However, as each wave of Mennonites had spent several additional generations in Europe, their customs had grown more different from each other.

At the present time the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA) lists over 15 branches of the Mennonite Church that have existed at one point in this country (<http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/Graphs/mennonite.html>). A number of them have ceased to exist, have merged with others, or have in some way changed their name or form. These branches differ mostly by how conservative they are, or how much they integrate with contemporary society. The Amish are the most conservative branch and they and other groups of conservative Mennonites disallow use of electricity and other modern

conveniences, dress plainly and uniformly, and keep themselves largely separate from the rest of society. Various other Mennonite groups integrate themselves into society and their communities more frequently, but continue to worship in churches whose structure and organization has stayed mostly the same for generations. The largest and most contemporary group is the Mennonite Church USA. Churches in this group generally exhibit the greatest acceptance of society and modern culture, and have worship services that include contemporary instruments and music.

The Mennonite church has become a very active church in peace and justice issues and likes to be known as peace builders. From the very beginning, the Mennonites adopted a pacifist, nonresistant stance, claiming their ultimate loyalty to God and not national governments. Mennonite-supported Christian Peacemaker Teams are scattered throughout the “hot spots” of the globe including Africa and the Middle East, where members simply live among the locals trying to open dialogue between conflicting groups. The Mennonite Church has an office in Washington D.C. to work for peace through lobbying.

Another characteristic of the Mennonites is their dedication to service and assistance to others. Through the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), the church helps to rebuild homes and communities that were victim to floods, hurricanes, and tornados in North America. As of the summer of 2006, MDS had four sites of hurricane rebuilding in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana (<http://www.mds.mennonite.net/>). Because of this organization, local congregations can quickly organize following a disaster and send teams to start the rebuilding process.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) incorporates peace and justice with serving and assisting others on a global scale. It is through this organization that Mennonite missionaries are sent. It is quite common for young adults to take short-term assignments with MCC before, during, or after their college career. MCC also provides aid following disasters. The main goal of MCC is to “demonstrate God’s love by working among people suffering from poverty, conflicts, oppression, and natural disaster” (<http://www.mcc.org/about/>).

The Mennonites are a very proud and hard working group of people. There is incredibly strong support for all things Mennonite within the local congregations from their educational institutions and publications to their most basic traditions. Being different from other Christians and protestant groups is also important. The Anabaptist and Mennonite movement is referred to as the “third way” and a website sponsored by the Mennonite Mission Network is even entitled Third Way Café. This “third way” refers to Christian church evolution. First there was the Roman Catholic Church out of which grew Protestantism, and then thirdly, the Anabaptist movement, from which the Mennonite church was born. Mennonites believe strongly in their uniqueness. A survey completed by the Mennonite church in 1989, asked the question, “Do you believe that the teachings of your denomination more accurately reflect the Word of God than the teachings of any other denomination?” Twenty-four percent responded “definitely” and 45.5% responded “for the most part”. The survey included over 3000 adult Mennonite church members across the country ([http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/MENNON\\_CB.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/MENNON_CB.asp)).

## The Benefits of Church Involvement

The concept of social support leading to greater mental and physical health became widely studied in the 1980s (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). House et al. note that scientific interest in the benefits of social support derived from ideas shared by two physicians, John Cassel and Sidney Cobb. These two physicians demonstrated the significant role social relationships and supports play in maintaining good health, specifically by acting as a buffer against the potentially harmful effects of psychosocial stress and other health hazards. Church membership, along with marriage, friendships and familial relationships, and other formal and informal group affiliations provide for social support.

Broyles and Drenovsky (1992) examined the correlation between religious attendance and the subjective health of the elderly in a sample of 4,122 adults aged 55 years and older from the state of Washington. They acknowledged that previous studies showed a positive correlation between these two, but that various religious scholars questioned the validity of this correlation, citing that the healthier elderly are more likely to get themselves to church. , Broyles and Drenovsky were able to show that religious attendance does have an independent relationship with one's subjective health. In addition to the effects of social support, Broyles and Drenovsky hypothesized that religion provides the elderly with certain beliefs that allow them to adjust as they age and maintain a positive evaluation of their condition.

Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman (2001) explored church-based social support and religious coping, such as turning to God in times of trouble and use of prayer. These authors used data from a nationwide survey of members of the Presbyterian Church USA and focused on the nature of three sources of religious support: emotional support from church members, spiritual support from church members, and emotional support from pastors. Krause et al. found that spiritual support from other members had the most significant

role in facilitating the use of religious coping responses. Emotional support from the pastor had much less influence and emotional support from other members had no impact at all.

These findings demonstrate that religious coping results from social interaction. When individuals encounter hardships they naturally seek the help of other individuals with similar backgrounds and values to help them sort out the best course of action. This input from other church members is significant as Caplan's research study ( as cited in Krause et al., 2001) has shown that unhealthy stress levels arise in individuals when they focus all their efforts on solving their own problems. Within a church community, personal problems are solved with religious solutions and emotional troubles are managed using religious strategies. Therefore, fellow church members act as conductors for basic principles of the Christian faith as they encourage religious coping methods (Krause et al. 2001). Likewise, it would seem those Christians without a church home would be more likely to become overwhelmed by their problems and emotions.

Despite these benefits, as noted earlier, denominational membership is declining. Things are happening within and around church members to cause them to make decisions to leave their church. It would certainly be in the interest of the church to understand what is happening so that some of these things could be prevented and others could be acted upon. The following section will discuss the reasons, events, and experiences that may lead members to leave a church.

## Who's Leaving and Why?

Certainly others have taken notice of the population decrease in Christian churches. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1993) were driven to investigate this phenomenon within mainline protestant churches. They noted that as recently as the 1950s, the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and other protestant denominations experienced generation after generation of church growth. In the 1960s however, growth slowed and by 1990 these denominations had lost between one-fifth and one-third of their membership from 1965.

Various theories have evolved to try to explain the decline of these denominations. One theory states that industrialization, urbanization, and the advancement of education have led people to leave the church (Hoge, Johnson,& Luidens, 1993). This seems to be a common theory used in explaining the rapid secularization of Europe. In a study in the Netherlands, Need and de Graaf (1996) used data taken from a cross-section of the Dutch population to show that the less educated one's parents were, the more likely one was to maintain their religious practice. As the level of parental education increases, so does the percentage of those who disaffiliate from their church (Need & de Graaf, 1996).

Grotenhuis and Scheepers (2001) followed with a similar study in the Netherlands. They used a 1995 two-stage random sample of Dutch people between the ages of 18 and 70 in which 2,019 people participated. When looking at the effect of urbanization and modernization, they found that moving into modern cities did have a small impact on people leaving the church. However, they did not find a relationship between one's education level and commitment to the church. One other factor that increased

disaffiliation was the growing number of partners or spouses who are non-religious or who don't come from the same denomination (Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001).

Another theory of church disaffiliation, in the U.S., blames the movements of the 1960s that promoted individuality and freedom from institutional restraint (Hoge, Johnson & Luidens, 1993). Hoge et al. cite a third theory, popular with conservative churches, that says people are leaving the church in protest of the support various denominations and agencies give to liberal causes such as abortion rights and Third World revolutionary movements.

Hout, Greeley, and Wilde (2001) explained that decreasing mainline Protestant membership numbers were due to demographic factors. They used data from the General Social Survey, 1974-1998, and found that families from more conservative, fundamental churches were larger than those in those in the more liberal, mainline churches for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So while the mainline churches held a large lead in membership for much of the first half of the century, the trend swung and as mainline churches were shrinking, conservative churches were growing. It was also noted that when the birth rates of the mainline and conservative denominations leveled off in the 1980s, the conservative denominations developed what the authors described as a socialization advantage. People who were raised in conservative denominations in the 1980s became half as likely to convert to a mainline denomination as previous generations.

Roger Stump (1998) identified that denominational growth patterns were related to their geographic distribution. Stump pointed out that the liberal mainline denominations were concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, and since the 1980s there has been a general migration of the population out of these areas south and west into the Sunbelt

states. Stump also completed a logistical regression that showed that the more conservative denominations had more churches in counties that had a greater probability for growth than did the mainline denominations. Stump said that it was a case where the more conservative denominations had better infrastructure and organization in areas that were experiencing population growth, while the mainline denominations had their infrastructure and organization centered in areas that were losing population. The mainline churches did not have a strong enough presence in the Sunbelt to overcome their loss of membership in the Northeast and Midwest (Stump, 1998).

While demographics and geography were used to explain some of the reasons behind loss of church membership, others concerned about this phenomenon, including clergy, sought to find answers from the very members who left. In the section that follows, two pastors, one from New Zealand and one from Texas, report their findings from discussions and interviews with former members.

### Where Have All My Members Gone?

Alan Jamieson is the Senior Pastor at Wellington Central Baptist Church in New Zealand. In his research on the church in a postmodern culture he interviewed 108 people across New Zealand and Australia who left their church. Jamieson (2003) described these individuals in four different categories: Displaced Followers, Reflective Exiles, Transitional Explorers, and Integrated Way-finders. The participants included both those who had left the church and church leaders from the Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches. His paper included only generalizations of the population interviewed with no specific details.



The Displaced Followers were described as church members who experienced events and circumstances that led them to decide to leave the church. These individuals reported that they did not harbor ill feelings toward the church, and in fact continued to have great respect for it (Jamieson, 2003). The Displaced Followers made up 17.5% of those interviewed, and Jamieson further categorized these as people who were either hurt by the church or those who were angry at the church. Both of these groups shared that they had specific issues with the church leadership, the direction the church was going, and the daily operations of the church (Jamieson, 2003).

The Reflective Exiles made up 30% of the interviewed population. They also reported some problems with church leadership, church direction, and daily operations, but these were not the main issues which resulted in their leaving. For this group, leaving the church was a process that occurred over as many as 18 months (Jamieson, 2003). Over this time period these members described gradually feeling more uneasy in church, feeling that the church was irrelevant to their everyday life, and eventually that they no longer fit in with the church community (Jamieson, 2003).

The group Jamieson labeled as Transitional Explorers was characterized as having an emerging sense of their own faith. They began to question the faith based on the beliefs of their church while strengthening ideas they had been testing on their own. The Transitional Explorers made up 18% of the interview population and within this group there were seven individuals who were transitioning toward alternate faiths or, in some cases, agnosticism (Jamieson, 2003).

The final group Jamieson described, the Integrated Way-finders, left the church in search of a deeper faith that they could “integrate” into all areas of their life, including the

physical, mental, emotional, sexual, relational, and spiritual. Jamieson (2003) refers to this group as Way-finders because they are sure of what they believe and have found a way to move forward without their church.

John D. Duncan has reflected on his experiences and struggles as pastor at Lakeside Baptist Church in Granbury, Texas. In his article titled “6 Reasons People Leave Your Church”, Duncan (2004) shared what he has learned and what his members have shared with him. Some of these reasons are internal to the church while others are due to the needs and preferences of the members. All are important for a church to be aware of as it seeks to retain its members and gain new ones.

First, Duncan listed poor leadership and dissatisfaction with the way a church is run as a significant reason people leave a church. Duncan admitted that at times under his own leadership church members experienced lack of vision, worries over finances, morale problems, and placing blame on each other. Another reason Duncan found people were leaving was “inner hurts.” This refers to relational problems or conflicts such as impending divorce or feeling unaccepted in the church. In some cases members left the church to avoid dealing with these hurts, and in other cases leaving the church was done in an attempt to find answers to the hurt. For example, a member who doesn’t feel accepted may try to find a church where there is acceptance, and a member who was divorced may go somewhere to have a fresh start where that history is not known. A third reason for leaving that Duncan’s members gave was that they were simply disillusioned with the church (Duncan, 2004).

Three other reasons Duncan cited were due more to the preferences of the members. First, he noted that people might desire a different style of worship or preaching

and seek that at another church. Another preference would be for a specific program or ministry, such as children's activities or adult support groups. Finally, the size of the church can be an issue that makes members uncomfortable; some people prefer a larger church while others decide to leave a church when it grows to be too large.

In a review of several papers exploring why people leave a church, Douglas Walrath (1980) concluded that people's reasons for leaving vary greatly and are often complex. As newcomers tried attending church and ended up leaving, they criticized the church because it didn't meet their needs or acknowledge their concerns. This results in a need for church leaders to help long time members understand the differences between themselves and those who have never before been part of a church culture. Walrath states that the literature he reviewed shows that "an inability (of the church) to relate meaningfully to an emerging secular worldview is the leading cause of disengagement" from the church.

By speaking directly to members who left their church, researchers compiled lists of likes and dislikes concerning the church, such as the teaching and the programs, as well as things members try to avoid by leaving such as controversy, guilt, feeling useless and insignificant, and general feelings of discomfort. Upon discovering the reason members have for leaving a church, or wanting to attend elsewhere, a better understanding of how individuals make this decision of church attendance and involvement is necessary. In the section that follows, researchers consider religion using a marketplace approach. In this approach, the spiritual marketplace includes numerous religious and secular products to choose from.

## The Religious Economy

Laurence Iannaccone (1990) took what he called a “human capital” approach when examining church involvement. Iannaccone refers to “the new home economics” that was introduced by Gary Becker in the 1960s. In this model families are viewed as miniature companies that produce household commodities, such as meals or clean laundry.

However, unlike an actual business, this family consumes their own products. As a business does, the family must use valuable resources, such as purchased materials, skill, time, and labor to make these products. Therefore, in order to enjoy and partake in the commodities of the family, one must participate in the production. Family members must chip in to see that the pool is kept clean so it can be swum in, that the refrigerator is stocked with food so dinner can be cooked and snacks can be had, that the yard is mowed so the family can enjoy playing wiffle ball, and that the kitchen is cleaned up after dinner so there can be a family game night at the table. Human capital is what economists refer to as the skills that enhance the productivity of the family. These skills are not only natural abilities but also those that were gained through instruction and education. The same is true in a church with religious capital.

It is the opinion of Iannaccone (1990) that many activities in churches are designed and intended to be personal investments. Church services are not only to inspire the members, but also to instruct them, and charity is not only for the purpose of benefiting others, but to make oneself a better person. Thus, there is an interaction between religious capital, which is an appreciation for the church teachings, doctrines, traditions, and members, and a person’s religious participation. This religious capital, or appreciation, is both a prerequisite and a consequence of involvement in the church. The religious capital

allows one to experience greater satisfaction when participating in the church and it increases the likelihood of a person continuing to participate. Iannaccone noted that participation in church is the most important way of maintaining a healthy amount of religious capital.

What might happen in a situation where a person experiences great personal growth and change in their church? They may have had new religious experiences outside of the church that ignite a hunger and desire for more than what their church has always provided. In a sense, their religious capital may have changed. Iannaccone (1990) has stated that people will switch denominations in an effort to “preserve the value of their religious capital.”

Darren E. Sherkat and John Wilson (1995) also explored the economics of religion and church attendance. They used data from the Youth-Parent Socialization Study which interviewed 1,669 randomly selected high school seniors in 1965. A randomly selected parent of each student was also interviewed. Follow up interviews were conducted eight years later to examine any changes in the patterns of religious preference.

Sherkat and Wilson (1995) used the analogy that churches and denominations are a religious marketplace. In order to succeed and grow as a church community, denominations and/or churches must provide something special and rewarding, offering products and experiences that match the preferences of the consumers in the religious market. The culture of the United States has become marked by high social mobility, and Sherkat and Wilson (1995) noted from their findings that a change in a person’s social mobility often resulted in a changing of their preferences because they were exposed to new things and different consumption patterns. Therefore, as people experience different

ministries, different worship styles, or recognize that they have experienced growth and change, they may learn to appreciate and desire different religious products. It is also possible that a person would come to desire nonreligious products and stop attending church.

Sherkat and Wilson (1995) emphasized that status is very important in predicting religious preference and choice. They found that high-status parents engrained in their children a desire for a religious experience that reflects their status in society and rejects the spiritual and supernatural aspects of low-status religious traditions that tend to be very conservative. Children from high status families tend to choose denominations and churches whose values closely mimic society, and sometimes they choose to withdraw from religion altogether.

Another aspect of religious consumption that Sherkat and Wilson (1995) reported as being greatly overlooked is the social aspect of religious choice. People make decisions based not only on what they want and desire, but also on how they believe others will be affected by their decisions. When a person makes a religious choice, such as what church to attend, they may consider what their parents will think, what their spouse or children will think, or perhaps they're even worried about their standing in the community (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995).

A more recent study on religious choice and religious switching was completed by Matthew Loveland. Loveland (2003) used the General Social Survey of 1988 to test several hypotheses thought to deter religious switching. Loveland found that socialization in a church as a child, such as in Sunday School and Bible School, did not deter one from switching churches later in life. However, joining a church as a member by confirmation

or baptism in one's teen years did have a deterring effect on switching. Dropping out of church for a time as a teen or young adult increased the likelihood of switching. Loveland also found that persons who belonged to more unique denominations and churches, including the Catholic Church and more distinctive Protestant denominations are less likely to switch. Loveland's final hypothesis, that time spent with family members decreases chances of switching churches was supported as well. This was illustrated by the finding that those who interacted with family members less than once a month were 70% more likely to switch churches. Loveland concluded that religious preferences are created and sustained as people maintain and discard their social relationships.

The use of an economic model to describe religious preferences and choices has shown that individuals make decisions of religious consumption based on things such as life circumstances and experiences, social status and relationships, as well as exposure to new and different things. In addition, individuals must feel a sense of ownership of, or contribution to, their church experience. If one can no longer identify with and appreciate the practices and values of a church or denomination, the choice to leave or switch may be made. Often there is a series of events or experiences that create this change in preference. The following section will explore the events and occurrences that lead individuals to become disillusioned with their church and desire something different.

#### Events and Interactions Leading to Disillusionment

Krause, Ellison, and Wulff (1998) studied the psychological well-being of church members and leaders as it related to emotional support and negative interactions. The studies of Finch et al., Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, and Roof ( as cited in Krause et al., 1998)

proposed that negative interactions may have greater effect on psychological well-being than the benefits of being part of a social network, like a local church, provide. In their review of literature Krause et al. noted that the majority of the studies on church conflict focus on disputes over theology and policy. Very few studies look at how conflict within a church affects individual health and well-being.

Secular literature also shows that social connections, such as those in a congregation, are not always beneficial, and negative interactions can in fact degrade physiological well-being (Krause, Ellsion, & Wulff, 1998). This same review highlighted the fact that in a social community, positive interactions are expected and anticipated. As more positive interactions occur, there tends to be less reaction. However, when a negative interaction occurs, a significant emotional response may result because it stands out in great contrast to the benefits that come to be expected with involvement in a relationship. This experience would be especially unsettling in a church as it subtly but significantly goes against the concepts of faith and trust that are among the basic Christian principles (Krause, Ellsion, & Wulff, 1998).

Another issue that may lead to disillusionment is the concept of religious coping. Nooney and Woodrum (2002) described six patterns of religious coping. The first three are positive ways and include: thinking about life as a part of a larger spiritual force, working together with God as partners, and looking to God for strength and support. The remaining ways are more negative means of coping and include: feeling like God is punishing one for sinning, wondering if one has been abandoned by God, and trying to make sense of a problem without God. Nooney and Woodrum (2002) found that using negative religious coping was significantly related to depression. Similarly, while Krause,



Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman (2001) found that positive social support increases positive religious coping, they point out that it is still unknown whether negative interaction has the opposite effect. Could it be that people who experience negative interactions and interpersonal conflict are led to reject positive religious coping methods, start using negative religious coping, or perhaps withdraw from religion and church life altogether?

### Friendship's Affect on Church Growth and Attendance

Daniel V.A. Olson (1989) studied results of questionnaires that asked if friendships with fellow church attendees had any influence on decisions to join or leave a church. Olson found that individuals that have more church friendships also experience greater satisfaction with their church and are more likely to continue attending. Even when there are other areas of church life that are causing dissatisfaction, these people are less likely to leave a church as they appear bound by their friendships. When looking at friendships on a church-wide level, Olson found that the churches with the least incidences of cliques are the fastest growing.

In another study of church friendships, Dudley and Cummings (1983) reported that the percentage of members meeting in small fellowship or Bible study groups was one of the strongest predictors of church growth among Seventh Day Adventists. It is in these groups where regular fellowship and learning occur and intimate friendships are born. New members are attracted by these groups and thus the church experiences growth. Warren J. Hartman completed two studies on Methodist Church attendance ( as cited in Roozen, 1980). First, Hartman found that Methodist church drop-outs' most frequent

reason for leaving was “they did not feel accepted or wanted” while the most frequent reason members gave for joining was “a sense of being accepted, loved, and wanted.” Additionally, Hartman reported the five most important reasons congregants joined Methodist churches were the friendliness of the congregation, the church was close to their home, they felt wanted and needed, they liked the pastor, and they liked the worship service.

It is clear that the relationships one has in the church greatly affect the overall experience one has with the church. When an individual experiences repeated personality conflicts and negative interactions this may lead not only to negative attitudes toward the church but may also negatively affect one’s psychological well-being. An individual may also adopt or get stuck in using negative religious coping to handle problems that focus on a separation from God and a sense of punishment. Conversely, when an individual has numerous, healthy friendships, they are more likely to feel accepted and satisfied in the church. The more involved and connected one is socially in the church, the less likely they are to leave, even if there is a sense of dissatisfaction.

Once again this literature shows the strong influence relationships play in determining church attendance. Relationships have the power to make good experiences seem better and bad experiences worse. The following section will give a more intimate glimpse of the experiences of individuals who made the choice to leave their church.

### What Those Who Left Are Saying

Marilyn McNaughton (2002) interviewed 16 people, from four different Presbyterian churches, who had left their congregation. The focus of her case study was to

learn about these members' process of disaffiliation by examining the conflicts they encountered. McNaughton also paid attention to possible subconscious material during the interviews and used psychoanalysis as the framework for her study.

In listening to the participants' experiences in their churches, McNaughton (2002) reported that for a significant length of time they each felt very much supported and cared for by their church community and had abundant friendships. They had opportunities to grow spiritually, to serve in the church, and to feel part of the church body. Though there were a few disappointments along the way, each participant reported an overall very positive experience.

As time passed for these participants, a theme of discontent and disappointment arose (McNaughton, 2002). When faced with these feelings, the participants did not just quietly leave the church. In nearly every case they not only took their concerns to leadership, but also took action themselves when possible. For example, some of the participants desired to see a broadening of the scope of worship and programming. One woman, who was enthusiastic about the environment, founded and chaired the church recycling committee. Another who had a passion for music encouraged his choir director to expand their repertoire by lending music and offering to perform a solo. A total of twelve of the participants interviewed by McNaughton addressed their concerns with church elders but the changes they were looking for and hoping for never came about (McNaughton, 2002).

McNaughton found that participants' disillusionment with the church occurred as a result of three common factors:

- (1) the belief that their views would be supported

(2) the belief that their ministers would receive them and their suggestions with high regard and a listening ear, and

(3) the belief that they would be supported and cared for by other members

Not only did the participants get discouraged when trying to voice their concerns and work for change, but they also experienced a general deterioration of their friendships.

Many of them mentioned being deeply frustrated over things that were happening, or not happening, within their communities of faith. Strained relationships became the norm, and the respondents noticed that their experiences of church as a home were fading fast. Sense of belonging was gone, and they felt that they were viewed suspiciously by others. One respondent spoke of being labeled “a bad person, a dissident.” Another expressed that he was “branded as a troublemaker, a zealot.”

For all of the subjects the sense of church as family was breaking down

(McNaughton, 2002, p. 70).

William D. Hendricks went about exploring the phenomenon of people leaving the church in a similar manner to McNaughton (2002), but since his approach was journalistic his work gives a much richer emotional illustration of the process of leaving the church. Hendricks (1993) traveled the country to hear the stories of over two dozen individuals who had become disillusioned with and separated from the Christian church. For some of these, the negative experiences were not actually in a church but in a Christian organization or while serving as missionaries.

Hendricks (1993) made several cases for the importance of listening to and recording these stories. First, he noted that people who leave churches are rarely listened to and instead are preached at and often judged. Hendricks also shared Dr. John Savage’s

findings in his study of church dropouts in the 1970s. Savage found that on average these dropouts waited for a period of six to eight weeks until they considered themselves permanently removed from the church. When this time passed and there was no contact made by any church leader or representative, and there was no concern shown that they were no longer attending church, these dropouts considered themselves removed from the church.

Some of the people in Hendricks's book had trouble feeling accepted in church due to their background or vocation. These included several artists and one individual of Jewish background. Others experienced or were involved with different levels of scandalous activity, such as affairs and substance abuse in positions of leadership. For the most part these individuals had stories that started off joyful and fulfilling but ended with their departure from the church. All of these people had a common desire and need to find themselves back in a loving faith community.

One of the common themes mentioned by several individuals was their frustration with the legalistic church. An interviewee named Diana talked about growing up in her church and learning how to please people and do things to get positive feedback. However, even as a teenager she realized that there should be more; "I probably wasn't able to say at the time, but I hated going. I thought it was ridiculous I just sat there bored out of my mind. And I disagreed with what was being said. There was so much about authority in it, and I had always been against that anyway." As for her feelings of her church at the time,

I found it interesting that people could repeat the same things over and over again with such an absence of meaning and penetration from reality- even within the church. Everyone seemed to be just kind of going along dead, and not alive--not

what I would expect for people filled with the spirit or moving in the direction of the spirit. None of that seemed to be happening. Just words and... phraseology... spiritual jargon that had no correspondence to reality. I was mad about it! (p.26)

L.J was another interviewee who had clashed with his small community church. He and his family experienced church leadership critiquing and condemning his family's actions and behaviors. "The church started to get pretty legalistic. They were putting pressure on you. You know, if you didn't do a certain thing, then, well, 'Hey, you're not quite measuring up!' (p.89)" After repeated instances of this L.J. finally responded, "And it finally got to the point where I just said, 'If I'm not up to par, then I'm sorry! It's not you that I have to answer to; it's somebody else much higher.'" (p.89) Hendricks notes that small churches in close knit communities often act more like families, including all the bickering and criticizing. Unfortunately however, L.J.'s situation is likely far too common. Hendricks (1993) reported that there are about 350,000 protestant congregations in America that averaged only 75 people in a Sunday morning service. This leaves many opportunities for legalism and infighting to occur.

David and Jennifer started a church together and for three years their church was growing and they were happy. Jennifer described, "Marriages were being saved. There were people turning away from drug and alcohol abuse. There are great things happening. There were definitely victories in God's kingdom (p.64)" but as time went on they began to have various disputes with members they counted as good friends. They were accused of abusing their children, David was chastised for his choice of words in a teaching he had done to the point a third party pastor was brought in to mediate, and Jennifer reported "getting totally cut down day after day after day" (p.69). Hendricks notes that the pattern

of David and Jennifer's relationship with their church is a common one. They began as excited and energized leaders in the church and then were mired in a period of conflict which festered until a more significant crisis caused them to make the decision to leave. For many people like this, their exit is a silent one, and while some go on to another church, many choose to stay away (Hendricks, 1993). Hendricks also noted that he believes this is a growing trend in the United States.

Another major theme discovered by Hendricks (1993) was the desire and need for a church community where members could be free with one another, not burdened about how they looked to others. They wanted a place where openness and honesty was the norm and the Holy Spirit was working in their lives. John, a long-time pastor, saw the problem this way:

Every place that I have gone, virtually without exception, I find the same thing: active, busy, committed Christians who love the Lord and love each other, but are up to their necks in Christian activity. Elders, deacons, pastors, assistant pastors, youth directors, choir members, Sunday school teachers—you name it—people who are up to their necks in activity saying, 'What I am experiencing is not enough. There's got to be more to the Christian life. It's not meeting my deepest needs, and I don't know where to turn, and I don't know what to do' (p.147).

For Mark, the church in which he grew up was all about doing the right things and not doing the wrong things. He recalled adults being harassed to give money, serve on committees, and that the pastor even scolded the congregation when no one came forward after the sermon. In the letter Hendricks included in his book, Mark wrote,

And while it would not often be said directly, the message was clear: without these works, you are at best a second-class Christian, or at worst had a faith that was seriously in doubt. The victorious life was assumed to be the pursuit of every sincere believer. So one could not go long at church without hearing about someone's spiritual success (p.201).

Even after Mark went to college and explored other church communities, he still longed for something more.

There was certainly no place to talk about pain, failure, or frustration. The proper topic was a victory—how some righteous act had led to blessing or insight. The focus was on the Christian's righteousness, not on the redemption of the miserable sinner. I was now pretty miserable (p.201).

Diana had very similar sentiments when she said,

Mainly, I guess, I want to have a church where people are more real. Of course, it's really kind of scary when people start talking about who they really are in a group. I'm uncomfortable when people do that. But I think if you could draw appropriate boundaries, that if the church were more real and addressed people in a more real way, then that's the kind of church I'd like to be involved in (p.33).

Becoming disillusioned with the church is a process, which I can verify from personal experience. Hendricks (1993) notes that this same disillusionment with the church involves a grief process and feelings of loss. He points to the New Testament (NIV) book of Romans 12:15 which says to "mourn with those who mourn". Not only is it a Biblical principal to listen to those disillusioned with the church, but also in using a business analogy Hendricks says,



The loss of even one previously satisfied customer is worth examining, because it suggests a breakdown somewhere, a disappointment of expectations. Such an examination, painful as it may be, might hold crucial clues as to how the church can improve its core business of bringing every believer to maturity in Christ (p.19).

### Summary

This literature review included a wide sampling of existing research that tries to explain why people leave or switch churches, with some examples for particular denominations. Throughout the literature, two main themes that help explain church members' decisions to leave: change and relationships.

Change is a concept that appeared over and over in various ways in this literature review. First, there has been significant change in the demographics of the United States as the population has shifted south and west. Certain churches and denominations capitalized on this shift while others lost significant membership. Change has also been a major driving force in our culture and society. The average education level has increased dramatically over the last few generations. People now have greater knowledge, skill, and opportunities. In addition, modern society is much more mobile. Changes in location and job and social status can happen in a very short time. As one's opportunities and surroundings change so can one's preferences, including religious preferences. A final aspect of change involves what is really a lack of change. Members who have left churches have shared how they began to view the church as legalistic, and unaccepting; unable to make room for their passions, ideas, and desires of what they wanted from their religious experience.

A second concept that dominated the reviewed literature was relationships. Relationships within the church play a very important role in one's relationship with the church. Healthy and plentiful relationships with other church members facilitate a fulfilling relationship with the church. Negative interactions with other church members can significantly impact one's emotional health and well-being and would seem to cause reason for church drop-outs. Relationship terms are also used by those to explain why they left a church; they were hurt or angered by the church, they felt unaccepted, not listened to, not valued. The religious capital approach to religion reported how members feel greater satisfaction when they are participating in the church with others.

It seems very logical that these two concepts, change and relationships, are closely linked in determining who leaves churches and why. Quite simply people experience change. Some of this is self-driven, some spiritually-driven, and some is simply the result of a constantly changing and evolving society and culture. Church members need churches that can accommodate their changes and personal growth, or they will seek this elsewhere. Those who are not Christians, or who don't attend church, are changing as well. Their lives and experiences are becoming more and more different from what is seen in traditional church culture. Perhaps this explains why some of the more contemporary, non-denominational churches are gaining membership while traditional denominations are losing membership.

The current research is a collection of interviews of church members who became disillusioned with and left their church. The goal of this study is to analyze these interviews and discover patterns and common themes that exist in the relationships these

individuals had with their church. More specifically, what happened to these once fulfilling relationships over time that led these members to leave their church?

## Chapter III: Methods

### Introduction

While there is considerable research describing the demographics of people and their reasons given for leaving churches, very little is known about the experiences in the relationships with their church. Foremost, what is it that happens in the relationship with the church across a period of time that causes it to go sour or become unfulfilling? Qualitative research methods allowed the participants to present a very detailed and descriptive account of what one experiences in coming to the decision to leave their church. Using the framework of phenomenology and social exchange theory as a guide, face to face interviews allowed for personal and meaningful data to be presented and revealed patterns and themes across the life of the church and the relationships with its members.

### Personal Perspectives

One of the basic assumptions of the phenomenological perspective says that a researcher can not be an objective observer because one's feelings, beliefs, values, and responses become part of the research. This is especially true for this study as I have had an extensive history in the Mennonite church

I spent the first 24 years of my life in the Sunrise Mennonite Church community. This was the place where my faith was nurtured and many wonderful relationships were created. I left the church and the area over eight years ago for a job and then when I was married we settled elsewhere. In my time at Sunrise I was certainly aware of families and individuals who left the church for different reasons. The church members and church

leaders also spent much time discussing issues and trying to make decisions on things such as ministry styles, outreach, building expansions, and general identity issues of the church. For example, 25 years ago four-part, a cappella hymns made up the music of the worship service. Soon guitar, drums, and keyboards accompanied contemporary songs projected off the wall of the sanctuary. Almost from the day this music first appeared until the current time, there has been debate and discussion as to what the worship service should look like; somewhere between the traditional hymns only approach, to a contemporary praise band, to some kind of compromise in between. Another issue that was for decades being processed was an expansion to the building. A number of church members were opposed to building and growing the church, while others were passionate about the impact greater infrastructure would have on the different church ministries. This issue was finally resolved as several years ago a new addition was completed.

After leaving the church I joined a nondenominational church near my new home. Here I was exposed to a variety of things that would not have been possible at Sunrise Mennonite Church. One of the first main differences was being involved with other Christians who were in the military and government. Many Mennonite churches would not allow enlisted military to be members of their church and wars and the government are rarely, if ever, supported. Along with this I was exposed to different interests, different passions, and different ways of ministering to others. The worship was also very different, very contemporary. The biggest difference from Sunrise however, was that my new church was growing, fast!

As I returned for visits to Sunrise Mennonite Church, I felt more and more uncomfortable there as time went by. There had been changes in leadership, with promises

of change, but for many church members, the church community seemed ever more stuck in controversy and disappointment. This was visible first hand for me as some close relatives are still significantly involved there. One male relative, who was a long time leader, decided to step down so he could put all of his energies into the community outreach program he had started. However, he and numerous others were increasingly discouraged wondering if there would ever be any significant growth and change at Sunrise.

There has basically been a 20 year period at Sunrise where change and growth has been butting heads with tradition and denominational values. Church members have been frustrated and have chosen to leave over different levels of frustration and hurt. I see that frustration and hurt in my relatives and friends when I visit. I too can't help but feel some of that. I am no longer physically part of that community, but I often wonder what would have happened had I never moved away. What would I be going through and would I decide to leave?

As I consider what bias I may have in doing this research, I acknowledge it was very exhausting doing the interview process because of the depth of empathy and understanding I had for the participants' experience, both leaders and members. While I can definitely identify with some of the dissatisfactions, disappointments, and hurts experienced by those members who have left, I can also understand and appreciate the challenges of leadership at Sunrise. It is my hope that presenting the stories of the people who have left Sunrise Mennonite Church may be helpful in bringing about a sense of unity and mutual understanding of the vision and purpose in the church community.

## The Context: A Brief History of Leadership and Structure in the Mennonite Church

As the Anabaptist movement began in the sixteenth century, before birthing the Mennonite Church, it simply involved groups of Christians meeting together to counsel each other, pray together, and make decisions (Mennonite Church 2001). Within two years a group of leaders met and established that congregational leaders would be called shepherds and would have the responsibility and authority to read scripture, teach, and discipline members of the church, among other things (Mennonite Church, 1981).

Later in the sixteenth century a three part format of leadership in the Mennonite Church evolved and included bishops or elders, preachers or ministers, and deacons (Mennonite Church 1981). The bishops or elders were charged with the greatest responsibility in ministering to the church. They had authority to ordain, discipline, perform baptism and communion services, and would also preach and teach. These church leaders could be chosen by majority vote or by lot, similar to drawing straws (Mennonite Church, 1981). Preachers or ministers assisted the bishops or elders in ministering to the congregation. These leaders did not ordain others, were usually not responsible for administering discipline, nor did they regularly preside over baptism, communion, or other ordinances. They were however, usually ordained for life (Mennonite Church, 1981). The deacons have historically had the greatest number of tasks. A significant duty of theirs involved caring for the poor in the congregation, assisting the bishops and elders in their tasks, reading scripture in worship services, and helping to visit and attend to sick members. The deacon was also normally ordained for life (Mennonite Church, 1981).

As the Mennonite Church evolved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many congregations in North America have maintained the three part structure of ministry and church leadership.

Other congregations have dropped the positions of bishops, elders, and deacons and have moved to one pastor. In these cases, churches usually establish a board of elders or a church council that provides assistance and advice to the pastor. In addition, where pastors were previously chosen from within the congregation and were ordained for life, many Mennonite churches now select a pastor from outside the church and pay him, or her, as a full time employee (Mennonite Church, 1981). Mennonite Churches have also been influenced by the changes in both the Christian and secular cultures in the last century. Contemporary organizational and management structures have made their way into Mennonite churches and Mennonite church members have acquired some different expectations for leadership and organization than what has been the tradition (Mennonite Church, 1981).

Sunrise Mennonite Church is currently operating under by-laws that were adopted in 2001 and revised in 2004. In addition to the pastor, church leadership is under the direction and authority of the Church Council and the Board of Elders. The Church Council consists of laypersons in the positions of Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Recording Secretary, and Treasurer. Other individuals on the Council include one elder, a youth leader, a member at large, and any staff member whose job description entails it. The duties of this council are described as “the functions normally handled by officers of a non-profit corporation”. This council oversees and administers areas of church life such as evangelism and mission, Christian education, facilities, finance, and youth activities. The Church Council also plans the agenda for the yearly church business meeting and may formulate additional committees when need arises.



The Board of Elders consists of laypersons that are elected or affirmed by congregational vote. One of the elders on the Board is a Deacon-Elder. The Deacon is elected to a five-year term with the option of unlimited succession. The other Elders are elected to three-year terms and individuals may serve one additional term in succession. In addition to those elected, the Board of Elders consists of ministry staff as designated by their job description. The Board of Elders meets regularly once a month with additional meetings as necessary. Seventy-five percent of the Board constitutes a quorum but the Board always strives for consensus in their decision making process. If a consensus cannot be reached a simple majority vote of those present is necessary to take action on an issue. At least one time a year the board meets without the pastor.

The by-laws state that any congregational decision must be made by communal discernment, a majority vote, or a percentage of votes greater than the majority determined by the Board of Elders. Congregational meetings must be announced at least 10 days prior to the meeting through written notice or mail, or must be announced at two consecutive Sunday services. When the communal process is initiated, the Board of Elders assumes the authority for identifying consensus.

Though the Mennonite Church makes up less than one percent of the Christian population in the United States, there are a number of regions that have high concentrations of Mennonites. Some of these include Lancaster County and southeastern Pennsylvania, Harrisonburg, Virginia and the surrounding Shenandoah Valley, and various rural Midwestern communities in the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. In these areas it is common to find numerous Mennonite churches with up to several hundred members each, within several miles of each other. Sunrise Mennonite Church is on the

outskirts of one of these Mennonite regions. Though there are several other Mennonite churches within a ten-mile radius of Sunrise, like Sunrise they are smaller churches in contrast to the numerous other Mennonite churches found 15 to 25 miles further away.

Sunrise Mennonite Church traces its beginnings back to the early 1700's when increasing numbers of Mennonites immigrated to this area. The first log meetinghouse was built in 1732. Divisions in the Mennonite Church have been common, as evidenced by the more than 16 branches or groups of Mennonite churches listed in this country (ARDA, 2006). A division in the Sunrise community occurred in 1847 when there was disagreement over issues of holding public and government office, swearing of oaths, musical instruments in the church, conformity of dress, among others. At this time one-third of the congregation withdrew and began worshipping separately, eventually building a new church adjacent to the existing one (Gehman & Bower, 1936).

At the present time Sunrise Mennonite Church has an average attendance of about 120. This number has remained constant for at least several decades. There are an increasing number of members who are first or second generation Mennonites as well as those who do not have roots in the Sunrise community. Historically, the majority of the membership at Sunrise Mennonite Church has been comprised of succeeding generations from a handful of local families.

### Participants

For purposes of this study, I hoped to recruit members of Sunrise Mennonite Church who had left the church within the last 10 years. Since I grew up in the Sunrise Mennonite Church, I maintained some contacts with the church community including

some family members and long-time friends. These individuals helped me identify and compile a list of members who had left the church within this time period. In addition, I made a list of former and current church leaders whose input I sought to balance the stories of the members. Once this list was complete I used a script to contact subjects by telephone or email. (See Appendix A)

A total of 11 members were contacted as well as 4 current and former church leaders. These were all members who made it publicly known they were leaving Sunrise and looking to attend church elsewhere. One member declined to participate, saying that the topic was not one she wanted to talk about any more. Two others said they didn't have the time to schedule an interview, and though given the opportunity to respond to the questions by email, they did not respond. Appointments were conducted at the participant's home with the exception of the three current church leaders who were interviewed at the church. Each participant appeared very eager to share their experiences, feelings, and viewpoints and was excited about what could be learned from the research.

I interviewed eight former church members, all of who left the church after 1998. The members included three married couples, two interviewed together and one separately, and two men who were interviewed separately. Of the four church leaders, one was a long time leader in the past, one was a current leader who moved into the church community in the last 5 years, and the remaining leaders had been in positions spanning the other two. The research design and interview procedures were approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board. (See Appendix D) The following page contains a chart that details the demographic data of the eight former members, the one former church leader, and three current church leaders.

Table 1

Demographics of Former Members Interviewed

	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP</b>	<b>LENGTH OF SEPARATION</b>	<b>INTERVIEW TYPE</b>	<b>NOTES</b>
A	Male	50	17 years	5 years	Face-to-face	Married to B
B	Female	51	17 years	5 years	Face-to-face	Married to A
C	Male	26	18 years (from birth)	8 years	Face-to-face	
D	Female	33	7 years	6 years	Email	Married to E
E	Male	35	20 years	6 years	Face-to-face	Married to D
F	Female	46	7 years	1 month	Face-to-face	Married to G
G	Male	47	7 years	1 month	Face-to-face	Married to F
H	Male	28	18 years (from birth)	10 years	Face-to-face	

Table 2

Demographics of Church Leaders Interviewed

<b>Subject</b>	<b>ROLE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>LENGTH OF SERVICE</b>	<b>INTERVIEW TYPE</b>
A	Current Leader A	Male	5 years	Face-to-face
B	Current Leader B	Male	5 years	Face-to-face
C	Current Leader C	Female	10 years	Face-to-face
D	Former Leader	Male	17 years	Face-to-face & Email

\*Although no longer serving as a leader, this subject continues active membership

## Procedures

All interviews were conducted between November 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Upon arriving at the interview, participants were given a consent form (see appendix A) which explained the purpose of the research, described the expectations for their participation, and highlighted potential costs and benefits to them. Participants were ensured that their responses, names, and any identifying information would be confidential. After receiving oral consent from individuals to participate, the audio taping began with each participant being asked for some demographic information. All interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and explored the member's experiences in deciding to leave the church. Leader interviews were aimed at finding what kind of understanding church leadership has regarding what these members, and others who had left, have experienced and endured. I developed two separate sets of open ended questions for members and leaders. To refine the questions, I asked these questions to current members of other churches who were acquaintances of mine. I made several series of adaptations to the question sets until they were finalized. During the research interviews I occasionally asked additional questions for clarification as well as to hear more about particular experiences mentioned by participants. The questions and demographic information requested, as well as an opening statement, are listed in Appendix C.

## Data Analysis

Immediately after the interviews were complete I transcribed all of the audio tapes. There was one instance where a tape was accidentally deleted and the participant was kind enough to recall his responses and email them, thus this interview was not transcribed.

One additional participant responded solely to the interview by email. When the transcripts were completed, they were emailed to the participants for their review and they were allowed to make any corrections, clarifications, or request that something be deleted. Participants were given a “respond by” date after which their responses would be considered valid. Two persons responded by making some corrections to the transcript, four others responded by email that everything was fine, and the remaining participants did not respond. When responses were received or the “respond by” date passed, all audio tapes were destroyed in order to protect confidentiality.

I read over each transcript thoroughly several times, highlighting significant statements of interest and writing notes to categorize the responses. When I was quite familiar with the participants’ responses I began using open coding to analyze the data. Open coding involves naming and categorizing phenomena by breaking down data into distinct parts, closely examining the data and comparing and contrasting it for themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1991). It was very clear that several main themes evolved in the responses of the members. Next, I began to cut and paste the transcripts so that responses were categorized into a number of themes. Leader responses were categorized as well. I met several times with my thesis chair to discuss and examine the data and the various themes that arose. The examination of these themes and patterns, along with individual’s own words and stories, formed the basis for the next chapter.

## Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this research was to understand the costs and benefits of church membership and attendance, and more specifically, to understand how those costs and benefits affect an individual's decision to leave a church. Using a phenomenological approach, interviews of former members and current and former leaders of Sunrise Mennonite Church were analyzed for patterns and common themes in exploring what led up to their decision to leave. Social exchange theory guided the interview process and helped to uncover the experiences these individuals had in their relationship with the church. Social exchange theory also helped to frame these experiences and describe how they strengthened, maintained, or weakened the relationship with the church.

Over the years there have likely been members of Sunrise Mennonite Church who have left and never became involved in another church community. Perhaps some have even rejected the Christian faith. The participants I interviewed, however, had a different story to tell. All of these individuals either became very active in new church homes or were actively pursuing a church where they could be fulfilled and be active participants in ministering to others.

The relationships between these members and the Sunrise Mennonite Church exhibited very similar patterns as they began with satisfaction, joy, and fulfillment and ended with the members experiencing varying degrees of frustration and longing for something more. I have identified five major stages that were common to the experience of these participants:

- 1) The Benefits of Being a Member
- 2) Early Dissatisfactions
- 3) Efforts to Stay
- 4) When It Was Clearly Time to Leave
- 5) The Experience of Leaving

Several of the members provided some additional observations and experiences of Sunrise Mennonite Church that they felt led to share. The leaders also talked about the challenges they experience in trying to create and maintain a healthy church environment. These things will be discussed prior to the members' Experience of Leaving.

The leaders' and former leader's perspectives did not overlap as much as the former members' experiences did. However, I have used the leaders' collective responses to highlight the former members' experiences and to provide insight as to what may be happening in the church that has caused such disillusion in a number of members.

### The Benefits of Being a Member

Upon asking the first question to the participants which was, "What are some of the first things you appreciated about Sunrise Mennonite Church?" the most predominant answer by far involved fun, fellowship, and meaningful relationships. For the two young men who were born into the church this meant growing up with friends and having fond memories of Sunday school, Bible school, and youth group activities. As these men grew into their teens, relationships with others in the church remained their foremost benefit. One man expressed it this way;



I think the most important thing is I was involved in real relationships. I have a few very authentic relationships, people my age, people that are like parents or friends or things like that. I still have close relationships with them.

He continued,

The church met my need for giving me people to spend time with. Just in general the whole finding my place in the world, trying to figure out where you fit. It gave me other people that I respected besides my parents that I could say, ‘What the heck’s going on and what am I supposed to be doing and what’s the point of all this’”. Just the kind of questions that everybody asks when they’re in junior high, high school, trying to find your place. It gave me..., I mean I was able to go to people and have people that I respected talk to me about that stuff.

Another young man joined the church as a pre-teen following his parents’ divorce. For him the relationships he found at Sunrise were especially valuable as he dealt with change and uncertainty at home.

The church was a place of stability, consistency. It was every Sunday you know, it was kind of the thing that you did and you saw the same people. And it was something that was very dependable. Then also as I started growing, it was a place where people had similar values that I had. So it was just a place where I felt I belonged.

For those who joined the church later in life, the draw of being able to have fun and share meaningful interactions with others was still significant. One man was greatly impacted by his friendships with other men in the church.

I immediately connected with a number of other guys there. I felt very comfortable. A couple of the guys invited me to go hunting with them. And just, after a couple of weeks of being there, it was just a very friendly group that we thought we had a lot in common with.

Even after his time at Sunrise ended, he continued to hold these friendships dearly.

I think the friendships are the thing that I treasure the most from our relationship with Sunrise. We were with a small group for a number of years and developed some very close friendships through that small group that I really want to continue.

Several others who joined Sunrise as adults had come from smaller Mennonite churches. They remarked how happy they were to have other families to do things with, both social activities and church ministry activities. A number of the former members were very involved in small groups and even led their own group. It was also important for these former members that their children had meaningful friendships and opportunities for participation in the church.

Fellowship and relationships were mentioned as a perceived benefit by the church leaders I talked to. The first leader I talked to said, “There’s obviously a benefit of fellowship; being together with other Christians and to have relationships with other Christians”. Another current leader echoed these thoughts.

I think relationships is a real significant part, a significant benefit, everybody has with church membership. You have relationships with people with similar commonalities, similar belief systems. It gives you more to talk about. You can talk about religious beliefs and spirituality. Along with that would go support system, like an extended family, you have more resources available to help you.

A second benefit former members recognized was a time of spiritual growth and development and a deepening of their relationship with God. This concept was most interestingly expressed by one of the young men born into the church.

Spiritually I'd say it created needs for me, which it then met. Like when you're growing up in the church, when you're 8 years old you don't know what it feels like to be empty inside and to have a longing. But you grow up learning about God, that you need this to be complete.

One of the women explained that at her previous church she was always too busy doing things in the church and never felt like she had a conversion experience. When she started attending Sunrise and was not so busy with different tasks in the church, she felt God really started working in her.

I personally had a lot of spiritual growth at Sunrise. You know I finally had a conversion experience and a baptism that really meant something to me. At Sunrise I really learned how to pray. I never really knew how to pray before. It was really becoming something that is a real joy to me. It's a gift that I have and that's something that I learned at Sunrise. And the prayer ministry really helped me tons. I got tons of healing out of that. I guess I had things I needed to deal with from my childhood, my upbringing.

One of the men who joined the church when he was about 40 linked his spiritual growth to his relationships at Sunrise.

I think I experienced some pretty significant spiritual growth (at Sunrise). Some of it was through friendships and almost like a, it wasn't a formal mentorship, but the interactions that you have with brothers that you really can see God working in

their life. It just really has an effect on you, to grow you spiritually. And I think I did grow through that.

Only one of the church leaders mentioned a personal growing experience or a growing relationship with God as a perceived benefit of church membership. However, this was the first benefit listed by that leader and he stated it this way, “First of all there’s the benefit of the growing experience in Christ, a relationship with God, that I think needs to be a lifelong process”. These former members definitely described a continual process of growing and changing, becoming more aware of God in their lives. However, as the relationship with the church continued, it seemed that this growth led to much of the stress and frustration with the church. This will be discussed in the following sections.

The third major benefit of attending Sunrise Mennonite Church, listed by the former members, was the opportunity to be used by God and to be involved in the life of the church. This was also a theme spoken of by the leaders. A current leader said, “I think that God wants all of us to be useful in the building of the Kingdom of God and bring others to Jesus and be what I call an instrument of God’s grace”. The former leader continued this thought by saying, “Involvement will offer ways to use gifts and have a sense of helping the kingdom of God to grow”.

In addition to finding friendships, experiencing involvement in the activities and ministries of the church was very important to one of the women. She shared, “It gave us really good things to do that we felt called into. We became really involved really quickly”. A number of other members mentioned their appreciation for the various Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and small group opportunities they had. One of the younger men explained that the

opportunities to be involved in the church as a teen and young adult were very important in his development.

The church gave me opportunity; gave me opportunities for example to be on the worship team, being a Sunday school teacher, eventually different plays and musicals that the church would do. So it gave me opportunities to stretch myself, to break out of my shell. It was somewhat a safe environment where, you know in high school your peers were so threatening in a sense. I wouldn't ever dream of being in choir or musicals or anything like that because of just the fears and so forth. But in a church environment, with people who are for the most part supporting, encouraging, there were opportunities in a safe environment.

Relationships and fellowship, found within Sunrise Mennonite Church, was a key ingredient of fulfillment for these former members. As these former members continued in their relationship with the church, some of the benefits they counted turned into hindrances and stumbling blocks. For some members who experienced much spiritual growth, their friendships became strained and distant. For others, as they sought greater and deeper involvement in church ministries, they began to experience resistance from the congregation and church leadership. These initial dissatisfactions will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

### Early Dissatisfactions

As mentioned in the previous section, all eight of the former members talked of a significant growing experience while attending Sunrise Mennonite Church. This led to a change in preferences and desires of how they wanted to experience church worship and

ministry. A number of these members started to supplement these needs and desires in readings, seminars, trainings, and worship experiences outside of Sunrise Mennonite Church community. One woman explained what it was like to go to outside sources in search of fulfillment.

I guess for the most part we, what we did was we started going outside of the church to see what else is going on. From the day we started exploring worship, we realized that was the key big missing component (at Sunrise). And as we started to learn more and more about what other churches were doing and different organizations were doing and seeing how effective it was, then it became more and more frustrating to go back and do the same old same old.

A younger woman had very similar experience.

There was a time after being there awhile, that I had a desire for a deeper prayer and worship life, and that need wasn't being met within the Sunday morning events. I went to other events and groups of the church and sometimes even larger denominational meetings that met those needs.

After about 15 years at the church, one man felt a strong shift of his priorities and a calling from God to reach out to the community. He was discouraged when the church as a whole, didn't share his passion.

I felt we should have been more geared towards reaching people outside the church. Just doing things more like that. And from my perspective that was definitely not where the church was headed. That was not the number one priority. It wasn't even the number two or three priority. So that was disappointing and frustrating.

I don't think the church was really changing. We were just starting to see more of a need for that. And I guess I felt that the church talked about it a lot but when it came time to make some of the changes necessary to facilitate that, to really reach the people that were really unchurched, not just people from other Mennonite churches, that's where it really sort of hit a wall. It just wasn't important enough to change some things that needed to be changed to reach outside of the church. There were other things that were much more important to the church.

A very descriptive account of being challenged to grow in his Christian experience was shared by one of the younger men.

After I was out of college I had an experience where I really had a wakeup call. It's enough of just playing what it means to be a Christian, what you look like on the outside. There's now an issue of integrity and becoming something of substance on the inside. Growing up, as I was exposed to these different opportunities; I would be on the worship team and I would look for people who would say 'Good job!' and all these other kind of things and it really felt good. But it was not a substance thing; it was just a showing that I could play the part. And I remember one night just a sense of wanting to change and become more mature and grow and all those other kind of things.

So I started pursuing more of those kinds of things. I was aware of and involved with some people who were pushing me in the direction I knew I needed to go. They were mentoring me, helping me. There were times when I was reading various books by Christian authors. I would go to various groups who were not in your traditional typical Mennonite church. I saw people in worship settings where

the worship was anything but what you would see at Sunrise; raising of hands, people dancing in the aisles, speaking in tongues, those kinds of things. I was exposed to other things.

As these former members started to change and grow, they began to see the church as more legalistic and less accepting of who and what they desired to be. One woman became very passionate about worship and began to reflect that during the services. She experienced the church reacting to her in a very hurtful way.

We had a really big issue with the worship. Half the congregation wanted to go more contemporary, some wanted a mix, some wanted... you know... I was on the worship team at the time and I was just, I was ridiculed for raising my hands, I was ridiculed for closing my eyes, and it got to the point where I had to step down. I just couldn't... I thought you know what they can't ridicule me when I'm sitting in my bench and worshipping God. And if they want me to do it (continue on the worship team), I'm not going to do it. I'm just not going to help lead worship. The style and method of worship, and the very vocal opinions and debates on the topic definitely affected a number of members. One of the young men became very disgusted with this.

And another thing that frustrated me was, in my mind petty, insignificant things. Like the music has been something that has...It doesn't matter. I didn't care what happened too much with music, whether it's hymns or whether it was... whatever. But it just seemed like there was always tension with little things like that, music, how are we going to play songs in the church, or can we play the guitar. Just things like that. When I went to college and I saw a congregation that just wanted to



worship and didn't care how it was done, you know we can play piano, just piano, we can do whatever. But the most important point is we're worshiping God.

That's not what I saw at Sunrise. I saw people more concerned with the way worship was being done not the fact that worship was being done.

Church leaders were asked what kinds of costs, or disappointments and dissatisfaction, they thought members tolerated and still found fulfillment at church. The former leader stated that, "It seems that most quibbles are over methods and procedures rather than over basic, foundational beliefs. For example a famous one is types of music." It seemed the young man who mentioned being frustrated with "petty, insignificant things" identified with this. A current leader also identified that the worship service bothered some people. He said, "I think there will be continual differences in worship styles, disagreements over that." As he continued to express this idea, it was evident he believed this was truly a dissatisfaction members could endure as he was aware of current members "sacrificing personal preferences for the good of other people's worship experience."

I have decided not to talk about the other "everyday" or "tolerable" dissatisfactions that the leaders mentioned because for the most part, the former members told of these small dissatisfactions evolving into their reasons for leaving. What they were able to tolerate for a while, became too great a burden. While they were satisfied for a time, supplementing their desires for deeper worship experiences and a closer commune with God outside of Sunrise Mennonite Church, they began to long for a church home that would continue to nurture their growth. In the section that follows I will discuss the growing discontent these former members felt within the church and the efforts they made to continue as faithful members.

## Efforts to Stay

Four of the former members had close connection with each other as they had similar passions and appreciation for more contemporary worship and outreach to the community. As their dissatisfaction with the church grew, they worked together to try and form a ministry within the church that would be an outlet for their passions and provide sustenance for their increased spiritual appetites. Their goal was to essentially provide a forum for contemporary worship, open and honest sharing and pouring into each others' lives, and a place that would be welcoming to the surrounding unchurched community.

These members, along with a number of others, established a weekly meeting, including worship and teaching time of a much different style than what occurred on Sunday mornings at Sunrise Mennonite Church. As this ministry evolved, there was a desire to see a second, or alternate, worship service on the weekend at the church. All four of these former members spoke of meeting resistance from the leadership and the congregation as far as establishing a more prominent place for this ministry. This group approached the topic with church leadership over and over again. One man noted that "It was probably three to five years that we were battling". One of the women echoed these sentiments:

Seriously, we were just trying to find a way to make it work. You know we didn't just like one day say 'This really stinks, let's go somewhere else.' A lot of energy went into it. A lot of time went into it. Till we figured it was going to be a slow process and at the end of five years we said 'There's way too much to be done and we're not getting anywhere.' And again after the last couple of meetings we came to realize that there probably never will be a change .... Yet we didn't just one day say 'We're done', it was a good three to five years.

Eventually these members decided enough was enough. But one man illustrated again how slow and deliberate his leaving process was.

I wanted to leave long before we actually left. Actually we had left once, we had gone to Mountain View. And in obedience (to God) we went back. Then we thought ‘Well ok maybe something’s going to change’, but nothing really changed. One of the younger men acknowledged the struggle with the church but felt they were still where God wanted him at that time. He explained, “And we for the longest time felt that God had not released us. He wanted us to be doing the work there.”

In the next section I will present the experiences and events that left no doubt for the former members that it was time to leave Sunrise Mennonite Church in search of a new church home. I will revisit the dissatisfactions that church leaders are aware of and their perceptions of how these effect members and lead them to leave the church. In addition, I will discuss the challenges the church leaders face in trying to maintain unity, vision, and identity in the church.

### When It Was Clearly Time to Leave

For all eight of the former members there came a time when they realized that the personal and spiritual growth they experienced could no longer be accommodated by Sunrise Mennonite Church. For most leaving the church was not a decision they wanted to make, however they knew it would be to their benefit. Some of the former members spoke of being hurt and offended while others observed a growing dissonance between themselves and the church.

For those who were actively seeking to express their growth and passion within Sunrise, they reached a point where the discouragement they encountered was too great. One woman shared of her curiosity of speaking in tongues ever since she was a young girl and witnessed it at a friend's church. She explained how after she had started growing spiritually at Sunrise, she asked the Holy Spirit to allow her this experience, and it happened.

And in sharing it with people at church, they didn't understand. And there I was with a couple of my friends, both that I thought were my close friends, and they just didn't understand where I was coming from. I would never put myself higher than anybody else it's just that I experienced God on a more personal level and that wasn't really happening there with everybody. I would watch preachers on television and think, oh I wish I could be in a church where I could.... But that's how I felt and I couldn't share it with anybody because they thought it was loony.

Meanwhile, four of the former members continued meeting with church leadership concerning expanding their ministry. It was in this venue that several of these former members had experiences that revealed to them that they had to leave. Essentially, they felt betrayed by the leadership. One man explained:

We were having meetings with leadership and we sort of found out we were lied to. I mean point blank, flat out lied to. So, just being run along, I got a really bad taste. You know we said, 'Look if this isn't going to work, tell us now and be up front. Be honest with this.' This is what we want to do and if this isn't going to work here then tell us. "No, no! We want to consider everything", only to find out that it never really was a consideration. We were just being strung along.

A woman involved in these meetings shared:

It's not like we went to leadership and said this is what we want to do. We really felt like God just gave us this burden or whatever you call it, to do this. I remember one meeting we were at with the elders, and they said, 'Well if God gave you the vision, he'll give it to us, and then we'll do it.' You know, God doesn't call everybody to do the same thing.

A young woman who was not from a Mennonite background, but had been a passionate member for over five years, relayed her difficult experiences out of these meetings:

I knew it was time to leave when I felt shunned at some level by some members. I felt that a group of us were being "talked about" but no one was willing to talk to us; people assumed that we were "disgruntled" about a style of worship, but never took the time to really understand our hearts;

I felt like some leadership understood our desires and realized that it may also be the heart of God to pursue what we were requesting, but they were unwilling to pursue it (I assumed it was out of fear of hurting others or doing something that wasn't approved of by the whole congregation); there were congregational meetings that were hurtful and painful when things I hold dear were put down in a very demeaning way, and no one stepped in to stop it; I felt that the leadership allowed the "squeaky wheel" to always win a disagreement and that it was easier for them to stay "status quo" than to push into what the Holy Spirit wanted to do – especially when that went against the opinions of those that have been the "church family" longer than us church grafts.

Leadership and the church decision making process also became a sticking point for one of the young men:

I guess my relationship with the church as a whole, if I was speaking as a whole, I guess I never really knew how Sunrise was going to be. I had these interactions that were very positive interactions with people, with members of this body. But then the body would make decisions and, the body would make decisions that I didn't feel like these individual people who were people that I've talked to, have relationships with, within that body, wouldn't have gone along with that decision. And it was kind of, I began to question why are these decisions being made and who are they've been made by? Because I feel like I had known a lot of people in this body, that they don't like this, but why is this happening? And I kind of felt like there is a silent minority, or not silent, but there was a silent majority, and a loud minority. The minority was controlling everything because they were louder. So looking at the relationship I didn't know what to expect and I didn't feel like I could trust it.

This same man also noticed an absence of openness and honesty, or a willingness to be authentic with one another in both good and bad times. There had been a number of occasions that he was aware of, where other members had shared struggles and failures with the church body, and they had been "struck down" for doing so.

I just thought that Sunrise is more of a family church, not really reaching out to the community, not that there's anything good or bad about that, but that's just how the church was at that time. And I thought, it's in that kind of church where the most important part of being a church like that is really being able to support each other.

You know really ministering to each other's needs. And when I heard about, just story after story of you know, this person sharing something that they're struggling with and it's kind of, everybody is like, 'Oh why are you sharing that?' That really affected me. It was like this is not..., it just doesn't seem healthy, doesn't seem like where I want to be.

This young man brought to light the theme of confusing, contradictory experiences that a number of the former members had. On the one hand, these individuals were able to have meaningful, authentic, and supportive relationships with other members. They were able to grow spiritually within the nurturing environment of the church. However, as a collective group they experienced being ridiculed, felt as if they were marginalized, and when engaged with leadership and the church body, they felt strung along and lied too.

One of the men shared his belief that these dual experiences these members had were due to a lack of unity in the church.

The last couple of weeks we've been visiting other churches and we just sense such a strong atmosphere of unity of purpose at the other churches. But it's just...; you really see that when you can step out of that and step into something where there is unity. There's such disunity at Sunrise.

Another man believed their experiences at Sunrise became more negative as they tried to expand and grow beyond what was acceptable or traditional within the Mennonite denomination. He said, "From our perspective, we were confronting some of the Mennonite stuff and that just really crossed the line."

A lack of strong, clear, and authoritative leadership that could set a vision for the church seemed to be a great disappointment for most of these former members. Just as the

four members felt they were given false hope by the church when trying to establish a contemporary service, a few others felt blindsided by the way the congregation reacted to the pastor's attempt to lead the church in a new way. A female former member who experienced this said,

Well for me, when the pastor's plan for leadership change was challenged, that took me so much by surprise that there are a bunch of people at Sunrise that just have this profound disrespect for authority of any kind. It was just kind of like opening up our eyes, like we couldn't believe that we had been in this church for almost seven years and didn't realize that a lot of people really don't recognize any authority that the pastor has; he's just one of us. And that's not what we wanted to be a part of. We feel like the pastor is a leader you know, he's given to us by God. And if he has a vision for something we need to trust him, you know fall in behind him. And you know, (long sigh), the pastor has been given a lot of problems trying to reach out to the community, and things weren't really happening. Things are going really slow. But it became brutally obvious that if things stayed the way they were, there was nothing going to happen in our lifetime.

One of the men had a clear vision and desire for the church at Sunrise to reach out to the community, especially to the unchurched. The fact that Sunrise could not ever fully embrace that and share the same vision was difficult to accept.

There are churches out there that are really growing that are not just stealing people from other churches. They're really getting people that have never set foot in other churches, teaching them about Jesus, changing people's lives. That has really been



my heart's desire and I have that vision for Sunrise, that Sunrise would be able to do that. But it became clear to us that it was not going to happen anytime soon.

After investing significant time, energy, and passion into the church at Sunrise, the frustrations and lack of fulfillment there caused the eight former members to seek a new church home. These were dedicated, active, and committed Christians whose absence would surely impact the community of Sunrise Mennonite Church. I wanted to hear what the church leadership thought and felt about members leaving, and to explore if and how their concerns paralleled those of the former members.

One of my first questions for the church leaders was what kinds of dissatisfactions can and do members tolerate, while maintaining healthy church involvement. The leaders were quick to acknowledge the history and environment of the church regarding decision making and establishing church policy. Over the years, Sunrise Mennonite Church has had many congregational meetings, heard many opinions, and witnessed many debates over issues such as building expansion, establishment of new ministries, and style of worship. Because Sunrise has operated like this for so long, many members have in fact endured this. Speaking on the subject of reaching agreement and unity as a congregation, a current leader said,

I just think it's difficult whenever you attempt to come up with any kind of church statement regarding visions, goals, who we are, identity all that kind of thing. I think it's next to impossible to get everybody on board and agree on everything in there because there's a lot of diversity. It's difficult, the more specific you make any statements about who you are in a church, the more chance there is that certain people are going to disagree with something.

Another current leader explained why this internal struggle might exist at Sunrise and the Mennonite denomination as a whole:

In Mennonite churches I think the cost of flexibility is a big cost. There is a tendency in Mennonite churches to have a bias toward conformity in specific areas that are considered to be fundamental to the Mennonite identity. At the same time there's a conflict, that I believe began in the sixties, in which diversity became a very strong core value. So I think there's a real tension between these two things. On the one hand people want to be allowed to do what they want to do, they want diversity, they want to experience a variety of different kinds of things and worship in other ways. At the same time they still feel the strong desire to conform to a specific set of doctrines and practices that help them to know that they're Mennonite as opposed to some other denominational group. And I think this tension is extremely difficult to balance in Mennonite churches. And because of it I think there's a lot of struggle across the Mennonite church.

From what the former members described, this struggle in the church was not simply the clashing of two concepts, flexibility or diversity and conformity, but a clash between the groups of members who championed those concepts. Listening to the language used to describe their experiences told how these members felt that they were on the other side of the fence, so to speak, of how the church wanted to be. A young woman said, "I felt that there were some members who didn't consider me 'as important' because I wasn't born in to the denomination. A middle aged woman shared how others reacted to her style of worship, "I was ridiculed for raising my hands. I was ridiculed for closing my eyes." One of the young men described, "I kind of felt like there was a silent majority and a loud

minority. The minority was controlling everything (in the church) because they were louder.”

Church leaders also acknowledged that within these decision-making processes, as well as everyday church life, communication between members can become unhealthy. One current leader stated,

There are always going to be communication problems in the church. Whether it is people are not heard or people are misheard. There are breakdowns in communications. Always causing problems...

Another current leader agreed that “They’re always going to be people who rub you wrong in church. There are going to be personalities that rub people wrong.” The former leader said, “I’ve noticed that one person can drive someone away by unkind statements.”

An interesting idea was suggested by one of the current leaders when she said, I think people sacrifice things that are unnecessary and I think an example of that is that people might show calling to a specific ministry and they think, ‘Well we can’t do this because the other side of whatever, you know, won’t like it or support it.’ So people sacrifice because they’re afraid of what other people will think. And as a leader I want to empower people to do things. If God’s calling you to do something, then do it. We don’t have that... You know we can’t make people do things that they want to do. And sometimes we can’t even encourage them to the point that they can get past their own fears of that.

This could very well be a valid point that is true for some current members. Those former members that I spoke to were very clear about their efforts to incorporate their vision and

passion in any way the church would allow. One of the men involved in trying to start a contemporary service added,

We were meeting regularly with leadership to see if we couldn't come up with some amicable solution. If they wanted to continue down that road, that's fine, but is there some way that we can start looking down a new road and start drawing people in.

The church leaders were also asked for their thoughts on the costs and burdens of members that were too great and lead them to leave. A theme that each leader suggested in some form was that members no longer felt valued, accepted, supported, and most importantly did not have significance in the church body. This theme was explained very well by one of the current leaders.

Well, my experience here at Sunrise is that the vast majority of people who have left over the years have left because they felt that they have not been valued on some level: valued in ministry, valued as a person, valued in terms of the views they represent. Just being valued.

This leader continued by describing the cost that is too high for members to continue at Sunrise.

Well I think there's a price that is too high. And the price is the price of being ineffective. People in the congregation, I think all of us, need to feel that we have some kind of positive impact in our community as well as in our congregation. And the church has, is helpful to you only to a point where you're able to say yes to those things; Yes, I feel like, first I am part of the community. Secondly, I feel accepted, valued. So significance is a key issue. Do I feel significant? If I don't

feel significant, then I need to go somewhere where I am. Will I be significant in this place? And I think that's a very common value, core value that should be talked about somewhere.

The former members and the former and current church leaders clearly identified similar challenges to maintaining healthy membership at Sunrise Mennonite Church. Both groups described a church culture where it is difficult to make decisions and affect change. A side effect of this is frequent debate, causing divisions to arise in the church. In this process, people are often hurt or feel marginalized and unappreciated. After this occurs it is difficult for these people to feel they can continue to grow and be nurtured in the church and they do not feel free or able, to be involved in ministries about which they are passionate.

In the following section I will discuss the challenges the church leaders experience in trying to maintain a healthy environment for church members, while also trying to create an environment that is open for growth and outreach. Also included will be additional observations made by the former members. Even though they are gone, most of these former members have a deep desire to see Sunrise Mennonite Church have a future that includes unity, clear vision, and a passion to grow and reach into the community.

### The Challenges of the Church

Throughout the interview process, several of the former members made it clear they still cared very much for the Sunrise Mennonite Church. Many did not want to leave and made significant efforts to find fulfillment there. Some of the members that had left a number of years ago shared some observations of the church as well as visions of what

they hoped could one day happen at Sunrise. The leaders also opened up about their frustrations of seeing members leave, the reasons for this happening, and the obstacles they face in trying lead and care for the church.

In reflecting on their time at Sunrise, a number of the members shared their view that the conflict and struggles in the church were due to difficulty balancing the tradition and values of the Mennonite denomination with the growth and passions of some of the members. One of the former members was very blunt and said, “At Sunrise things are just... being Mennonite is more important than reaching out to the community.” Another member expressed similar frustration with church getting caught up in denominational issues. He said, “Traditions are good but they can become something unhealthy if that’s what you’re pursuing.” This same member continued to share after the formal interview was over. He shared that he believes that at Sunrise, “maintaining the status quo is above all else”. He went on to describe that he believes “the downfall of experiencing change and growth at Sunrise is the reliance on the democratic process and not on what God wants done.”

These former members did not lose respect or appreciation for the Mennonite denomination; there was simply a desire to grow as a church body, become something more, and to reach out to a broader community. One of the young men born into the church shared his thoughts of the struggle within the church to be more evangelical while still being a traditional Mennonite church:

I felt like sometimes there were people within this church that wanted to keep it just a religious church. They just want the Sunday service, and there would be other people that had this vision of what Sunrise Mennonite could be. But because there

were certain people that were drawn to that church because it was a Mennonite church -- it was denominational, my family has always gone here. The church didn't want to offend certain people because it was a family church, that families have gone here for generations or whatever, and I'm really not referring to anyone in particular. I just got a sense that we don't want to offend anybody. I think because it was a denominational church they wanted to be very delicate with the families that had been there for awhile. Not taking any risks ... they didn't want to do things like that.

The former leader shared how he witnessed a change in the make-up of the church that likely explains some of the conflict and debate in the congregation. He said,

When I first came to Sunrise, I soon recognized that the personality of the congregation was largely formed by the dominant families here. Not on purpose, but it can work that way. As the group became more diversified the "who we are" began to change because a wider group of people helped to form the congregation.

One of the current leaders was very animated in sharing about the current state of discord in the church. She said,

People don't really talk to each other effectively to resolve things. They don't talk to the person they're having the problem with. You know leaders so easily get triangled into things that are basically gossip. If it comes to us third hand, it's gossip. And people expect us to do something about it. Are we supposed to do something about gossip? So you kind of know that there's something out there that needs to be dealt with, but we're not in a healthy position to deal with it. Aside from prayer, there's not too much we can do, other than try to teach people to think

differently about conflicts and differences and try to help people learn how to communicate better.

Two leaders mentioned the task of fostering a healthier environment. One current leader said that from her experience, when people are affirmed, equipped, and involved in the church, differences will dissolve and church unity will increase. Another current leader said,

So for leadership we need to be training and equipping our primary leadership not only in the skills of relationship building but also in the skills of completion of tasks; getting people motivated to do the work of the church.

I can't help but wonder about the eight former members I spoke to, and how motivated they were to do the work of the church. It was obvious they wanted to stay at Sunrise if they could find a common ground with the leadership and the congregation. What is not clear is to what degree the church body wanted to incorporate these members and what changes or growth the church wanted to experience. Perhaps the church needs to discover healthier ways to help these types of members move on in a more healthy way.

### The Experience of Leaving

In order to complete the cost-benefits analysis of the relationship with the church, I asked the former members what it was like to have left and how it impacted their lives. As was discussed in previous sections, these former members were very connected to and invested in Sunrise Mennonite Church. Deep and intimate friendships were formed, and though some of these became strained, this made leaving more difficult. For the two young men who were born in the church, their leaving coincided with going away to



college and learning to appreciate different things than Sunrise offered or allowed. The remaining members experienced a significant period of time where they tried to work on the relationship with the church before deciding to leave.

At the time they were interviewed, two of the former members had left the church only one month earlier. They were still experiencing the withdrawal from the church community. One of the women described what it was like to make her decision public.

To walk away from Sunrise has totally broken my heart. But what we determined we should do is just stand up in church sometime and tell people what we were leaving. And I just basically cried for two hours. It is really strange to think, well I don't have a church family right now. And I know we still do because I know they still love us but yeah, it's kind of weird to be in between.

The other member who left just recently was making an intentional effort to leave the physical church and its teaching but not the community of friends. He said,

To say that I made that separation is kind of misleading because the separation that I made was with, I guess with the Mennonite teaching more so than a lot of people, because I still consider many of the people very close friends and I want to maintain those friendships with.

Two other former members who left years ago had to mourn the loss of their friendships at Sunrise. The one former member shared, "We pretty much lost all our friends. We still say "Hi, how're you doing" and that type of thing. But there's just not that close friendship that was once there." The other member was hit hard by the loss of her friendships that occurred in the leaving process. She said,

It was hardest for me to go because I'm a quiet person. To start over in such a huge church... And I remember one day, I used to work from home, I was crying and praying saying, "I lost all my friends. I need friends."

Another younger woman who left the church tried to keep the losses she experienced in leaving Sunrise in perspective. She said,

I lost some friends that I wish I wouldn't have. I know some people would say that there was no need to lose those connections, but I couldn't keep in touch with them without hearing how the old church was doing, and that was just too painful early on. It brought up too many negative memories and actually felt like gossip. Many of our friends from the old church were very active members, so it was almost impossible to talk to them without bringing up church issues, and those painful feelings were just too fresh.

Despite the pain of friendships lost, all of the former members expressed that their leaving Sunrise Mennonite has been for the best, and in many ways their lives have been blessed. One former member expressed that upon leaving and finding a new church home they experienced great benefits in many areas of their lives. He said,

Spiritually, we are now doing exactly what we wanted to do and then some.

So we're very much involved, were seeing it happen in our community. Spiritually we have learned more than we thought we could learn. Just even understanding better how things work in our spiritual life.

We have friends now that we're closer to than we were at Sunrise. So socially it's been great. Materialistically, you know I was going to lose my job a while back, and instead of saying, 'Well, will pray for you', they spoke into my life like I

already had a better job. You know, it's going to happen, blah, blah, blah. And it happened just like that! So you know we've been blessed in almost any way you can possibly think of.

Another member echoed the fact that her life too was greatly blessed by leaving Sunrise, though she still expressed fondness for that church community. She said, "God has just opened doors for everything that we wanted to do at Sunrise and I would've been very happy to do all of that at Sunrise." One of the young men who spent significant time trying to incorporate his passions at Sunrise, shared what it was like when he finally left.

So it was real difficult when the time finally came, but there was also somewhat of a sense of relief because now we're released and can pursue whatever it is. Now we are free to do whatever it is but we don't have an environment to do it.

Fortunately it didn't take too long that we got settled into where we are now. And we couldn't be happier with where we are now. In a sense it removed restraints.

This member also shared what he saw happen in another young man who left. He said,

And I remember one of the people who was leading worship (at Sunrise) at one point, musically, with his ability to lead worship and so forth; I sensed he was just an eagle in a parakeet cage. You know he had no room to move around. And I especially saw it on Sunday mornings. An eagle is meant to have its wings spread and soar in the skies and so forth. But here (at Sunrise) he was restrained, limited to what he could and couldn't do. You know I was seeing through (the contemporary service) and other things, ways that he was maturing, growing, and things like that. But yet there was the restraint.

The former members described their experience leaving the church as a difficult decision to make because they knew there would be costs. These costs were exhibited as hurt feelings and lost friendships that couldn't be maintained when they left the Sunrise Mennonite Church community. These costs were soon outweighed however, by the new benefits these members experienced in their new church home. The former members still have great appreciation for Sunrise Mennonite Church and hope that those members they left behind can experience the joy they have found.

### Summary

The purpose of these research interviews has been to better understand the relationship a person has with his/her church community. More specifically, how the costs and benefits experienced over time affect the decision to remain at the church, or seek greater fulfillment elsewhere. A phenomenological approach allowed for the description of how individual members experienced their relationships over time. Social exchange theory helped to frame these experiences by highlighting the events and changes that made the relationships less beneficial and more costly, causing the members to leave the church.

In exploring the relationships of the former members with the Sunrise Mennonite Church, a very noticeable change happened across a period of time. All of the members reported great attraction to and appreciation for Sunrise Mennonite Church. Significant growth occurred in these members' lives during their time at the church. In every story of those interviewed, the costs began to outweigh the benefits of attending Sunrise, after this growth experience. These members found it difficult, frustrating, and even hurtful as they tried to incorporate their new growth and passion into the church. They had been nurtured

and supported within a denominational church setting, but their growth exceeded what that traditional setting provided for. The church leaders seemed to struggle as well in trying to involve these members, but at one point in a final meeting specifically told a few of the members that they were “released” to go elsewhere to explore their passions.

Though leaving was a long and unpleasant process for these former members, and there were consequences or costs to leaving the Sunrise church community, there were no regrets expressed. There were initial losses of friendships, hurt feelings, and loneliness, but upon getting established in a new church home where they found fulfillment, these individuals’ lives were greatly blessed. These former members continue to have both great concern and great hope for those still at Sunrise Mennonite Church. These former members are well aware of friends and other current members who are still in the process of weighing the costs and benefits of continuing at Sunrise. As one of the women who left a number of years ago said,

My heart breaks for those who are going through this now at Sunrise. We know how hard it is to leave a place but if you want to grow and if God’s calling you out...

## Chapter V: Discussion

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of church members who left their church and understand what happened to their relationship with the church over time. In focusing on these relationships with the church, specific attention was given to analyzing the costs and benefits of maintaining church membership. A qualitative research method was used to gather rich and detailed information through personal interviews. Eight former church members shared their experiences in the church and described the events and occurrences that led them to leave. Four church leaders were interviewed as well for their perspective on the issue.

Through the framework of the social exchange theory, I was able to understand these individuals' relationships with the church and highlight what made the relationships strong and rewarding, as well as what made them frustrating and costly. A phenomenological approach gave voice to the lived experience other researchers have explored in surveys and other studies that document trends but not the human experience. Hearing the perspectives of leaders and former members from only one church allowed for a clear understanding of the relationship dynamics of church membership. The leaders interviewed served overlapping terms across more than 25 years and the former members interviewed left over a period of ten years. This span of time also helped reveal patterns of relationships and the lived experiences that have existed at this church, highlighting any changes or lack of changes. Most importantly, the implications of this study are predominantly for church and denominational leaders. The study of one church provides a

case study and a clear example of the impact a church-church member relationship has on one's life.

### Integrations of Findings with Previously Published Research

There are two predominant themes that help to explain leaving the church, as found in the previously published research. First is the theme of the various occurrences of change, from large scale societal changes to personal growth and life decisions. The second is the relational aspects affecting church membership satisfaction, such as the number and quality of church friendships, positive versus negative interactions in the church, and feelings of being listened too, valued, and appreciated. These themes were quite evident in the current research findings and will be integrated with the earlier research.

The ease of bonding with other members and forming close friendships within the church served to both attract the current participants to Sunrise Mennonite Church and to maintain a level of satisfaction and fulfillment with the church. This is consistent with the research of Olson (1989) who reported that having more close friendships in the church leads to greater satisfaction with the church. Olson also found church friendships help prevent members from leaving. While friendships did not keep the current participants from leaving, the fact that their relationships at Sunrise Mennonite Church were so meaningful made it difficult for them to leave.

A number of the participants experienced various instances of negative interaction with other members and church leaders. In some cases this began a deterioration of their church friendships, and for others this caused hurt, anger, and frustration that eventually

spread to their relationship with the church as a whole. Krause et al. (1998) referred to a growing body of literature that suggested that negative interactions may have a greater effect on psychological well-being than the benefits of a healthy, supportive social network. While none of the participants said negative interactions were the sole reason they left, several members did express feeling marginalized, put off, and even lied to. The effects of the negative interaction certainly led to feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment.

Religious capital played an important role in attracting the participants and maintaining satisfaction at Sunrise Mennonite Church. Iannaccone (1990) described religious capital as the appreciation one has for their church's teachings, doctrines, traditions, and members. Iannaccone explained that religious capital is both a prerequisite and a consequence of religious participation. Therefore, religious capital enables one to increase their satisfaction as they participate in the programs and ministries of the church. This principle was reinforced by findings of the current study. Not only did the church leaders at Sunrise list involvement and feeling used by God to benefit others as benefits of church membership, but several members also spoke of the importance of being participants and leaders in various church activities. This was so important in fact, that when the participants were unable to incorporate their new passions into the church, it set the stage for their greatest frustrations with the church and initiated the leaving process.

Iannaccone's (1990) application of religious capital seems to fit well with the theory of social exchange. When the former members were exposed to new and different ministries, teaching, and worship styles, things that competed with what they were used to, their relationship with the Sunrise church became unstable and unsatisfactory. These



individuals experienced a decreasing of their religious capital at Sunrise Mennonite Church. When they were unable to resolve this, they fully embraced their new passions and preferences and sought a fulfilling relationship with a new church.

The former Sunrise Mennonite Church members interviewed in the current study all spoke of experiencing change in their lives. In the literature, the concept of change, in a variety of forms, was a significant factor in explaining members leaving the church. A very common theory used to explain shrinking church populations, especially in Europe, is the incredible advancement and modernization of society, especially in the areas of urbanization, technology, and education. The effect of this modernization is that people are provided more control of their life, more choices and options for meeting their needs and desires, which results in fewer people choosing organized religion. Though two Dutch studies found conflicting results for the effect of education level on church leaving (Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001, Need & de Graaf, 1996), Grotenhuis and Sheepers found that urbanization and more frequent intermarrying with non-Christians leads to more people leaving the church.

Cultural changes did not directly lead the Sunrise members to leave, but it seemed that their acknowledgement of these changes and a desire for the church to adjust its mission was at the root of their increasing frustration. Four of these former members spoke specifically of wanting to change, or incorporate a level of change, in the style of teaching and worship in order to become more relevant to the non-Christians, as well as others who may be unfamiliar with Mennonite tradition, in the surrounding community. The others also spoke of growing to appreciate a different style of worship that was not available or possible at Sunrise.

The change in the preferences of these former members was brought about by the social mobility of modern society. All eight of these former members had either recently spent time away at college, or had begun to supplement their faith and worship experiences with services, studies, trainings, and materials that were outside of the Sunrise community, and in numerous instances outside of the Mennonite denomination. As Sherkat and Wilson (1995) explained, social mobility often serves to change people's preferences because they are exposed to new and different patterns of use and consumption of things such as material goods, services, and entertainment. People's religious or faith preferences could change as well when they visit other churches, read religious books from various perspectives, or are exposed to different styles of worship and music from television, radio, or personal audio and video purchases.

In addition to the change in their preferences, the former Sunrise members all spoke of experiencing significant personal and spiritual growth. The combination of these two resulted in goals, passions, and a sense of calling from God that made it increasingly difficult for these individuals to assimilate into the Sunrise church community. In trying to work through this conflict of ideals, a series of events and experiences hurt the relationships these former members had with the church.

McNaughton (2002) and Hendricks (1993) both interviewed individuals who left their churches and the findings of the current research are supported by both of these. A significant number of participants in McNaughton's study were dissatisfied with aspects of their church's operations or ministries and made efforts to work with church leaders to incorporate their vision. Some of the former Sunrise members in the current study were in much the same situation. Disillusionment with the church developed when church leaders

did not support their views and they felt they had lost much of the support and care they once had from other church members. Some of the participants in the Hendricks study also reported significant conflict with those in their church.

The members who left Sunrise Mennonite Church also described what they desired in their church experience along with reasons why they left. These desires were consistent with what participants in Hendricks's study said they wanted. First, both groups longed for a church that was not so legalistic or so focused on maintaining the status quo and tradition of the denomination. They wished to see a church body that could meet together with authenticity and honesty and have the freedom to be real with each other about their struggles and not just their successes. They wanted to be part of a church that was following the call of God and not what they perceived as human ambition.

Previous research and the current study findings have shown the importance of having close friendships and positive interactions within the church for maintaining a fulfilling church membership. As church members experience change, within their own lives and in the surrounding community, the church's ability to manage and incorporate these changes strongly affects church members' satisfaction. If a church does not recognize or respond to members' spiritual growth or change in preferences, these members will become increasingly frustrated and disillusioned. The relationship with the church as a whole begins to deteriorate, and the members begin the process of evaluating the costs and benefits of maintaining their church membership. When these costs are indeed too great, these members move on in search of a place where they can find fulfillment for their new passions and preferences. In conclusion, I have identified a

pattern in the stages of disillusionment that was experienced by the former members of Sunrise Mennonite Church, which I called the Life Cycle of Disillusionment.

1. A time of personal and spiritual growth
2. Exposure to new and different styles of worship, teaching, and ministry
3. Frustration and inability to incorporate new passions and preferences into the church
4. Restraint due to the limits of denominational tradition
5. Negative interactions and damaged friendships
6. Ultimately, the former members either experienced a sense of being released from the church by God and/or church leaders, or they made the decision to leave for their own fulfillment

#### Limitations and Topics for Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on a small number of leaders and former members of one congregation. The participants in this research study all had significant history and involvement in the church. They were active members who had intimate and supportive relationships with other members in the church. The experiences they had leading up to leaving the church would most likely differ with those who leave because they were disinterested and uninvolved in the church. These members are also probably more apt to discontinue attending church altogether, rather than seek a more fulfilling church home. Future research would benefit from comparing the experiences of these two types of former church members.

It should also be noted that those who participated in this study agreed to talk about their experiences, while three others declined. These three who declined may have experienced leaving the church in a different way. In addition, of the eight former members interviewed, three married couples were included. One couple married only after leaving the church, but it must be considered at least for the other two couples, that the experiences they shared of leaving the church were perhaps a shared experience rather than that of two individuals.

Another significant limitation of this study is that only one congregation and one denomination were studied. Protestant denominations vary in their histories, values, and doctrines, while local congregations can have even greater variation. Studies similar to the current model across a wider sampling of churches and denominations would serve to create a more detailed and comprehensive description of the experiences of those who choose to leave their churches.

Studying only one congregation also limited this study demographically. The demographics of the Sunrise community and surrounding areas include a mostly white, middle class population in a rural-suburban region. It is a church community that continues to be made up of families who have been there for generations. Future research should be sure to not only include additional churches and denominations, but also different demographics regions of the country.

### Clinical Implications

It is always beneficial for clinicians to know as much about their clients' life situation as possible. Previous research has shown that church membership holds many

benefits for a person's well-being and that if a person experiences any kind of frustration or disruption in this relationship there could be significant effects on one's psychological well-being. When one has been a committed member of a church for long time, making the decision to leave the church community, and all the relationships and experiences that have been a part of it, can be a stressful and upsetting time.

The former church members in the current study shared their feelings of sadness and loneliness in the time immediately after leaving Sunrise Mennonite Church. Leaving the church was not something any of them wanted to do. Making the decision and being in the process of leaving can be a time marked by stress and anxiety. For many church members, the church community is at the core of their support system and understanding the impact that a lost or damaged relationship with a church can have will help clinicians provide the support one needs under these circumstances.

#### Implications for Church and Denominational Leaders

Most of the implications of this study affect leaders in the church as well as those leaders in positions that direct entire denominations or conferences of churches. The members who left Sunrise Mennonite Church were all passionate and committed members who did not want to leave the church. Instead, they had a strong desire to see the church grow and appeal to the non-Christians in the surrounding community. Their reasons for leaving the church are the same as their beliefs of why the Sunrise Mennonite Church is not a growing one and has instead lost numerous members over the years.

All of the former Sunrise members interviewed were either born into the Mennonite denomination, had attended other Mennonite churches before Sunrise, or had

spent at least seven years at the Sunrise church. While they spoke of appreciation and respect for most of the traditions and teachings of the Mennonite denomination, over the course of their relationship with the church their spiritual growth and relationship with God led them to believe that the church needed to be more accessible to the community and outreach-oriented. In order for this to happen, some of the traditional Mennonite practices would have to be altered. After realizing that Sunrise was not interested in compromising its denominational identity for this cause they made their decision to leave.

Reggie McNeal (2003), a director of church leadership development for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, suggested that the Church in North America has been unable to grasp how the world has changed in the last fifty years. He shared his belief that the North American Church “may have saturated the market of people who want to be part of the church culture, who want church the way we do it” (p. 10). McNeal described the non-Christians’ view of the church as a country club where religious people celebrate their traditions and hang out with others who share their views, opinions, and interests. This was much the same concern held by the former Sunrise members.

The findings of the current study and the statements of Reggie McNeal suggest that in order for traditional, denominational churches to grow and impact the community, and perhaps even to survive, church leaders have important decisions to make. They must determine how, or if, they can continue to operate using the long-standing practices and tenets of their denomination and/or church history, if that is indeed preventing them from impacting and reaching out to the community around them. The demographics surrounding a church would certainly play a role in this consideration. For instance, the mainline Protestant churches in the Northeast, where significant population has been lost,

may find it necessary to make changes in order to continue attracting people in the community or be forced to close down.

Neither McNeal nor the former Sunrise members believe that the church is consciously turning away from or neglecting the community. Instead the church is becoming disconnected from the larger culture that surrounds it and has lost its influence. McNeal (2003) explains, “[The church] has lost its influence because it has lost its identity. It has lost its identity because it has lost its mission” (p. 18). The members at Sunrise Mennonite Church left because they felt the mission there was largely focused on maintaining Mennonite tradition rather than reaching out and influencing the local community for Christ. McNeal’s suggestion to the denominational churches he consults with is this:

The appropriate response to the emerging world is a rebooting of the mission, a radical obedience to an ancient command, a loss of self rather than self-preoccupation, concern about service and sacrifice rather than concern about style (p.18).

Of course churches such as Sunrise may decide they do not want to want to relinquish or change any part of their denominational identity or history. Regardless of the direction a church decides to go, the church leaders need to make clear to its members what type of church they intend on being. As the greater culture continues to change, church members, and their religious preferences are likely to be affected. Traditional denominational churches will likely continue to experience members who have a desire to go beyond the confines of the church identity.



Church leaders need to respond to these members in a timely and responsible way. This might mean helping these members realize it would be best if they found a new church community where they can incorporate their preferences, or the church leaders may need to decide how they can make room for these changes in their own church. Whatever the conclusion, it should be imperative for church leaders to prevent an extended period of frustration and disillusionment, especially in people who have a strong desire to live out their faith and be active church members.

### Personal Reflections

If not for the circumstances of getting married and moving away from the Sunrise community, I too might have been confronted with having to weigh the costs and benefits of continuing as a church member. Simply talking to those who had to live out and process that decision to leave the church weighed heavily on my heart and mind. Less than two months after completing the research interviews, and as I am now writing this, I have become aware of another group of members at Sunrise Mennonite Church who are seriously preparing themselves to make the decision to leave. Some of these members have spent up to 60 years of their life in this church! The number of members who have left, especially in the last year, is beginning to have a significant impact on the church with potentially long-term effects. It has become obvious how difficult it is for the church leaders to find a way to balance the Mennonite denominational doctrine, teachings, and traditions with the desire of an increasing portion of members to experience some level of growth or change not provided for in the traditional Mennonite context.

At the start of this project I wondered what it might look like, for a church such as Sunrise, to maintain much of its denominational identity and yet be a relevant and influential church to the non-Christian population surrounding it. Non-denominational churches, and those that market themselves as such, are free of this challenge. In many ways this challenge seems like a burden. It is a burden that is divisive, that causes frustration and disillusionment, spoils friendships, and ultimately derails the mission of the church.

Today I still wonder how a traditional denominational church can adapt and become a thriving, growing church that passionately serves and cares for those in the surrounding community. I am sure it is possible, but from studying the church at Sunrise, it appears to be very costly. It has been costly in terms of time, strained relationships, and now lost members. It has brought great anxiety to those who maintain their membership. It is an anxiety that I have grown all too familiar with. I have a great appreciation for my Mennonite heritage and the foundation it has been for my life. However, in spending eight years in the presence of other faith perspectives, I have developed new preferences for living out my faith and for my church experience. I am grateful that I am not in the position of having to decide between my new preferences and wanting to continue as a member at Sunrise Mennonite Church. I have great empathy for both the members and the leaders and hope that someday soon, that instead of people struggling with the decision to leave, there will be people who are excited to be making the decision to join.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Email and Telephone Script for Contacting Potential Participants**

Hello,

My name is Ryan Ehst and I am conducting a master's thesis study looking at the relationship an individual has with their church and how that relationship changes as they make the decision to leave the church. This study is associated with Virginia Polytechnic and State University and in no way connected to the church. Information gathered from this study will be used to better understand how one's relationship with a church community affects one's life and how the decision to leave a church is experienced.

I am aware that you have left the local church and am interested in hearing your experiences. Please let me know if you would be interested in participating in this study. Prior to being interviewed you must go through a consent process that will only take a few minutes. You will be informed of your rights as a participant, as well as receive further details of the study.

Sincerely,

K. Ryan Ehst



## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

**Project title:** When to Stay, When to Go: A Cost-Benefits Analysis of Church Membership and Attendance

**Researchers:** K. Ryan Ehst, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Eric E. McCollum, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship a person has with their church, especially when deciding to leave the church.

**What will I be asked to do?** Your only commitment is to participate in an interview at a mutually agreed upon time and place, or over the phone if necessary. This should last less than one hour. During the interview you will be asked about your relationship with your church and how that relationship came to the point where you decided to leave. If you are a church leader, you will be asked to comment on the church's relationship with those who have left and on how the church should be in relationship with those who attend. This interview will be audio-taped to make sure I know exactly what is said. After completing your interview you will be contacted and given the chance to read through the transcript of your interview and make any corrections necessary.

**Are there any risks to me?** I anticipate that there will be minimal risk to you as a result of participating in this study. I ensure that your information will be kept confidential. In an effort to really understand all the components of your experience, the interview may include some questions around emotional issues; however, you may decline to answer any question at any time.

**Are there benefits to me?** As a result of participating in this study you may feel empowered and satisfied because you have contributed to a study that may benefit other church members and leaders. The study may also provide important insight to mental health professionals, demonstrating how a church relationship impacts one's life.

**Are my responses confidential?** Every effort will be made to keep all information you provide in the strictest confidence. Any specific identifying information will be omitted from your transcript. Pseudonyms will be used. Your responses will be kept locked for the duration of the project and access will only be allowed to the researcher. Your name and any other identifying information will not be reported in any publications or presentations, and audio tapes will be destroyed. Once the data collection is complete and interviews are transcribed, a copy of your interview will be sent to you via e-mail. If there are any portions of the interview you wish to change in order to protect your confidentiality, you may do so and send it back to the researcher by the date designated in the e-mail. You may also highlight any portion of your transcription that you do not wish

to be quoted later when the research project data analysis is reported. These highlights can be sent back to the researcher via e-mail as well. If you do not respond to the interview transcription e-mail by the designated date, the researcher will assume that you do not wish to make any changes.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?** There will be no compensation for your participation in this study.

**Do I have the freedom to withdraw?** You have the right to refuse to participate in the study. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions and you may drop out at anytime.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact:

K. Ryan Ehst, Principal Researcher  
703-250-8319, [rehst@hotmail.com](mailto:rehst@hotmail.com)

Eric E. McCollum, Ph.D. LCSW LMFT, Committee Chair  
703-538-8470, [emccollu@vt.edu](mailto:emccollu@vt.edu)

Dr. David Moore, IRB Chair  
540-231-4991, [moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu)

### **Participant's Permission**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I have read and understood the Informed Consent and the conditions of this project. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my consent for participation in this project by signing my name on the line below. I realize that although I choose to participate right now, I have the right to withdraw from this study at anytime without penalty.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Sample Interview Questions for Members/Attendees

#### Opening Statement/Explanation

I would like to talk to you about your relationship with your local church community. In thinking about relationships in general, from romantic relationships to friendships to work relationships, the more we get out of them, the more we are likely to invest in them and continue in them. Similarly, if a relationship is no longer fulfilling, be it a dating partner or an employer, one can choose to end the relationship.

With the questions that follow, try to think of your time at your church as a relationship. Consider such things as what first attracted you, what kept you in the relationship, and eventually what lead you to end the relationship. I will be mentioning “costs” and “benefits” that come with this relationship. The “costs” would be the negatives, the parts of the relationship you dislike and may cause you distress, disappointment, or to spend unwanted time and energy. The “benefits” would be the parts you enjoy, are rewarding, and make church attendance or membership worthwhile.

#### Demographic Survey

Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

1. Were you born into the church?
  - 1A. At what age did you join, or start attending?
2. How long was your attendance at your church?
3. How long has it been since you left?
4. How would you describe your current church involvement?
  - A. Have a new church home
  - B. Looking for a church home
  - C. Not involved or looking for a church right now

### Open Ended Questions (Members/Attendees)

- 1A. What are some of the first things you appreciated at your church that made you glad to attend there or drew you to become a member there?
- 1B. Since you grew up going to church with your family, did you reach a time when going to church was something you wanted and desired for yourself, or were you at least getting something out of going to church?
  - a) At what age or life stage was this?
  - b) What was the first thing you remember appreciating from your church attendance?
  - c) If you can't name specific things you appreciated or valued, what do you think kept you attending on a regular basis?
2. Thinking about your entire time at the church, in what other ways did you benefit from being a member or regular attendee at the church? They may be physical, social, emotional, spiritual, or other.
  - a) Can you tell me about any needs that were met by your involvement in church?
  - b) Did you ever feel that attending church helped prevent you from experiencing any negative consequences or reactions? Tell me about them.
3. Before you began to consider leaving the church, what were some of the dissatisfactions or disappointments you felt with the church? i.e. unmet needs, relationship issues, expectations, hurts, etc.,
4. Tell me about the time when it became clear to you that the costs of being a part of the church were becoming greater than the benefits.  
Or, perhaps you experienced a diminishing of the benefits you once had. If so how did you experience this?
5. Were there other events or changes in your life that were happening at the same time as your deciding to leave?
  - a) How did this affect you in your relationship with the church?
  - b) How did the church's reactions or responses to these affect your relationship?
6. How did the decision to leave the church impact your life?
  - a) How has your spiritual life changed (or been affected)?
  - b) How has your personal life changed (or been affected)?
  - c) How has your family life changed (or been affected)?
  - d) How has your social life changed (or been affected)?

### Open Ended Questions (Church Leaders)

1. As a leader in the church, in what ways do you believe people will benefit from regular attendance and involvement?
2. How do these benefits compare for those who identify with traditional denominational teaching and values and those who do not?
  - a) For those who don't embrace traditional denominational values, how are their opportunities for church involvement affected?
3. It would seem likely that most people have at least a small degree of dissatisfaction with their church. With that said what types of disappointments, dissatisfaction, or disagreements do you expect to exist while still maintaining a healthy environment and attendance?
  - a) What kind of sacrifices, or toleration of disappointments and dissatisfactions, are you aware of in current members? What about past members?
4. Over the last 10-15 years, a noticeable number of members have dropped out or moved on to other congregations. What are your thoughts and feelings as you experience these members' decisions to leave?
5. Aside from those who leave due to personal needs or job or family changes, what do you think happens to these peoples' relationship with the church that leads them to choose to leave?
6. What is your view on these "costs" that lead people to leave the church, or more simply the reasons people have for leaving?
7. How would you describe the responsibility of the church in seeking to maintain healthy relationships with its members?


## Appendix D



DATE: November 7, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Eric E. McCollum  
 Kendall Ehst

FROM: David M. Moore 

Approval date: 11/7/2006  
 Continuing Review Due Date:10/23/2007  
 Expiration Date: 11/6/2007

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "When to Stay, When to Go: A Cost-Benefits Analysis of Regular Church Attendance and Membership", IRB # 06-657

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective November 7, 2006.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

**Important:**

If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, this approval letter must state that the IRB has compared the OSP grant application and IRB application and found the documents to be consistent. Otherwise, this approval letter is invalid for OSP to release funds. Visit our website at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/newstudy.htm#OSP> for further information.

cc: File  
 Department Reviewer:Angela J. Huebner

## Vita

Kendall Ryan Ehst  
Burke, Virginia  
krehst@vt.edu

### **Education**

Boyertown High School, 1989-1992

Eastern Mennonite University, 1992-1996, BS Liberal Arts, Elementary Education

### **Employment**

Teacher, Northern Middle School, Roxboro, NC, Eighth Grade Algebra, 1998-99

Teacher, Hendley Elementary School, Washington DC, Math Specialist, 1999-2001

Teacher, Woodlawn Elementary School, Fairfax, Virginia, Grade Six, 2001-2002

Finance Manager, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Fairfax, Virginia, 2003-2007