

Why Has Membership and Attendance in The United Methodist Church Declined?

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Term 1

705 Organizational Behavior

### Abstract

For years the church was a haven for people, and attendance flourished during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, membership and attendance began to decline. For the last decade, many social issues have impacted church membership and attendance. Many studies have investigated the external and internal causes of the decline in membership and attendance in The United Methodist Church, which is the second-largest religious denomination in the United States of America. The purpose of this research is to explore reasons for membership and attendance decline in selected churches in The United Methodist Church in the City of Atlanta, Georgia.

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### INTRODUCTION

There has been tremendous research to address the cause of the decline of membership and attendance in the Methodist church. Methodism in the United States has had a decrease in membership and attendance since 1964. The church has lost over 4.5 million members and has reported a decline in membership and attendance in 2002. Membership and attendance have continued to decline every year since. In 2009, membership and attendance dropped 1.2 percent to 7.8 million, according to the United Methodist News Service. Research has shown that there has been a continuous decline in church attendance across all denominations. The United Methodist Church is not the only mainline Protestant denomination suffering from declining membership and attendance in the United States. Recent reports indicate that in 2011, the United Methodist Church experienced a decrease of 72,000 members. Eighteen conferences reported membership losses of 2 percent or more. According to the most recent data in 2016, The United Methodist Church has lost 116,063 members in the past 12 months, which is equivalent to losing a 318-member local church every day of the year.

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### LITERATURE REVIEW

Ten research studies and articles reveal the dynamics and reasons for the decline in the United Methodist Church. Solomon (2018) noted that one of the proposed causes of the decline in church attendance in the United Methodist Church is the failure to reach out to the millennials. Rev. Tyler Sit of New City Church United Methodist Church of Minneapolis began listening to his congregation tell stories about the changes in their neighborhoods, which are mostly predominantly African American and Latino. The changes were to make improvements to their communities, such as adding bike lanes, closing bars, and according to the local city council, renovated apartment homes and housing, which lead to an increase in rents that residents could no longer afford. He stated that he heard over and over from the residents that they were “too poor” to live in a safe and green neighborhood.” (Solomon, 2018) Solomon also says that “for the church to be relevant to a younger generation, social justice issues like gentrification will need to be on the agenda.” “Jesus was about justice. So far, for the sake of integrity, the church will also need to be about justice.”

Franck and Iannacoone (2013) state that many theorists began using the rational-choice theory to analyze church growth and decline. They all see modernization as the prime cause of the religious decline. The theorists also stressed urbanization (which removes people from tight and traditional communities,), industrialization and family change (which rationalizes work and separates production from consumption), pluralism (which brings people into contact with competing views and lifestyles), and prosperity, health, and technology (which leave fewer needs unmet).

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This study strongly affirmed the prevalence of religious decline in the churches. The statistical results offered little support for the secularization thesis (which links decline to changes in income, education, industrialization, urbanization, and family life). Their results did not offer much support for competing for a thesis that social welfare spending crowds out religion. However, the results did indicate state support for schooling did lower rates of church attendance. Also, their studies did fit well with links to a religious commitment to religious capital accumulated through experience, instruction, and interactions.

Gill and Lundsgaard (2004) report in a 22-nation study strongly suggests that government social spending crowds out much more than church and charity contributes to membership decline in the Methodist church. The spending crowds regress average national rates of church attendance (estimated from the 1995 World Values Surveys) on aggregate measures of pluralism, urbanization, literacy, religious regulation, government social welfare expenditures, and other controls. The negative effect of welfare spending proves so strong that it effectively eliminates the explanatory powers of all other regressors and by itself, accounts for nearly half of the observed variation in attendance.

Azzi and Ehrenberg claim another reason for the decline in the membership of the church is the economic model to account for religious commitment. The theorist predicted that people would devote more time and money to religion as they age, but less time relative to cash as their wages increase. Other theorists extended Azzi and Ehrenberg model to incorporate a religious human capital that doubles as one engages in religious activities. This activity would raise the

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perceived benefits of future spiritual life specific to denomination. (Iannaccone 1984, 1990; Chiswich 2008) (Franck and Iannaccone, 2013)

Thom S. Rainer suggests that the number one reason church attendance in many churches in America is declining or not growing is that members attend with less frequency than they did a few years ago. If the number of attendance changes, then attendance will respond accordingly. If 200 members attend every Sunday, and if one-half of those members miss only one out of four Sundays, the attendance drops to 175. No members left the church. Everyone is still active in the church. But attendance declined over 12 percent because half the members changed their attendance behavior slightly. [CITATION Rai13 \l 1033 ]

Economist Don House, a United Methodist layperson, reported a statistical report to the United Methodist higher administrative body on the declining membership in the church. He stated that the denomination must embrace and implement a dependable turnaround action plan in five to fifteen years. If it fails to do so, he proposes that the median worship participation will drop over 35 percent by 2030. Worship attendance will fall to less than a million in 2050.

According to recent data, the decline in membership in The United Methodist Church has resulted in the loss of 116,063 members in the last 12 months, which equals to losing for a year 318 members every day. Mark Tooley (2012) states that some fear it is too late to shift. Methodism will remain on its current path to extinction. “Methodism in the United States has lost membership every year since 1964—more than 4.5 million members.

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The decline has become more prevalent, with both membership and attendance falling by a third during the last ten years, and churches closing in record numbers. The United Methodist Church's decrease in the loss of attendance and membership has also abandoned the Word of God.

Harman (2012) reports Lovett H. Weems Jr., consultant of Wesley Theological Seminary, who says, that the prospect of the United Methodist Church decline in membership is in danger if it does not demonstrate that it can reach more people, the younger generation, and more diverse people. (Harman, 2012)

Weems (2010) reports that the decline in church membership in the years following 2001 has shown a deep recession in worship attendance. The decline in worshipers year after year was more dramatic than what data from the previous decade would have predicted. One feature of the recent descent in attendance is the changing pattern in large churches. In the United Methodist Church, large churches (those averaging 350 or more in attendance) showed steady attendance growth during the 1980s and significant increase during the 1990s, reaching a high point in 2001. Their decline in attendance each year since. If the large churches kept their attendance numbers at previous levels, there would still have been a denominational decrease, but less. In principle, the smaller churches continued and somewhat accelerated their decades-long decline while the large churches for the first time joined the drop.

There is one reservation to the direction to churches median of 1,000 or more in worship are showing growth in most years, with 2008 marking their largest attendance ever. Weems (2010) also describes three possible reasons for the overall attendance drop. The first is the worshipers' attendance decline. Furthermore, some churches are tracking weekly attendance and

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who worship during the month. Many pastors feel that the same individuals are worshipping throughout the year, but that they worship less often. The next possible decline in mainline churches is that there is a disproportionate number of members age 65 and older. This proportion will only grow more noticeable as the first of the baby boomers reach the age of 65 in 2011. Many former members may not attend church often, which may be due to health reasons. The other side is the failure of the churches to reach the younger generation. Lastly, adding to the challenge of reaching younger people is the fact that the age group in which self-identified adherents of “no religion” is among most is 25-34. The General Social Survey 2008 gave an additional indicator of decreasing interest in church life. Fewer people are going to church several times a year, and more people report going to church once a year. The fewer report is people going less than once a year, while many more people say going never. The attendance area for never going as grown since 1990. (Jr. Weems, 2010)

To future explore the decline in the Methodist church, Cafferata (2017) draws on structural and identity theories to further the understanding of pastoral identity threats and ways the congregational and denomination process the closure and death of the church. In recent years, the number of United States churches has been declining at a rate of about 1% to 2% per year, but this statistic hides the reality of a far steeper decline in church membership not yet reflected in closures. Congregations as getting smaller and older, creating financial and other challenges for congregations. This researcher merges Max Weber (1949), Durkheim (2001), and Merton (1957), structural theory, and the identity theory. The structural theoretical perspective, along with identity theory, helps us understand how the relationships and context affect pastoral identity (Ashforth 200); Burke 1991; Pratt et al. 2006).

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A church closing, which can have an internal conflict or a dispute with a judicatory, is identity relevant stressors. The expectations from the head of the organization can weaken the church by expecting smaller churches with small memberships to contribute unmanageable annual apportionments, and to tithes. Organizational theorists have called such work-related conflict or the demise of a work organization. Structural theorist suggests that a failed church in the face of an expectation of growth (whether by the pastor, congregation, or judicatory) can be a destructive event for the clergy. [CITATION Caf17 \l 1033 ]

Hick (1994) gives his personal view of why the decline of membership in the church. He states at the close of the twentieth century; the church is facing forces that must be clearly understood. We have given birth to a generation that does not speak the language of the church and is both unacquainted and disinterested in matters of the spiritual. We are facing a cultural acknowledgment that at the close of the twentieth century, “anything goes” in the name of religion and as an acceptable substitute for Christianity. Biblical teachings will be compromised. The denomination will die. The moral authority of the church will be a thing of the past. There will be no such thing as “sin.” Nothing will be sacred. Any church members who remain will believe as they will, do as they wish, and the Bible will be no more than a curious reference book on a shelf of exciting but irrelevant spiritual literature.

Consequently, the decline of membership in the church would appear to have forgotten the power and the priorities that first brought it into existence. Instead of transforming the culture, the church has chosen to conform to the culture. Another viewpoint on the decline in membership in the Methodist church from Roger L. Frederikson suggests that we have reached the point that we have been domesticated and institutionalized within the ghetto of the religious

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establishment that we have been cut off and alienated from the very people we have been eager to reach.

Additionally, Hicks (1994) states that at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decline of membership in the church will have a strange collection of consumer Christians who hop from church to church until they are satisfied or until something accessible comes along. Cable Television and other forms of media technology have created a competitive frenzy for the membership of those who bring a ‘shopping mall mentality’ their pursuit of religious meaning. Perhaps that is why it is true that “much of our so-called “Christian Fellowship’ has waded in the deep waters of God’s organism and power.” Roger Frederikson has appropriately suggested that we are in an era of “technological gimmicks. The church will be a slick, manipulative, and marketable religion in society. The church seems to be no longer filled by the Higher Spirit, who empowers it.

Greenwald (2006) noted that the average age in the 8.1 million members in the United Methodist Church is between 57 and 62. She cites that the decline in membership and attendance in the United Methodist Church is by millions of young people attending house churches, marketplace ministries, and cyber churches. She says that young people avoid going to not only the United Methodist but other denominations as well. Greenwald also states that young people are passive churchgoers addicted to consumer church.

Bradfield (2006) reported the United Methodist Church membership and attendance were slightly down in 2004. Membership dropped by .81 percent, to a little more than 8 million, and attendance fell .96 percent. Membership drop marked the 36<sup>th</sup> consecutive decline since the denomination merged in 1968 with the smaller Evangelical United Brethren Church.

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Flatt, Haskell, and Burgoyne (2018) analyzed explanations for growth and decline gave 21 mainline Protestant churches in Canada, by 21 clergy and 128 congregants. Noted in McMullin's (2013) research concluded that the pastors and members of declining congregations attributed to the decline in membership and attendance due to external social change over which they have no control.

## CONCLUSION

At the current rate of decline, The United Methodist Church in the United States has less than 50 years remaining. The United Methodist Church's experience of decline is a cautionary tale for all churches, including conservative ones. The decline appears to be extensive, with both membership and attendance falling by a third during the last ten years, and churches closing in record numbers. The decline in the United Methodist Church can be seen not only in the loss of attendance and membership but in its abandonment of the Word of God.

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### METHOD

This study's purpose is to explore reasons for membership decline in selected churches in The United Methodist Church in the City of Atlanta, Georgia. In this study, four churches will conduct surveys and interviews with each part of the United Methodist Church in the City of Atlanta, Georgia. The sample consisted of 382 adult churchgoers. There are 100 members from Central UMC, with a total membership of 800 and an average Sunday attendance of 185; 150 adult churchgoers from Cascade UMC, with a total membership of 4000 members and an average Sunday attendance of for one service of 1500 members; 10 members from Rocky Head UMC, with a total membership of 300 and an average Sunday attendance of 35 members; Headland Heights UMC, with a total membership of 500 and an average Sunday attendance of 250 members. These membership numbers are approximate estimates as it is not possible to get accurate counts of the total membership of congregations due to the reported difficulty of keeping track of different categories of members, attendees or friends, and visitors. All four congregations located in the Metropolitan Atlanta area in relatively affluent suburbs and inner-city neighborhoods. Educational levels were a mixture of High school graduates, BA, MA, Ph.D. They are predominantly African Americans. The average age was 65 years. I selected this sample to investigate a spectrum of reasons from various economic and education levels. All four congregations surveyed are dependent on their local membership for financial survival.

I gathered information from participant churches using several survey instruments, including a church profile questionnaire completed by a staff member, a clergy questionnaire administered by the lay servant members to all adults in attendance during a Sunday service.

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Following the congregational survey, I will send follow-up interview questions via email to congregants who provide email contact information in the congregational study. We asked the congregation and clergy of declining churches the following questions in the in-person interviews.

Many congregations in the Methodist Church are experiencing a decline in attendance and membership.

- 1) What do you think the reasons for fewer people attending and joining your congregation?
  - a) Not interested
  - b) Boring
  - c) Traditional worship
  - d) Contemporary worship
- 2) Why do you think that there is a decline in attendance and membership?
  - a) not interested
  - b) Boring
  - c) Traditional worship
  - d) Contemporary worship
3. Are the most churches declining because of the same reasons your church is declining?
  - a) Yes
  - b) no
4. Do you think that there are reasons in the larger society that are crippling your church's ability to attract new members and attendees?
  - a) Yes
  - b) no
5. Do you think that there are issues about your home church that are hindering its ability to attract new members and attendees?
  - a) Yes
  - b) no
6. What do you think could be changed or improved at home church to strengthen its ability to attract new members and attendees?
  - a) Shorter service
  - b) Include more young people
  - c) More contemporary music
  - d) Less loud music
  - e) Not sure

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The responses will be coded from each church to establish categories and subcategories to identify themes repeatedly arising in the answers.

Table 1 Congregant's Explanations for Decline: External Factors

Category	Subcategory	Declining	Total
No, external factors don't matter			
Pressures of modern life			
Sunday competition			
Technology			
Attitudes related to religion			
Individuality			
spiritual not religious			
Society is secular			
rivalry from other religions			
Faith not being passed down to the next generation			
Supernatural factors			
Other factors			
Characteristics of the church itself			
Don't know, no the on-topic answer, or no answer at all			

This study will use a qualitative method approach using a Likert scale. This method using a questionnaire and the Likert scale allows the participants a limited time, lasting an hour or two at the most to complete. The questionnaire is precise with choices of answer selections. It is easy to refuse to answer questions or to refuse to participate altogether. Procedures to safeguard

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the confidentiality and data security are precise and to explain. It will be impossible to identify any person's responses from the statistical analysis of the data. There is no recording of voices and faces. There is opportunity for bias in reporting and interpretation of the data. Research states that there is no way to eliminate bias in research. The questions on the questionnaire are leading questions to elicit the response from the participants — the recorded answer is biased and unprofessional by many researchers. The weaknesses of this study are getting enough interest from the participants to complete the questionnaire. The challenge that I view with this procedure of using a questionnaire is getting enough responses and attention in the study. The study could raise more issues that need further research based on the reactions from the inquiry.

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