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A Holy Decline

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A Holy Decline

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Introduction

Many nonprofit organizations are religious institutions. It is known that nonprofits fill the gaps of society that the government is unable to fill. Some of these gaps include, hunger, homelessness, and refuge for the abused. The Christian nonprofits that often fill these gaps are churches. There has been a visible decline in black church membership attendance. Seeing this decline in membership activity could cause a domino effect in the nonprofit world. Black churches have served as the cornerstone for the black community for centuries. It has often been the place for afterschool programs, extra-curricular activities, civic meetings, and so much more. This current decline in member attendance can lead to the previously mentioned programs not being able to be supported not just financially but through volunteers as well. When nonprofits are no longer able to meet the needs of the community, but the need remains, the responsibility will shift to other nonprofits or even worse, remain unmet. The question that arises from this is: What has been the reason for the decline of black church attendance. The answer to this question could be the key component to the resolution of sustaining the identity and power of the black church and having some of the numerous gaps in society continue to be filled.

What would America look like if Christianity went extinct. In order to understand this we have to look at the role Christian organizations have played in American history. The black church has served as the catalyst for change for centuries. Black churches were often the hosts of civic engagement, being that they often held meetings, prayer sessions before events, planning of movements and so much more within the Civil Rights Movement. This is what makes it crucial for black churches to remain high in attendance, so that their identity won't be lost, their identity within America. Black churches are a place where people can come together and unite for a

cause, feel a sense of family, and comfort. However, it could be possible that somewhere down the line the black church has decreased in these known attributes resulting in a mirroring decrease of membership attendance rates. But it is not only important that we look at why there has been a decline, but also look at the population at which remains. In doing this there is room to recognize and increase the things the church is doing right, to see attendance rates back on the rise.

This paper first explores the prior research that has been done on the decline of church attendance. Then it introduces the reader to the history of church membership in the United States and the current decline. Then touches on the importance of recognizing and fixing the decline in membership attendance. The paper goes on to further analyze the reasoning for this decline in church membership rates. Later discussed are the results of a survey done at a small church to test the thesis and further answer the research question. Lastly, discussed are some of the limitations of this research, future research, and possible solutions that can be implemented to ensure an increase in church attendance rates.

While the decline of church membership is disheartening to those that hold the church near to their hearts, there are solutions to overcoming this curve. Research like this allows for the problem to be identified, understood, and solved. Without this research the seemingly small decline in church membership attendance will turn into a large decline in church membership, resulting in the extinction of membership attendance.

Literature Review

While there hasn't been a lot of research on black church attendance over the last decade, I was able to find a few credible sources on this topic. Most of the literature on this topic revolves

around the importance of the black church's relation with political influence. Researchers have also conducted interviews that will help formulate the survey questions that will be used in this current research project.

The Issue

In the article "Is the Black Church Dead?..." (Allen 2023), the claim of a decline of black church membership rates is supported with evidence from interviews. The author conducted research on this topic by interviewing current and former members of the black church. This study specifically focuses on the generational differences of participation. This research is important because it reveals the context to which the data shows the decline of membership/participation. It also emphasizes the view of the millennial generation which is the age in which the decline is prevalent. Here it should be pointed out that because right now millennials are between the ages of 28 – 43 which are the parents of the next generation, typically, religion is influenced by the parent, so this suggests that if there is an unresolved decline within black church membership rates that stems from the millennial generation then the future of the church is dreary. However, the concluded data of the research was that while there is a decline in black church membership rates, this is something that can still be shifted to increase if the black church makes socio-political, socio-educational, and socio-economic changes.

In the article "How the COVID-19 Pandemic..." (2023), it is presented a possible reasoning for the decline in black church membership. It also emphasizes the number is greater for Black protestant churches compared to that of white protestant and other religious church goers. However, it needs to be clarified that this article reveals that people are still interested in church, being that the data shows they are still viewing services online.

While the article “Comparing the Community Involvement..”(Chaves and Higgins 1992), was published over 3 decades ago some of the concept’s the authors present can still be applied to the present-day issues of the black church. Their research overall emphasizes that black churches participate with their communities more than white church congregations. Their data concluded that older black churches are typically more involved with their communities. This information can be used in two ways. The first being that this could be the reason why new black churches fail to retain their members [because its not interacting with the community due to its newly establishment]. On the other hand, it critiques the fact that if that is so, shouldn’t by now there be an increase even the more in participation being that the churches are now older.

This issue of black church membership rates declining isn’t unique to the black church. The notable Sociologist Rodney Stark researched a topic similar to this in the 1980s. In “Correcting Church Membership Rates: 1971 and 1980” Stark is correcting a prior study done that gathered data on church membership rates in America. Stark emphasizes that the data that was previously collected is inaccurate because it left out black and Jewish churches. While there is a tremendous time gap between the current study and Starks the conclusion of the research could still be relevant, this data will be able to show previous membership rates to compare to current day.

Background/Importance

The documentary “The Black Church:...” (2021), collaborates many different people from different backgrounds to tell the story of the black church. It firsts talks about how black slaves were first converted to Christianity by evangelists but those evangelists were able to convince both the master and the slave that blacks could remain slaves yet be converted to Christianity. They were able to do this by leaving out sections of the Bible that say contrary to that theory.

However, as time went on blacks found it harder and harder to identify with this free but enslaved theory, which led to the forming of black churches. This documentary emphasizes the way the black church has evolved over time and the way the church takes stances on political issues. The problem with this documentary is that it fails to show the current state of the church. However, it does draw attention to some of the churches criticisms, their failure to adapt and ultimately help the community due to controversial stances. However, some of the interviews will be relevant to this research. Some of the interviews voiced concerns that the black church was missing in a key area of history. This could be an area in which all black churches could grow in, navigating the civil/political battles blacks often face.

In the article “*Kincraft: The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality*” the author explores the strong sense of family of black churches. The author uses two black churches in Atlanta as her subject. The findings presented a common theme of different people playing different roles in order to have the feeling of family abide within the church. The author coins the term “Kincraft”, which they describe as, “the collective relational ethos and community fashioning that undergirds black evangelical religiosity” (Thomas 5). This text will be very relevant when it comes to the solutions section of this research, in that relationship of the members within the church matters and can keep people attending. The ideas presented in Thomas’s reading introduces ways in which a black church can build lifelong connections that keeps the people of the church near, engaged, and provides a sense of belonging.

In the article “Faith and Work:...” (Brown and Brown 2003), the authors research the relationship between church attendee’s vs non church attendees and their level of political activism. The results of the research indicated that those who did attend church participated at

higher rates than those that did not. However, the authors present a further question of whether this activism really matters, being that it is mainly in communities that don't really have the connections to influence politicians. This is relevant to this research because it presents something that's usually an afterthought that can be further used to fix the problem. Example, even if church attendance can be increased, resulting in higher political activism what are ways in which political power can be increased regardless of financial factors?

In the article "Church Attendance, Social Capital, and Black Voting Participation", the authors conducted research on what influences black voting participation. The authors concluded from this study that the only significant thing that influences black voting participation is church attendance. This is very relevant to the importance of this research because it shows the impact the church has on political factors. If the church membership/participation continues to decrease this will affect the black vote. When black voting participation decreases it results in a group of the population's voices not being heard, resulting in their needs not being addressed.

The research conducted in the article "Black Megachurches and Gender Inclusivity" gives great perspective on the characteristics of churches. While her focus is on Gender inclusivity her research subject is mega churches. The responses in the interviews conducted in this research provide great insight as to attributes that a church might have that will either attract attendees or detour them.

The book "*The Great Dechurched:...*" (2023), dissects all things related to Christian church membership declining. The authors first start by introducing the reader to the idea of the "Dechurched", and breaks down the magnitude of this phenomenon, then emphasizes to the reader the importance of the decline and ends it with both solutions and lessons that the church

should learn from said decline. The research consisted of three phases named as “Phase 1: How big is the problem”, “Phase 2: Who is leaving and Why”, “Phase 3: What is happening to evangelism”

Some of the key findings in the research include (For some of the following I will only point out the BIPOC data as it is more relevant to my case study):

- There was over a 14% decrease in Christian affiliation from around year 1990 to year 2018.
- Those that identify as Lesbians, Gay, or Bisexual attend church at a much lesser rate than those that do not.
- Parents have played a huge role in the decline of church attendance rates.
- When asked “What did your parents do that played a role in your decision to stop attending” (BIPOC) some of the most popular responses included:
 - “Inability to listen” 23%
 - “All their emphasis on the culture war lost me over time” 20%
 - “Inability to engage other viewpoints” 21%
 - “Strong support of Joe Biden and the political left” 21%
- Top reason for BIPOC leaving the church for ages 18-25
 - “I struggled to fit in or belong”
- Top reasons for BIPOC returning to church
 - New friends
 - Move and want to make new friends /Lonely and want to make new friends
 - Child wants to go

-Friend makes me

-A good community

Methods

I conducted research to answer the question of: What has been the reason for the decline of black church member attendance?

For this research I collected new data. My research focuses on church membership attendance. I used Mt. Ebal Missionary Baptist Church as my subject. There has been a slow decrease in the previously stated areas of focus. With the Baptist Church denomination beliefs of missionary work and helping the community, it is crucial that the problem in these areas be recognized and there be solutions developed in order to fulfil its mission.

Case Description

Mt. Ebal Missionary Baptist church is a 501(C)3 organization and its board consists of about 10 deacons and officers (some are not active). According to GuideStar the churches assets are around \$788,662, with the church bringing in approximately \$40,000 a year. These funds come mainly from tithes and offerings of its members along with occasional outside donations. Some of the ministry programs MEMBC has had over the years includes Deacon's Ministry, Ushers & Nurses Ministry, Pastors Aid Ministry, Music Ministry, Sister Hood and Little Sisters Club, Man of Valor, No greater love Ministry, Singles ministry, Mothers Board, Sunday Morning Day Care, and Missions Ministry. There is about 10 people in each ministry. The church holds services at 11am every Sunday and in addition offers an 8 am service on every first Sunday of the month. 11am service is streamed live to Facebook and YouTube. Service typically last around 1 hour and

45 mins. On an average Sunday there are approximately 70 people attending in person service, 20 people viewing on Facebook, and 20 on youtube.

Surveying was the method of research used in this study. The survey included both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey platform used was Qualtrics. The questions that were asked were slightly unique to the members, in that an if-then system was able to be used when formulating the survey questions. Example, questions that asked what their reasoning were for missing Sundays, were only asked to those that selected a specific answer to the previously asked question. This was done to lighten the question load of some respondents rendering better response rates.

Initial ideas and why they were cut

Initially I thought it would be a good idea to have a different set of questions for the following age groups: Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964) Generation X (Born 1965-1979) Millennials (Born 1980-1994) Generation Z (Born 1995-2009) Generation Alpha (Born 2010-2024). Conducting a membership attendance survey specifically unique to generations would be very productive in being able to see certain trends within the different generations. However, I decided not to use it as an initial research due to wanting to grab more general information.

I also initially planned to do a focus group based off the themes displayed in the survey results. However, I felt that the rendered survey results didn't really call for immediate further discussion.

Distribution

The survey was distributed via QR codes on paper, QR codes/links on social media, and paper copies. I made an announcement during church service about the survey, making emphasis on how the survey was anonymous, short, and gives an opportunity for members to let their voices

be heard on how they feel about the current state of the church. There were approximately 50 people attending church on the day I made the announcement, which was a little less because it wasn't the first Sunday of the month. Typically, at black churches the highest attended Sunday out the month is the first. The survey remained open for approximately 3 weeks.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data I primarily used Qualtrics. It was easier to see trends in Qualtrics rather than by exporting data into excel and analyzing that way.

Results: Summary

The survey received 32 responses.

Church Service attendance

The majority of respondents attends church 4-5 Sundays out the month. Things such as work, sports events, and other church engagement accounts for members who attend 3 or less services out the month. Some people that responded 3 or less services out the month also specifically responded that laziness, sickness, and other engagements are also to blame for missed Sundays. However, one response for missed Sundays really stuck out, "don't feel welcome".

When it comes to Mt. Ebal, recognizing if there has been a change in church attendance the members were split. 50% said there has been a decrease, while 34% said there's been an increase, and 3% said there has been no change. The other 13% have not been at Mt. Ebal long enough, thus not being able to judge a 10 year change. The results were similar when asked if the survey takers church attendance has changed since they themselves first joined. 44% said yes, while 56% said no. For those that answered yes some of the reasons provided for this decrease in attendance included working and weakened faith.

Increasing Future Membership

When asked if members have ever invited anyone to church 83% said yes, while 17% said no.

Out of the 25 people that invited someone to church 18 of their invites were accepted (the person attended). As for the 17% (5 respondents) that said they have never invited anyone to church some of their reasonings include: Being a shy person, not having a social environment at work, simply never considering it, not wanting to, and being hesitant on combining personal beliefs with those around them.

Program Participation

Out of the 12 programs that have been offered at the church Sunday school and bible study has the highest participation rate. When asked if members have any other program ideas a whopping 93% of members answered no. However, two members did suggest two programs: 1. Caregiver Ministry 2. Little Kids Chior. Only 7 members are unavailable for programming outside of church hours.

Open ended

In the open-ended section of the survey, members provided some insight as to why membership has decreased and how to improve the church.

- "I would like see more people attending Sunday School and Bible Study."
- "Church attendance decreased because the church aged. In the beginning it was full of young families. Children grew up, went to college, moved. Lots of people passed as well."
- "I love our 8:30 service and would like to see more services."

Results: Connections to Literature review

I couldn't help but notice that one of responses from the one of the three individuals that reported only attending service in person one Sunday out the month, related directly back to the findings of the book "The Great Dechurching". The respondent said, "Faith weakened, don't t feel like I

belong” and “Don’t feel welcome”. As I mentioned previously, the reading showed for BIPOC, the top reasoning for leaving the church was because they felt they did not belong.

Results: Limitations

There were many more limitations regarding this research. The first being the distance gap. I stay in DeKalb, which is about an hour from Mt. Ebal. This time gap could have contributed to the number of survey responses received and the subject pool. If I lived closer, I more than likely would have used around 5 more churches in my research. However, these 5 more churches would have been a little harder to reach seeing that they are not my actual church. Mt Ebal is a part of a district of churches called Lebanon, in which there are around 5 more churches apart of this district in the Joliet area. On the other hand using the other five could have yielded much more results, increasing both the quality and quantity of my research.

The second limitation encountered in this research was my researcher bias. My dad is the pastor of Mt. Ebal and I grew up there all my life. One thing that was considered before using Mt. Ebal as my subject was whether my role in the church would cause a bias and make people feel forced to take the survey. I do think people were more open to taking the survey due to it being asked by a familiar face as opposed to someone coming in from the outside. In the same way I wouldn’t feel as good about going into a church (being an outsider) and asking people to take this survey, being that the number of results might change adversely. However, some members at Mt. Ebal could have felt persuaded to answer in a way that would be favorable to me because I am the pastors daughter, possibly hoping to portray the church in a positive light.

The third limitation encountered in this research was lack of prior research to compare to. While most of the research that has been done was slightly dated can still be relevant it needs to be noted that post COVID data is more favorable when it comes to the topic of in person

attendance. I was only able to find one recent research done that deeply analyzed this topic. The way in which people interact has changed at churches. COVID forced a lot of churches to expand their technology to allow their members access to stream church services. While people are now able to attend services in person as they please a lot of people now prefer to stream than to go back in person.

The greatest limitation encountered in this research was time. The research question could have been better answered if there was more time to research and conduct surveys. If the time allowed for this research was closer to a years time span it would have went more in depth allowing a deeper study on specific measurements of church attendance and participation.

Results: Future research

For future research there should be a lot improved upon from my research. My recommended way in going about future research (in regard specifically to Mt. Ebal and its surrounding area) is as follows:

1. Distribution of the original survey to the other churches in the area. Have them heavily promote the survey on social media. This greater survey pool will allow for a more accurate answer to the research question.
2. A deep dive into attendance records should be analyzed and/or established as part of the research. This will give more concrete evidence that specifically the subject at hand has seen a decrease in attendance rates and hold as a place setter to show whether the solutions that are implemented are effective.
3. After analyzing the data and trends within the results conduct focus groups on such trends. This allows for people to speak their minds more in depth without being confined to organizing their thoughts into well put sentences on a survey.

4. One on one open invite formal interviews should be conducted for two types of members, the ones that love the church and the ones that hate the church. This will allow for more details to be shared on the good aspects of the church but shine light on the downfalls of the church.
5. For the focus groups, have different demographic settings. One week the focus group will be a mixture of ages and genders. Another week the focus group will be separated based off generations. Another week the focus group will be separated by gender. Lastly, the groups will come together to then discuss improvement steps.

More research should also be focused on those that are not in the church. Since a lot of Mt. Ebal's members are related it could be helpful to use the active members as a means of communication with inactive members. Also, implementing a social media outreach system to reach old members could be helpful as well. The limitation here is how exactly to reach that audience (those that aren't related to active members). This audience is as crucial to church attendance as the members who still believe who just aren't attending are. This part of the research aspect needs to be further analyzed in order to maximize attendance rates.

Solutions

This research project has allowed for certain solutions to the problem of declining rates of church attendance to be revealed. The first solution to this problem is first working on the belongingness of members that already attend the church. It has been shown through research that the level of belongingness and the feeling of "fitting in" is directly related to church attendance. In order to make sure people that are feeling unwelcomed are being noticed it would be helpful to conduct anonymous surveys more often. This will allow for those that are feeling uneasy to express their concerns in a comfortable way and gives the church an opportunity to improve upon itself before they lose individuals. The more people feel welcomed, the more people feel a sense of

belongingness, the more willing they will be to attend church. The second solution to this problem is to implement the suggestions presented in "*The Great Dechurching...*".

The ideas presented of establishing connections that makes the church feel like more than just a place that people happen to go on Sunday but truly leaning on the fact that the church is connected through their beliefs.

Lastly the greatest solution for Christian churches to increase church attendance rates is to hold true to its core values. Some of the Christian core values include: loving their neighbor, being a light into the world, and preaching the gospel to others. With these core values in mind people will feel welcomed, those that are inactive will feel led to become active once again, and those that have never been apart of the church will find their place where they truly belong.

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