A qualitative approach to unchurching and deconversion: Theme and sentiment analysis

Chong Ho Yu, Emily Brown, Azusa Pacific University

Presented at 2017 Western Psychological Association Convention, Sacramento, CA

Abstract

Different research studies and polls indicate that church attendance in America has been declining for four decades. According to Barnes Group, 50% of young adults, while transiting from high school to college, either cease to attend church or give up their Christian faith. Many studies approach this problem using a quantitative method; however, statistical figures are incapable of revealing the deeper structure of the phenomenon, especially the emotive and experiential factors. Using qualitative methodologies, the research team hopes that this analysis of rich data could unveil a holistic picture of the unchurching phenomenon.

Introduction

Prior studies conducted by the research team found that intellectual challenges by the New Atheist Movement and the postmodern culture are not major concerns by the participants at all. According to Hope and Packard, the experience of churchgoers in the community is a more determining factor to their continuation of Christian life than theological factors.

Parents and Family: Parental religiosity has a significant effect on an emerging adult's church attendance (Vaidyanathan, 2011). Further, young adults from divorced families have significantly lower religious involvement compared to young adults from an intact family unit. Those from divorced families reflected lower levels of attendance in religious services, but they did not, reflect lower levels in closeness to God (Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007) .

Attachment Styles: Findings suggest that one's attachment (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) is a determinant of one's satisfaction of participation within the church. Those who are securely attached are significantly more satisfied with their church in comparison to all other attachment styles combined (Hamilton, Martin,& Martin, 2012) .

Trust and Satisfaction: Millennials who are leaving the church do so because of feelings of lack of trust and satisfaction. Non-denominational churches seem to offer this sense of trust and relationship for millennial Christians. Millennials are looking for conversations and personal experiences to be stressed rather than doctrines (Waters, 2012).

"The Dones": "The Dones" are previously active members and faithful leaders who have given up church, but continue to practice faith. These individuals are discontent with the church's imbalanced hierarchy, inauthentic community, and its stifling of different ideas. They aspire to cultivate generous, compassionate, loving community without institution of church. There is a call to pastors and leaders to reflect and change (Hope & Packard, 2015).

Methods

In this study 212 responses from adults aged 18-40 were collected. Qualitative methodologies were employed in an attempt to find out what the disconnect is between their expectations and their actual church experience. The unstructured textual data are categorized into major themes and the findings are compared against those yielded by prior studies using quantitative methods. To avoid bias and to improve reliability, a panel was set up to classify the open-ended responses. A total of six questions were coded by the panel.

Results

For the six coded questions, a frequency table and code relations graph were created to visualize the relationship of the responses. Direct quotes are also referenced.

If you no longer attend church, please give a brief explanation of your choice.

Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Availability	20	13.42
No longer Christian	17	11.41
Religious Institutions	14	9.40
Negative Church Enviornment	14	9.40
Theology	12	8.05
Spiritual but not religious	12	8.05
No belief in God	12	8.05
Uninterested	11	7.38
Still Seeking a Church	6	4.03
Prior Forced attendance	6	4.03
Lack of Growth	6	4.03
Judgment in the Church	6	4.03
hypocrisy	5	3.36
Pastoral issues	4	2.68
Agnostic	4	2.68

Table 1: Frequency Table for Item 10

If you have given up the Christian faith, please give a brief explanation of your choice.

Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Gradual Doubt	13	12.26
Christianity is Illogical	10	9.43
Manmade beliefs	10	9.43
Issues with Religious Institutions	9	8.49
Contradictions in the theology	9	8.49
Atheism	8	7.55
Life Experiences	8	7.55
Disbelief that God is Good	7	6.60
Injustices within Religion	7	6.60
Confusion	6	5.66
Further Knowledge of the Church	6	5.66
Forced Belief	5	4.72
Further Knowledge in Science	4	3.77
Lack of Authenticity	4	3.77

Table 2: Frequency Table for Item 11
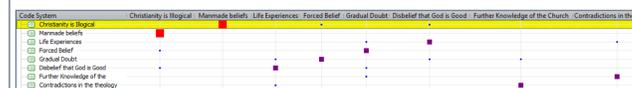
Figure 1: Code Relations for Item 11. A relationship is found between "Christianity is Illogical" and "Manmade Beliefs"

If you think there is a disconnect between the teaching of the Bible about what the church ought to be and the actual church that you are experiencing, please describe what the disconnect is and why.

| Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Bible Misinterpretation/Mistreatment	27	14.84
Judgmentalism	22	12.09
lack of compassion, forgiveness, love	22	12.09
Narrow mindedness and focus	16	8.79
Flawed System	14	7.69
Uniformed of Current Events	13	7.14
money	12	6.59
anti-LGBTQ	10	5.49
hypocritical	8	4.40
Invalidity of Bible/God	8	4.40
Cherry-picking	6	3.30
leadership	6	3.30
self-righteous	6	3.30
Ally with Republicans/Too Conservative	4	2.20
Lack of Unity/Denominations	4	2.20
Social Networking	4	2.20

Table 3: Frequency Table for Item 14

Figure 2: Code relations for Item 14. A relationship is found between "Narrow mindedness and focus" and "Judgmentalism"

"There are numerous disconnects. On one hand, the modern churches struggle to reconcile some of the wildly anachronistic teachings that are in the Bible (how to treat slaves, women, gays, etc.) with modern values. On the other hand, a lot of churches fail to emphasize the more compassionate aspects of the Bible."

If you think there is a disconnect between the teaching of the Bible about what Christians ought to be and the actual congregants that you encounter, please describe what the disconnect is and why.

Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Money	18	19.35
Power/Submission	18	19.35
False/Inadeqaute Teaching	16	17.20
Biblically Unqualified	8	8.60
Female Leadership	5	5.38
Corruption/Scandal	4	4.30
Harmful	4	4.30
Inactive/Immobile	4	4.30
Media/Fame	4	4.30
Narrow-minded/Favoritism	4	4.30
Outdated/Conservative	4	4.30
Sexual Corruption	4	4.30

Table 4: Frequency Table for Item 15
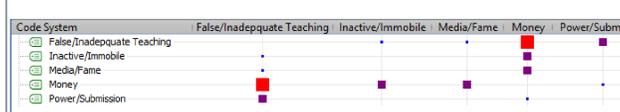
Figure 3: Code Relations for Item 15. A relationship

If you think there is a disconnect between the teaching of the Bible about what the leadership (e.g. Bishop, Pastor, Minister, Priest, Elder, and Deacon) ought to be and the actual leadership that you are.

Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Close-mindedness and Judgmental	29	27.62
Hatred and lack of love	18	17.14
Hypocrite and inconsistent	16	15.24
Abortion, gender role, sex, and LGBTQ	8	7.62
Human nature	6	5.71
Subjective interpretation of Bible	6	5.71
Christians in name	5	4.76
Not everyone is welcome	5	4.76
Selfishness	4	3.81
Follow the mainstream	4	3.81
Discrimination	4	3.81

Table 5: Frequency Table for Item 16
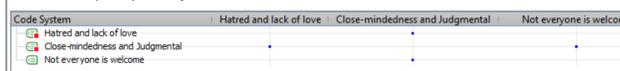
Figure 4: Code Relations for Item 16

"Christians are too full of hate. They fight against so many things, abortions, gay marriage. They say those are sins becaue they are in the Bible and yet they ignore other things in the Bible, like stoning a woman if she marries without being a virgin or not wearing mixed cloth."

If you have any unpleasant experience in the church, please describe the details:

| Code	All coded segments	All coded segments %
Judgmental	18	18.37
Unpleasant leaders	14	14.29
Unfriendly to LGBTQ	9	9.18
Reprimanded by the church	8	8.16
Conflicting Views	7	7.14
Money	7	7.14
Dismissing questions	6	6.12
Gossip	6	6.12
Moral Superiority	6	6.12
Unpleasant people	5	5.10
Closed-minded	4	4.08
Pressure from the church	4	4.08
Unwelcoming	4	4.08

Table 6: Frequency Table for Item 18

Figure 4: Code Relations for Item 18. A relationship is found between "Gossip", "Judgmental", "Moral Superiority", "Unfriendly to LGBTQ", and "Unpleasant leaders".

"I am gay and when I told my mother she took me to a preacher and we had a discussion about it. He told me I was similar to drug addicts that he had spoken to and that I seem to be sort of blinded by the true path one should take in life. "

Discussion

Several themes of discontent with the church were found, including:

- The church is too judgmental (especially regarding controversial issues like abortion and the LGBTQ community). Instead of inviting those who are different or marginalized into the church, participants experienced the church judging and separating themselves from these individuals.
- The church confuses cultural norms and scriptural mandates. Participants experienced church members and leaders equating topics such as gender roles that contribute to oppressive tendencies as being scripturally based. With this issue, is the lack of contextualization of scripture that churches sometimes ignore. Participants were frustrated that the church practices they experienced did not agree with a proper contextual reading of scripture.
- The message of the prosperity gospel teaches indulgence. Participants were upset with mega-churches, and the pastor's of mega-churches preaching that being "blessed" is living a life of luxury.
- Scriptural misinterpretation and narrowmindedness are related to the gradual doubt of some participants. Instead of engaging with questions, churches too often ignore or explain them away.

Steps to address these concerns are complex. However, the tone in which the church must address them is one of love and acceptance. People are coming to the church to be a place of refuge, and instead of addressing them with judgement, the church must engage with them, love them, and exemplify the spirit of unconditional love and positive regard that Christ exemplified during his ministry on earth.

Conclusion

Because studies like the Barnes Group suggest that there are a significant amount of young people leaving the church, it is incredibly important to discuss why these individuals are discontent with the church. Using qualitative research methods, the research team was able to gather a broader and deeper understanding of this phenomenon as a panel coded the responses of participants regarding their deconversion from the church. Common themes of discontent were found from coding, including, judgement, the prosperity gospel, narrow-mindedness and misinterpretation. This is consistent with other research that young members of the church are interested in trust and salinification (Waters, 2012). While steps in order to change the environment of the church are complex and difficult, the end goal should be one of love and acceptance.

Selected References

Packard, J., & Hope, A. (2015). *Church refugees: sociologists reveal why people are done with the church but not their faith*. Loveland, CO: Group.

Vaidyanathan, B. (2011). Religious resources or differential returns? Early religious socialization and declining attendance in emerging adulthood. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 50*, 366-387.

Zhai, J. E., Ellison, C. G., Glenn, N. D., & Marquardt, E. (2007). Parental Divorce and Religious Involvement among Young Adults*. *Sociology of Religion, 68*(2), 125-144.

Hamilton, S., Martin, M., & Martin, D. (2012). A Statistical Investigation of the Relationship Between Personal Attachment Style and Satisfaction with Evangelical Church Membership. *Journal of religion and health, 51*(4), 1306-1316.

Waters, R. D., & Bortree, D. S. (2012). "Can we talk about the direction of this church?": The impact of responsiveness and conflict on millennials' relationship with religious institutions. Journal of Media and Religion, 11(4), 200-215.