

Experts suggest why some Christians like church shopping

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BNG)—You've been a member of the same church several years. While you may not know everyone in the congregation well, you are acquainted with most folks in your Sunday school class.

One Sunday morning, you realize a friend isn't there. The more you think about it, the more you realize she hasn't attended the class in a couple of weeks. What has happened? Is she ill?



Bill LeonardPossibly. But equally plausible: She's looking for something different. She's church shopping.

Several studies show that sometime in their life, at least 40 percent of religiously oriented people will switch church denominations or faith traditions, said [Bill Leonard](#), the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Church History & Baptist Studies at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

Why would members choose to leave their church for another? Why would they switch denominations—from Baptist to Methodist, for example? Why would they completely switch faith traditions—letting go of Christian tenets to follow Buddhist teachings, perhaps?

The reasons are as varied as the people who opt to shop.

Comfort and familiarity are the primary reasons people change affiliation, particularly when they move to a different geographical location, Leonard believes.

“These days, chances are that a growing number of people who change churches are more apt to go look for a church that feels like the one in which they were comfortable before they look at the name on the church sign,” he said.



Various reasons drive some Christians to church shop, including internal conflict and being turned off by denominationalism. (Creative Commons photo)The local church can become a strong source of personal—not denominational—identity. People look for a church that mentors, nurtures or cares for them in the same or similar way they experienced with their former congregation, Leonard said.

Finding a place to re-create that intensity can be difficult. If the Baptist church the individual visits can't meet that level, the individual looks elsewhere.

“I just couldn't find any church like the church where we've been.' I hear

this consistently,” he said.

‘Felt need’ usually trumps religious ties

The felt need usually trumps religious ties, he noted.

Denominational identity means much less to people than it did in the past, [Bob Perry](#), added a longtime church health consultant and author.



Bob PerryHe sees conflict in the local congregation or within the denomination or religious tradition as a key reason many people change affiliations. The “negative baggage” conflict and other issues often create can drive people to look elsewhere.

“Most people are wanting church to be a place of refuge and peace,” he said.

“When a denomination is chronically engaged in conflict and rancor, many people just get fed up with it,” he added. “That is even more the case at the local church. When church members get drawn into a church conflict, they often just want to escape and get a fresh start.”

To decrease the impact of conflict or to avoid the controversy surrounding the denomination, congregations frequently drop references to the denomination in their name and advertising, or disaffiliate altogether.

Denominational affiliation still a draw

But not always. Denominational affiliation still draws some members.

Larry Harvey, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Hastings, Neb.](#), sees visitors drop into services because they are Baptist and have seen the name in newspaper advertising and on the church's marquee.

Congeniality and programming have been primary factors in membership ebb and flow at the Hastings church, Harvey said.

A small congregation in a town of about 7,000 people, First Baptist does not always offer the programs people feel they want or need, usually involving children or other family needs. Those folks often will go elsewhere.

They might return, sometimes years later, when perceived needs or desires change.

While maintaining membership in one congregation, many people will attend another, or even several others, during a week or month to take advantage of ministries those churches offer.

'Adherents' vs "members'

Leonard sees this as a growing trend that appeared to start with the growth of megachurches and a move to nondenominationalism. A growing number of large churches no longer refer to those who come or support the ministry as "members." Instead, they use the words "adherents" or "attendees."



Thom RainerPeople participate in a megachurch for programs but keep their membership in another church and take advantage of both, Leonard said.

Perry also sees “the phenomenon of people maintaining multiple church connections to pick what they like from two or more congregations,” even on the same day.

“They may prefer the Sunday school class they have been in at one church, then go to another for the style of worship they prefer,” he said.

As a result, even megachurches find member retention difficult. “Most megachurches struggle with the retention issue as much or more than smaller churches,” Perry said.

‘Blenders’ involved in multiple faith communities

A 2008 Barna Group study seemed to verify the trend, noting that “millions of people are now involved in multiple faith communities,” including online options. The study tagged as “blenders” those who both attend a conventional church and “experiment with new forms of faith community.”

Searching online for the phrase “church member retention” brings up a host of websites and blogs that offer specific, practical ways to keep members interested in staying with their congregations. Many books have been penned on the subject as well. Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, believes commitment is the issue.

In his Aug. 19, 2013, blog post, Rainer explained the average attendance drops as people skip a service to go elsewhere, even just once a month.

He called on church leaders to make membership “meaningful.”

“Church membership is becoming less and less meaningful in many churches. As membership becomes less meaningful, commitment naturally wanes,” he said.

Rainer offered suggestions to promote attendance, including getting people involved in ministry.

“People want to be a part of something that makes a difference. They desire to be involved in something bigger than themselves,” he wrote.