

***CLOSE THE  
BACK DOOR***



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## ***Ways to Create a Caring Congregational Fellowship***

***Alan F. Harre***



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# Introduction

Conscientious pastors and committed lay members of Christian congregations often find themselves reflecting on the subject of inactive members and how best to cope with individuals who drop out of active participation in the programs and worship life of a local parish. Denominational executives discover that these concerns appear with regularity on the agendas of meetings they are called upon to attend. Every congregation and denomination is painfully aware of how many of their constituents have become or are becoming inactive. It has been estimated that the Protestant churches of the United States remove from membership rosters or place on inactive lists over two million persons every year.<sup>1</sup> This estimate does not include all those people who have become inactive but whose names remain on membership rosters until they die.

This reality has led to all manner of advice-giving, handwringing, congregational resolutions to “clean out the deadwood,” and exhortations that congregational leaders do a better job of soul care. In addition, social scientists, particularly sociologists of religion and denominational executives charged with the responsibilities to do statistical research, have conducted numerous empirical research studies on the subjects of inactive members, the unchurched, denominational switchers, and church growth.

The findings of these empirical studies are generally not employed by parish clergy and lay leaders. Perhaps the primary reason for this is that most parish leaders do not read the technical journals which publish the research reports. Even if parish leaders read the journals, they might be a bit frustrated in trying to make use of the results of the studies. Most

parish leaders have little or no knowledge of (1) the nature of the intellectual structures or models employed by social scientists, (2) statistical analysis, and (3) how one goes about evaluating the relative importance of the results of a given study in relationship to the findings of other studies which have investigated the same or similar subjects. One of the great gifts of Lyle Schaller is that he has been popularizing and making understandable the findings of other social scientists for many years. One of the purposes of this volume is to interpret and explain what social scientists have learned about people who have become or are becoming church dropouts.

The writer has a number of biases about which he is acutely aware. It is important that the reader take these biases into consideration as he works through the materials that follow.

In the first place, the writer believes that it is imperative for the individual congregation to have as its primary motivation the desire to demonstrate by its every action and reaction that it is a functioning part of the body of Christ. As a portion of the body of Christ here on earth, the congregation is called upon to live out every aspect of its corporate life in agreement with what it claims to be. Such agreement is perceived by members and nonmembers as a sign of integrity and genuineness. Without such agreement the entire witness of the congregation is blunted.

Second, the individual congregation has the responsibility to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all who are outside the faith and to invite them to affiliate with that congregation in worship, service, fellowship, nurture, and “good-newsing” additional people. These activities have as one of their purposes the “discipling” of members of the congregations so that, as the Holy Spirit ministers to them through Word and sacraments, they might grow to spiritual maturity. One hoped-for manifestation of such spiritual maturity is that these individuals would not forsake their Lord by drifting into apostasy.

It is imperative that congregations do not automatically assume that when members have become dropouts from the congregation’s life they have also rejected their Lord and become apostate. The prejudgment that someone has become apostate must take into consideration other variables, all of which are suggested in the Bible, rather than just the variable of participation in the life of a local congregation. As Lyle Schaller has written, “There does not appear to be any positive correlation between the commitment of the individual to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the loyalty of that particular individual to a certain congregation. . . . A loyalty to Jesus Christ does not automatically keep people in a specific parish.”<sup>2</sup>

Third, as the individual congregation goes about its task of “good-newsing” persons who are not Christians and “discipling” members, the power of God is brought to bear on all such people through the Gospel. The term “Gospel” is here used in its technical, narrow Lutheran sense of “Gospel” as juxtaposed to “Law.” When a congregation promotes membership on the basis of considerations like its success, the social class of its members, its clever programming, and a variety of other claims to fame, that congregation is communicating a gospel of cheap grace much more reminiscent of the way of the world and its standards than of the costly grace which undergirds the Gospel message.

The writer also has some undergirding assumptions that he employs which are important to reveal. The initial assumption is that most pastors and lay persons prefer to avoid ministering to individuals who have become inactive. Many other congregational tasks are perceived to be more attractive and exciting than visiting and attempting to reclaim inactive members. As a result of this attitude, pastors and lay leaders put off calling on inactive members. When feelings of guilt arise over ignoring these people, manifold rationalizations, including the importance of gaining new members; help to give comfort to troubled consciences.

A second assumption is that stereotypes which have developed over the years concerning the character and motivations of members who have become inactive are generally far too simplistic. Such people do not comprise a homogeneous grouping of people. They are not motivated by a limited number of causes to become church dropouts. Rather, specific individuals are motivated to inactivity by a wide variety of concerns, factors, conditions, and situations.

A third assumption is that most congregations elect or appoint their most talented members to positions which are designed to meet the survival goals of the congregation. Such survival goals include the raising of money and keeping the physical facilities of the congregation in good repair. This practice leaves less talented and perhaps less committed members of the congregation for managing the committees, boards, and agencies that are responsible for evangelism, soul care, and the “discipling” of the congregation’s members.

A fourth assumption is that people learn to be religious. The primary teachers of religious attitudes are parents and spouses. This learning can be enhanced or decreased by things like doctrinal beliefs, attitudes about sexual matters, feelings about the clergy serving local congregations, and the sermons that are delivered at worship services. However, the primary socialization force to encourage church participation and other religious

behavior remains the family. Of most importance to individuals is the attitude and behavior of the spouse in a family constellation.<sup>3</sup> By implication this means that other variables which are used in many empirical studies will be much less powerful and profound predictors of religious behaviors like church attendance.

A fifth assumption is that trends in the percentage of people who participate in church life vary greatly over even short periods of time. Therefore it is very hazardous to try to predict what will happen from one decade to the next.<sup>4</sup>

A responsible analysis of the subject of inactive members cannot be presented without taking seriously the contributions of numerous social scientists who have conducted a multitude of studies on this and related subjects. Yet, as asserted earlier, most parish leaders are relatively unsophisticated in regard to the processes of conducting social science research and how to make use of the conclusions arrived at on the basis of the data collected and analyzed. Prior to reporting on some important findings of various social scientists relative to the issue of becoming inactive in the local congregation, it is important that the reader be aware of the major difficulties that are inherent in designing and carrying out research efforts in the area of human behaviors and attitudes and in applying the conclusions that have been drawn from the data generated by such studies.

Among the difficulties faced by social scientists is that people change continually—to some degree day in and day out. This is the primary reason why pollsters take their polls right up to and during an election. They know how volatile and fickle the attitudes and intentions of some people can be. Thus every empirical study is merely a snapshot of the variety of opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a randomly identified group of people on the day they were interviewed.

Even such a snapshot is tentative because we can only say that the people who completed questionnaires *may* have held a particular set of beliefs, opinions, or attitudes and *may* have been willing to exhibit behavior consistent with those beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. An empirical study is not a motion picture but a single snapshot. These limitations cannot be stressed too strongly.

The assertion above that the data gathered in empirical studies *may* reflect the attitudes, beliefs, or opinions of a sample of people on a given day about a particular subject further emphasizes the tentativeness of all data. Another significant problem faced by researchers in the social sciences is that respondents can choose to lie to the interviewer or give inaccurate data as they complete a paper-and-pencil instrument. People

may provide such less-than-accurate information for a variety of reasons. Perhaps they want to please the interviewer. Or they may want to present themselves in a particular way. Many subjects are test- or instrument-wise enough to “see through” the instrument. In other words, such subjects determine what it is the researcher is attempting to find, and they consciously or unconsciously set out to deceive him or to provide him with what they perceive he wants even though they are providing false information in the process.

A third problem revolves around the use of language. There is always the possibility that items the researcher has designed so carefully can be misunderstood by those who respond. This is a significant problem that social scientists try to prevent by carefully field-testing the instrument prior to using it, yet there is no way to make absolutely certain that all respondents will perfectly understand what they are being asked in a particular question.

A fourth problem is the fact that when one is doing research on human beings there is usually a maddening multiplicity of independent variables. If these independent variables cannot be held constant or if the researcher does not recognize that they are important, the data one gathers may be a proverbial comparison of apples and oranges. For example, a criticism that has been leveled at Dean Kelley’s methodology in the preparation of his famous book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* is that if Kelley had held constant the fertility rates in the various denominations he compared, much of the data he discovered to be statistically significant would not have been so any longer.

It is not scholarly to put together a research design to look for whatever it is that the researcher may find. Research that is worthy of the title “scholarly research” must be based on some theoretical model. Most people are more aware of theoretical models in the natural sciences (i. e., Einstein’s theory of relativity, the theory of evolution, etc.) than they are of the theoretical models employed in the social sciences. Yet there are hundreds and perhaps even thousands of theoretical models that are being used in all the social sciences each day. Thus in the best of all worlds the social scientist evaluates a wide variety of specific theoretical models and the particular insights that each model might produce before selecting a model he will employ in his new effort of empirical research.

Andrew Greeley is very critical of the scientific models sociologists of religion have used over the past decades. In his book *Crisis in the Church* Greeley writes: “Secularization, social class, relevance, then, simply are not even remotely adequate explanations of American religious affiliation and disaffiliation. The socialization model, fore-

shadowed by John Kotre and clearly enunciated by William McCready, is vastly more useful in approaching the phenomenon of American religion.”<sup>5</sup>

At some time in the future some other sociologist may be as critical of the “socialization model” as Greeley is critical of the models that emphasize “secularization,” “social class,” and “relevance.”

Another important factor that must be considered is that a research design, since it is based on a specific theoretical model, will ask questions only in one way. How a question is asked will cause a social scientist to arrive at a particular answer to the question. Kelley’s question, “Does the variable of the theological orientation of given denominations help to identify which denominations are growing and which denominations have ceased growing?” calls upon the social scientist to gather different data and facts and to evaluate those data and facts differently as he attempts to answer the question than does the question, “Does the fertility rate of the members of specific denominations help to identify which denominations are growing and which denominations have ceased to grow?” Therefore the selection of a theoretical model and the questions the model will cause the researcher to ask have profound implications on what conclusions the research effort will generate. As was said in the rural America of the 1920s and 1930s, “Select your ruts carefully, for you will be in them a long time.”

In other words, a theoretical model is a set of intellectual ruts. The theoretical model determines the questions asked, the data that must be gathered, and predetermines the answers that will be forthcoming at the conclusion of the research effort.

Assuming that a social scientist has (1) chosen the theoretical model carefully, (2) conducted the research project with integrity, (3) taken into consideration all the germane variables, and (4) evaluated the gathered data properly, there is still one more issue, which is the most important consideration of all. This consideration is that findings of social scientific research are properly used if they are perceived as descriptive and improperly used if they are assumed to be prescriptive.

A case in point, familiar to almost every adult in the United States, is what the judicial branch of the federal government has done with the conclusions of Dr. James S. Coleman’s 1966 report entitled “Equality of Educational Opportunity.”

The data gathered by Dr. Coleman, prior to writing his now famous report, were interpreted as demonstrating that poor black children achieved at a higher level in school if they were able to attend classes with white middle-class students. Coleman’s report described a situation that

seemed generally to be the case from a statistical vantage point.

If Dr. Coleman's report had been duly filed, shelved, and ignored, as is the fate of so many studies, his work would probably have been cited only in footnotes of Ph.D. and Ed.D. dissertations, and some other sociologists might have made attempts to see if they could repeat his findings.

However, this was not the fate of Coleman's report. Its contents began to be used by federal judges to mandate school desegregation by means of a process which came to be called "busing." When this happened, Coleman's study was no longer a descriptive report by a well-known sociologist of what he had discovered relative to the classroom achievement of black, lowerclass children. The conclusions of the study began to be employed prescriptively by the courts and were used to justify the actions and judgments of the judges. Thus the application of the conclusions of the Coleman report became the principal battleground between the ideologies of political liberals and conservatives. Court actions justified by citing Coleman's conclusions were condemned by white supremacists and black supremacists, while white and black moderates hailed the courts' actions as the beginning of a new day of significant federal involvement in the area of civil rights.

This lesson from recent history illustrates a number of basic points. The first is that there is a significant difference between descriptive and prescriptive applications of conclusions reached through social science research. Second, when descriptive conclusions are used prescriptively, such applications will create ideological conflicts. Third, since every human being has ideological commitments, there is a very great likelihood that individuals will read, study, and apply only those studies whose conclusions seem to agree with their own prior ideological commitments. Fourth, because of this propensity of human beings to accept and integrate only those conclusions which are congruent with commitments and understandings already held, there is a danger that causal factors will be perceived too simplistically and important considerations will be ignored because they conflict with ideological commitments. Finally, simplistic understandings cause people to design superficial plans to confront problems which are too complex to remedy with such easy approaches. Failure of these superficial plans makes people even more reticent to make a second attempt at confronting the issue.

All of the above has been written by way of warning to the reader. The material that follows attempts to paint the mosaic of inactive members from many vantage points. The reader will not find a simple

“cookbook” approach to confronting the people who have become inactive. Rather the reader will discover a multiplicity of ways to understand who the inactive people are, why they were motivated to become inactive, and numerous ways the various types of inactive people might be approached. To select only those causes that conform to ideology and personal experience or which seem easiest to address will likely produce frustration and cynicism over the long haul. Openness and willingness to seriously consider all the possibilities will be more likely to produce effective strategies. Openness to the data will also reflect willingness to follow through on the implications of the time-worn cliché, “You’ve got to meet people where they are.”

## Chapter 1

# Who Are the Dropouts?

Before any strategy can be developed to try to reclaim inactive members for parish life, it is necessary to know what kinds or types of people drop out. It is imperative to perceive the variety of motivations which nudge people into a posture of inactivity. As will soon become evident from the variety of factors described later in this chapter, the answer to the question “Who are the inactive?” is complex and calls for a complex answer.

At the outset it is important to acknowledge that the data collected on why people are inactive is problematic in that it is always gathered *ex post facto*. There seems to be no data that reflects a longitudinal approach to determining how church members function month in and month out and what elements impinge on them as time passes to cause them to contemplate, begin, and complete the process of dropping out. Because of this reality all findings must be weighed carefully. The data supplied by the dropouts reflects the way they feel when they are being interviewed. They may choose to be less than candid in their responses. They may answer the questions in ways that seek to justify their actions. They may have lost touch with important considerations because of the passing of time. In short, the data is not as “hard” as we would like it to be. The reader needs to keep this reality in mind when proceeding to study the materials that follow.

Hale’s vantage point is helpful here. He has written: “The rites of passage by which people become members of religious communities are well known. The rites of passage by which people leave, the ‘tipping phenomenon,’ remains unexplored.”<sup>1</sup>

Hale’s technique of interviewing unchurched people provided him with much anecdotal material. In summarizing his material, he wrote:

“The anecdotal material collected in this study reports the perspectives people have of the world we call ‘church.’ All the stories have in common a singular behavioral result: namely, separation from the religious institutions of our society. . . . We do not know precisely what triggers the exodus for some and what holds others in. The indications seem to suggest that for most the process of estrangement is gradual.”<sup>2</sup>

As social scientists have studied the issues of promoting participation and intervening in the lives of individuals who drop out of a congregation’s life, four major categories summarize the various factors that seem to be important. These categories are (1) national contextual factors, (2) national institutional factors, (3) local contextual factors, and (4) local institutional factors. A local congregation has no power to influence national contextual factors, little or no power to influence national institutional and local contextual factors. The local congregation can only influence and intentionally shape local institutional factors.<sup>3</sup>

Inherent in these categories are the seeds of significant intellectual debates and conflicts produced by ideological commitments. For example, some like H. Paul Douglass have argued that the local congregation and its “success” is almost totally dependent on local contextual factors. Other writers such as McGavran, Wagner, and Kelley emphasize the importance of local institutional factors. More recent studies suggest that both sets of factors contribute to a congregation’s “success” or decline. The specific percentage of each factor’s contribution is highly dependent on the specifics of a given situation.<sup>4</sup>

It is also important to note that there has been a great deal of similarity in the patterns of the large denominations concerning dropouts from their local congregations. Because of this similarity in patterns some argue that national contextual factors are much more important than national institutional (denominational) factors in explaining what has happened.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the data reflected in this chapter suggest that many of the reasons why individuals drop out of the life of a local congregation are beyond the congregation’s control and power. A sense of frustration could result as that awareness becomes more sharply focused. On the other hand, there are other factors that clearly can be addressed by the local congregation. Rather than despairing over the unattainable, it would appear to be prudent to concentrate efforts on addressing those areas where the congregation is capable of positive and remedial action.

Using data generated by the 1978 Gallup study, Roozen has concluded that about 40 percent of the American population is unchurched. Over 90 percent of these unchurched Americans were at one

time or another in their lifetime affiliated in some sense with a religious community. Over 60 percent of the nonchurched people reported having attended church regularly or participated in religious instruction classes earlier in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

Roozen has also concluded that almost 50 percent of Americans drop out of active religious participation at some point during their lifetime.<sup>7</sup> This percentage demonstrates how pervasive the issue of dropouts is for church leaders. To place these statistics in the proper context it is imperative to add that many of these people return to church life later in their lifetime. Roozen suggests that up to 80 percent return to church.<sup>8</sup>

Roozen has also asserted that in the 1970s reentry rates of dropouts have risen so that now reentries offset the losses incurred by dropouts. For the first time in 50 years the two rates are in balance.<sup>9</sup> Much more will be said later about the returnees and what factors seem to motivate their return.

A relatively consistent finding of studies is that the age variable is important in evaluating the percentage of members who drop out of churches. However, recent studies have called into question some results of studies conducted earlier. Roozen discovered that among preteen children there is a very low dropout rate. However, the dropout rate increases significantly during the teen years.<sup>10</sup>

Numerous suggestions have been offered to explain this rise in the rate of dropouts among teenagers. Perhaps the increased attrition rate reflects the fact that parents have less influence on teenagers than they do on preteen children. It is also possible that teenagers perceive the church as having little of worth to offer them as individuals. Some have hypothesized that the conventional church program caters to the needs of preteen children and adults. Thus the church is perceived as having little of relevance to offer the average teenager. This withdrawal from the church has been noted particularly among males, those individuals who have graduated from high school, those who have gotten a college education, and those who have come from Roman Catholic backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>

Once the respondents mature beyond the teen years and reach the early 20s the dropout rate decreases by almost one-half from the rate found among teenagers. Respondents in their late 20s and early 30s have an attrition rate of one-half that of the respondents who are teenagers. This decrease in the dropout rate remains about the same for respondents until they reach the mid-50s. In the mid-50s the dropout rate is about half the rate of dropouts of people in the late 30s through the mid-50s.<sup>12</sup>

Roozen summarizes his findings in these words: "The likelihood of

pre-teen disengagement is slight (2.6 percent); the dropout rate reaches its maximum among teens (15.5 percent); drops for those in their early twenties to 9.1 percent; plateaus at around 4.6 percent for those twenty-five to fifty-four; then drops to pre-teen levels for those over fifty-five.”<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that these data disagree with those collected earlier by various social scientists. Earlier studies reported a continued increase in the dropout rate from church membership among individuals from the teen years into early adulthood and among those who had become older adults or elderly.<sup>14</sup>

The data from various studies strongly imply that individuals who have chosen to become inactive from organized church life are those whose lives reflect cosmopolitan attitudes and life-styles. Individuals who have finished high school are twice as likely to drop out as those who did not graduate from high school. It appears that as people become better educated they are likely to be more mobile, more diversified in their value systems, and less likely to remain under the influence of a single local congregation and a nuclear or extended family.<sup>15</sup>

Although the above statements are generally accurate, the picture is even more complex than has been suggested. The changes that have come about in commitment to the church have been greatly affected by the religious climate on a national scale. This climate change is part of a larger mosaic of value changes. These changes cluster around values like “sex and family, birth control, ideal family size, civil liberties, legalization of marijuana and (among Catholics) political party identification.”<sup>16</sup>

Hoge judges that all these changes have been in the “direction of individualism, personal freedom and tolerance of diversity.”<sup>17</sup> This new attitude has been adopted most enthusiastically by young adults, particularly college-educated young adults. This change has taken place since 1960—which explains why reports of studies conducted before then asserted that college-educated adults were more likely to be church attenders than the non-college-educated population.<sup>18</sup> Thus the national contextual factor of, for lack of a better term, “secularization” is primarily responsible for the disaffiliation of college students and college graduates from the institutional church.

Roozen offers the hopeful prognosis that most teenage dropouts will return to active church involvement sometime later in their lives. He suggests that the return rate is particularly high for individuals in their late 20s and early 30s, and for those who perceived religion to be very important during their childhood.<sup>19</sup>

Studies conducted on individuals who have matured beyond their teen years have produced a variety of findings. In some studies the most

frequently mentioned reason for dropping out was that the subjects did not feel they were loved, accepted, or wanted by other members of the congregation. Their perception was that no one in the congregation was demonstrating any real love or concern for them.<sup>20</sup>

In other studies specific events which disrupted the lives of the subjects were cited as the primary reasons for dropping out of active church life. The reason most often identified by those 20 to 54 years of age was moving to a new community. After age 54 poor health became the reason identified most frequently. In many instances these disruptions in life cause subjects to pinpoint other items like irrelevance of the church and conflict with the church or a church member as additional causes for dropping out.<sup>21</sup>

Studies have also listed personal considerations such as "illness in the family, changes in work schedules, transportation problems, lack of support or opposition from other family members, too busy with other responsibilities, and leisure pursuits . . ." as important reasons why respondents have dropped out of church.<sup>22</sup>

Hartman reported that the cluster of reasons cited third-most-frequently was that the activities of the church and church school were not relevant. Respondents identified such things as "poor sermons or teaching, too much boredom and busywork, irrelevant curriculum resources, and apathy among church workers."<sup>23</sup>

Dr. John Savage of L.E.A.D. Consultants of Pittsford, N. Y., has popularized through his book *The Bored and Apathetic Church Member* and his cassette tapes a relatively simple typology of why people drop out of the church. Savage designed his study using a theoretical model which emphasizes the "Anxiety-Anger Complex."<sup>24</sup> Savage assumed that people move away from the church when their life in the church produces some kind of anxiety.<sup>25</sup> This is a significant assumption to make. Savage worked with four types of anxiety: (1) reality, (2) neurotic, (3) moral, and (4) existential.<sup>26</sup>

After interviewing 101 New York Methodists representing four congregations who had been categorized in three groupings as very active members, less active members, and inactive members, Savage developed a typology which asserts that the primary motivations people have for dropping out of church come from their participation in the church itself. All of the 23 dropouts had had an anxiety-provoking event happen to them. Frequently conflicts with one or more of a cluster of persons (pastor, church member, family member) or the feeling of being overworked in the church's organizational life constituted the anxiety-provoking event. This event was reacted to by the subject in anger. If the

person turned the blame inward, the person ultimately became a bored church member and dropped out. If the person turned the blame outward, he became an apathetic member and also dropped out of church life.<sup>27</sup>

Savage found that all 23 respondents asserted that no one had ever come to visit them to find out why they dropped out. This fact made the subjects bitter. They felt that this lack of action on the part of the leaders of the congregation confirmed the fact that no one in their congregation really cared about them.

One highly emotionally charged finding of Savage is that dropouts consciously or unconsciously give the local congregation only six to eight weeks once they have dropped out to call on them. If the subjects did not receive some indication they were missed in that period of time, they reinvested their efforts in other pursuits.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, according to Savage, people are motivated to remain members of congregations or drop out of congregations because of factors stemming from their participation in those congregations. When members of congregations feel positive about their experiences in the congregation, when they feel appreciated and loved, they will become more and more involved in the life of the congregation. But if they later begin to feel that they are being rejected, that they are no longer appreciated and loved as much as they were in the past, then they are likely to experience feelings of anger, disillusionment, and finally grief, and they drop out.<sup>29</sup> This may also explain why some dropouts describe themselves as having been overworked. Such people feel as if their strength and energy has been used up by the church.<sup>30</sup>

Savage's typology is reminiscent of a cartoon published originally in the *New Yorker* magazine. It pictures an older male, walking along in a slouched position, hands in overcoat pockets, with an unhappy look on his face. In a circle around the individual are the following words written in this order "awareness—involvement—activism—confrontation—disenchantment—alienation—apathy."<sup>31</sup>

William McKinney has described such dropouts as the disenchanteds. He describes the disenchanteds as "the reactive dropouts, those who covet church relationships but for whom church experiences have been so unsatisfactory or painful that they stay outside."<sup>32</sup>

Walrath and others have judged that Savage's typology represents a small percentage of the people who drop out of congregations. These types of dropouts are obviously going to be noticed because "they have turned their backs on the church." If this judgment is accurate, to design a reclamation program for dropouts assuming only Savage's model will not

effectively minister to the large percentage of dropouts whose reasons for leaving are widely divergent and more complex than provided for in Savage's model.<sup>33</sup>

Numbers of analysts have highlighted the importance of spouse and family for enhancing or diminishing the involvement of individuals in the life of the church. Probably no sociologist has been more adamant about this factor than Andrew Greeley. He has written: "It is the family of procreation, the family in which one participates as a husband or wife, that really matters. In most cases that family accounts for more of the variance in religious behavior than all the other variables put together."<sup>34</sup>

In this quotation Greeley is asserting that all the other variables social scientists are fond of investigating (education, social class, race, denominational affiliation, areas of the country in which respondents live, etc.) are less important as predictors of religious affiliation than the "family of procreation."

Greeley has reported that as marital satisfaction increases there seems to be an increasing closeness to the church. Positive influence toward religious commitment on the part of a spouse is most influential in satisfying marriages. And in satisfying marriages the influence of the spouse tends to lean in the direction of greater religiousness.<sup>35</sup> Thus Greeley proposes, "Improve the quality of marital intimacy and very likely the level of religious devotion will rise."<sup>36</sup> Later he says, "When religious leaders, journalists and theorists raise the question, 'How do you make people more religious?' the best answer that can be offered on the basis of this volume is 'make marriages happier.'<sup>37</sup>

In light of the above statements relative to the importance of a spouse's religious commitment for the other spouse's involvement in the life of the church, it is not surprising that a number of authors have commented on the negative effects of religiously mixed marriages. People often become inactive after they have joined their spouse's denomination or congregation.<sup>38</sup> Others begin to drift toward dropping out when they discover that their spouse is not supportive of their involvement in or commitment to the church.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of the family climate and religious commitment is not limited to husband-and-wife relationships. Greeley has also reported that family tensions during childhood have a negative effect on the religiousness of people as they become adults. Childhood family tensions seem to cause people to view the church in a negative manner.<sup>40</sup>

Hunsberger, using 51 control subjects and 51 apostate subjects, discovered supporting evidence for Greeley's assertions. Hunsberger summarized his conclusions by writing: "Emphasis on religion in

childhood is positively associated with later religiosity and agreement with parental religious teachings. Thus it is suggested that the religious environment of the home also may play an important part in the apostasy process, such that weaker emphasis on religion and religious practice is related to greater probability of apostasy later in life.”<sup>41</sup>

Savage’s findings, reported above, included the fact that conflicts with family members were major contributors to triggering his subjects’ anxiety, anger, apathy, boredom, and dropping-out pattern.

In 1965 Donald Metz reported that his interviews of attending and nonattending members of two Methodist congregations produced the results that almost one-fourth of the inactive members of these congregations cited some family difficulty as their primary reason for being nonattenders. Within this primary reason there were two major sub-reasons for the inactivity. One subgroup indicated that their spouses were not interested in church. The second subreason was that there had been some change in regard to children.<sup>42</sup> The very limited study done by Vangerud on inactive members of one congregation caused him to conclude: “Withdrawal from corporate worship in most cases seemed to be a coping device designed to reestablish a new balance in the family constellation.”<sup>43</sup>

The assertion that parental religious teaching is influential in the lives of children needs to be clarified lest it be misunderstood. Roozen found that people who had been raised by conservative Protestant mothers were the most likely to drop out of the life of the church. The dropout rate of teenagers was the highest for those with conservative Protestant backgrounds. The dropout rate of teens and young adults among Catholics and liberal Protestants is more evenly divided between individuals in their teens and individuals in their early 20s than is the case with conservative Protestants. In general the dropout rate is lower for teens and young adults who felt religion was very important to them during their childhood. But even among those who perceived religion to be very important during their childhood, 20 percent were no longer active church participants by the age of 25.<sup>44</sup>

It has become clear that, although they do not often admit it, one of the primary motivations people have for joining congregations is the relationships they have established or want to establish with others. Since social satisfaction and social needs are motivators for affiliation, it is logical to conclude that people drop out of congregations when their social relationships are destroyed or when the relationships do not meet the members’ initial expectations. The leaders of growing congregations have recognized and attempted to meet the needs of members for (1)

recognition, (2) esteem, and (3) a sense of belonging.<sup>45</sup> Dudley reports that the dropouts who remain within the vicinity of their former congregation most often cite broken relationships as the major reason for dropping out of church. Some former Presbyterians listed the loss of significant friendships as the most important reason for leaving their church.<sup>46</sup>

Donald Metz has also pointed to the importance of troubled relationships as a motivator of people who dropped out of churches. Metz reported that one of the major criticisms that nonattenders had concerning their two local Methodist congregations was the lack of personal contacts they had with fellow congregational members.<sup>47</sup>

Further evidence of the importance of good personal relationships as motivators for involvement in the life of a congregation and broken or poor personal relationships as motivators for dropping out of congregations is found in other studies. A United Presbyterian committee used a telephone interviewing process to talk with 225 persons who had been removed from the membership rolls of local congregations and a like number of active Presbyterians. The committee found that the dropouts were less likely than the active members to describe their church as being friendly, warm, and personally satisfying.<sup>48</sup>

Schaller has reported that there is evidence which indicates that one-third and even as many as one-half of the members of all Protestant churches do not feel that they belong or fit into the congregation of which they are members.<sup>49</sup> Schaller elsewhere has indicated that slightly less than one-third of all inactive members were unhappy about the congregation of which they were now former members. A very frequent complaint of these people was that they did not feel they were accepted by longtime members of the congregation or by individuals who served as its leaders.<sup>50</sup>

Certain types of people are particularly likely to feel unaccepted. Examples of such types include "the person who marries a member, but does not feel accepted in his or her own right . . . single young adults . . . childless couples who join what turns out to be a very child-centered parish . . . the person from a nationality background different from that of most of the members . . . the new member who never becomes comfortable with the order of worship or music of this congregation."<sup>51</sup>

Schaller has also asserted that people become inactive because they are unable to find a group in the congregation of which to be a part. This statement implicitly affirms the importance of positive relationships as motivators of active participation in the life of a congregation.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps individuals who grew up in small rural congregations which were made up of a limited number of extended families and who migrate to the city

and join large urban or suburban congregations might be representative of a type of person who would drop out because of not being able to find a group in which to participate.

Rauff has reported that inactive Roman Catholic lay persons say that an impersonal quality was characteristic of their former parish churches. Rauff concludes that people are not willing to accept alienation and impersonality in their parishes.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, the data collected by Savage, which was reported earlier, also affirms how conflicts with clergy, family members, and fellow church members can be the precipitating event which causes people to withdraw from the life of a parish.

The importance of relationships for motivating individuals to join a congregation and the maintenance of those relationships for continued participation in the life of a congregation may be well established sociologically and psychologically, but these factors are difficult for many to accept. Perhaps pastors particularly want to believe that the primary motivation for initial and continued affiliation is commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For some, emphasis on relationships may appear to cheapen the integrity of church membership or call into question the quality of members' personal relationship with Christ.

This factor has caused Dudley to write: "Implicit in membership withdrawal is a curious double standard. When people unite with a congregation, they resist suggesting personal needs or social satisfactions as causes for joining. They consciously relate church membership with program participation and religious values. When they leave, however, they are more likely to blame a breakdown in personal relationships."<sup>54</sup>

But perhaps even more frightening to many parish leaders is the fact that if relationships are so important then repair of broken relationships must become a high priority concern of clerical and lay leaders. Most congregational leaders do not have the skills, temperament, and patience to serve effectively as facilitators to repair relationships. Theologically, leaders have to come to grips with the nature of anger; psychologically, they have to learn how to dissipate anger; and methodologically, they must be skilled at resolving the underlying conflict that produced the angry reactions in the first place. More will be said later about how parish leaders can work through anger and assist in restoring relationships.

Dropouts have relatively strong negative attitudes toward sermons. Greeley has indicated that the quality of sermons is an important issue when considering Roman Catholic involvement in church. Greeley judges that the quality of sermons is a more important variable than "clericalism, feminism, racism, and in some respects even more important