

# Attrition of BNC/SNU Alumni: A Speculative Assessment

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## Abstract

An informal review of responses of affluent BNC/SNU alumni to questions concerning their past and present church affiliations. The respondents represented a pool of former students with family incomes of \$60,000 or more. The responses were gathered from 189 persons by two participating college administrators in the course of their visitations of potential donors to the institution's Vision for Greatness Capital Campaign. Although never intending originally to conduct a "study", the college discovered that, of the 189 persons contact, 39% were *presently* in the Church of the Nazarene. 47% were *former* Nazarenes, and 14% had never been members of the church.

## Introduction

This paper has been developed in response to questions and impressions that arose from a variety of alumni contact experiences during a \$3 1/2 million capital campaign at Southern Nazarene University, at the time known as Bethany Nazarene College. Contacts represented in the course of the campaign were made by me as the vice president for institutional advancement, and by J. Michael Crabtree, the school's director of alumni affairs.

The findings that will be represented and discussed were not derived from the rigorous application of any empirically verified model. In fact, they were not gained with any initial intention on our part of ever compiling the results - hence they represent only what they are - categorical summaries of verbal responses to questions casually asked in the course of friendly conversation. Therefore our findings arose out of discussion, observation, and active interpersonal exchange. We must state at the outset that any claim to situational application of a coherent and sophisticated methodology will be most assiduously avoided!

Nor, I must confess, was there any *intent* at the outset to correctly and methodically garner alumni response to key questions. It was rather, that as conversations developed, we found that certain interactive questions and responses began to continually surface. This piqued our interest and led to the imposition on each conversation of a sort of "hidden format" of questions designed to provide information on the respondents's present and previous (if any) church affiliation. Therefore, such data as will be presented actually "emerged" from the process itself and if the results eventually have any value for further theoretical investigation, such further study might profitably utilize the methodologies of grounded theory.

With these necessary caveats in mind, let me lead you through the context and process of this informal study. In order to properly understand the results obtained, a preliminary discussion of campaign strategy will be helpful. The content focus of the paper however, will be on the

denominational choices of affluent BNC/SNU alumni approached for campaign contributions and what such choices seem to suggest for further study.

## **The Context of the Responses**

During the spring semester of 1982, the college launched a capital campaign effort designed to address certain capital and programmatic needs. Unlike many traditionally undertaken campaigns at our colleges, the focus of this thrust was to be somewhat unique - designed to be addressed to potential giving groups in the college community other than, and independent of local church congregations. Of course local churches would be included in the overall strategy, but together they would not become the dependable "fulcrum" at the center of the effort. They would become only one campaign among several others directed to: Oklahoma City business: the BNC President's FELLOWS; college trustees; foundations; selected special donors; and, the college alumni.

The campaign was successful in pledges gained and this was due, perhaps in great measure to the resulting establishment of strong and friendly relational contacts between the potential donors and the assigned campaign personnel. Clearly representing the institution's largest donor potential, the alumni at that time numbered in excess of 16, 000. Little data however, was available on their interests, capabilities, occupations or financial stature.

In order to address this critical gap in our knowledge, the alumni office had during the approves semester sent a comprehensive questionnaire to all former students requesting information for an alumni directory. Of 14, 000 questionnaires sent, over 8,000 were returned, and unexpected response rate of nearly 58%! The questionnaire yielded information concerning the donor's occupation, position, income range (family and personal), and degree of satisfaction with his/her experience at BNC. These factors were then used to select alumni that we thought might be most disposed to give personal funds to a capital campaign for the college.

It was obvious that all alumni could not be visited. The need to economically utilize our resources dictated that our general access strategy had to be through mail and peer field contact. Among alumni most capable however, the decision was made to personally visit them and explain the direction and current mission of the college - and to challenge them to an assisting ministry. Within the field of fund development it is generally recognized that the effort to raise \$1, 000 is usually as great as that expended to raise \$25, 000. Therefore, with limited staff at the wheel, it made sense to concentrate our efforts on affluent persons deemed most capable and possibly receptive to a college request.

The lower "cut off" point came at the family income level or \$60, 000. Only persons at that level or above were to be specially visited. (Fund development strategists have found that most persons will never commit more than 10-12% of their net income o external causes, i.e., for a gift of \$10, 000, it is will be necessary for the donor to be in the \$100, 000 to \$120, 000 annual income range.) From this group 189 persons were visited on site and personally solicited for the campaign as " alumni leaders". Each visit was designed to build friendship for the college, but more important for long term goals, to build a personal "bridge" of friendship

and trust. This why the visits were almost always at a place or location convenient for, and familiar to, the respondent/donor.

## Process

It was thought that donor contributions would be most easily realized through personal contact and establishment of friendships. During the course of the campaign this became more and more apparent. The alumni were hungry for contact.

With the exception of infrequent visits to churches, the top administrative leaders of the college seldom visited these graduates on location. If they were no longer in Nazarene churches, or if they as current members did not take the initiative to contact the executive leadership themselves, they simply lost contact with the college. In addition, the college was not budgetarily geared up to fund such "extravagant" ventures. Visitations were costly - especially out of state and if made frequently. Persons were more easily contacted through church visits and in any case, administrative time is typically eaten by campus or denominational interests and responsibilities. Finally, there had not been a perception administratively that such on - site contact was necessary, or even necessarily desirable.

A suggested reason for this state of affairs may be that the college has traditionally been funded by its *churches*. This funding has come through tithes and offerings. A strong personal involvement in building and improving the school was not an *excepted* behavior. Philanthropy has not been a group expectation within the socioeconomic groups that have been the strength of the denomination. Even among the affluent within the church context, these working class origins have very possibly dictated a lack of interest and responsibility for the success of the effort - except in the *collective* impact of tithes and offerings through the church.

And in context of limited income and few appreciated assets historically, this phenomenon was understandable. Through tithes and offerings much could be done with relatively less from each person - and the "duty" was done - who could complain?

Therefore, a successful solicitation strategy needed to address effectively two contextual situations: The view that the church took care of the "real needs" (and this had no relationship to whether the person him/herself tithed or not) along with a dearth of the philanthropic imperative; and, little or no previous systematic cultivation of personal friendships with persons of financial stature who might be predisposed to assist the college and share its dreams.

As the campaign progressed, we increasingly realized that certain responses to casual questions were becoming frequent and somewhat predictable. We slowly began to realize that information valuable to the church and its future was being communicated. We were increasingly finding many respondents that had left the church and were, at that time, communicants elsewhere.

It was at this point that we initiated a two - pronged approach: In conversation, to causally inquire about the person' s church home - where they presently attend. Here we took care

(insofar as possible) not to prejudice the response - we were, after all representative personnel of the college, a Nazarene college. We were expected to be representatives of the church. We found however that when the question of church affiliation was then suggested, the response were sometimes very guarded - or non-committal. Often there was a period of awkwardness during which the person tried to determine "what we should hear." In my visits, when I identified myself as alumni, the revelation often surprised the respondent. He/she had assumed me to most certainly be a member of the clergy - after all, "those are the only ones who become presidents or vice presidents!" On a number of occasions,, this "revelation tended to precipitate more talking and a warmer relationship.

The questions that were asked either directly or indirectly were:

1. What church do you affiliate with?
2. (If not a Nazarene) Did you ever attend a Nazarene church?
3. How long ago was that?
4. (If formerly a member) How did you happen to find the church that you attend? Why did you change?
5. How do you feel about the college now?

We deliberately tried to make no judgements on a person' s present or past actions with respect to the church. Persons who were Nazarene were affirmed in their identity; persons who had changed were asked where they were presently attending and how they happened to be at the church where they now were. If possible, and unobtrusively, we would try to determine what the factors were that led them to where they now worshipped.

## Response

The responses to these questions yielded for us some rather surprising information. (Incidentally, of the 189 persons personally visited, 99 actually became donors. The others did not for various reasons contribute to the campaign effort.) However, of all the persons visited in the target alumni cohort:

74, or 39% were *presently* Nazarenes

89, or 47% were *former* Nazarenes (defined as having once been a member of a Nazarene congregation)

26, or 14% had *never* been a member of a Nazarene church.

This meant that 61% of the alumni in income categories above \$60, 000 annually were not presently in or members of, Nazarene churches. This is an interesting figure and it is likely that further research should be done to determine the degree to which this is representative of the real situation as it exist. If there is an implicit assumption that Nazarene college graduates will, for the most part, be found in Nazarene churches, the foregoing figure seems to suggest that any ongoing communication based on that assumption will be of limited value. It is important here to note again however, that this figure applies only to one segment of the alumni population those making annual incomes of \$60, 000 or over. Whether the same percentage could be expected in the general alumni population is unknown.

Of those identified as former Nazarenes, 81 or 92% stated that they were affiliated with, or at least attended a church and readily classified themselves as Christians. It is interesting to note the breakdown by church affiliation of this group.

30, or 34% called themselves Methodist

14, or 16% called themselves Presbyterian

11, or 12% called themselves Baptist

5, or 6% had affiliated with an Independent Church

5, or 6% affiliated with a Bible Church

3 or 3% affiliated with a Roman Catholic Church (this is not as interesting as it might seem - 1 married a Catholic and so changed; 1 had previously been a Catholic and had joined the Nazarene Church at conversion - then later returned to the Catholic Church; and 1 actually converted from Nazarene to Roman Catholic)

1 ea, or 1% each for Wesleyan, Evangelical Free, Greek Orthodox, and the Church of God

17, or 19% were unwilling to specify a particular church, or one was not identified during the courses of the discussion. 4 of these were self - admittedly "distant from the Lord" at the time of the interview.

It is interesting to note here that tentative results of a most recent survey of the entire alumni population at SNU, taken this past fall. This time with 16, 191 new questionnaires mailed and with a return of 3, 247 to date, 909 or 28% of the respondents identify themselves as former Nazarenes, having once been a member of the church but now presently out of it. The average length of time between graduation from college and the leaving of the church for a new denomination or affiliation is 12.7 years. In Mr. Crabtree's latest survey the church affiliation breakdown among respondents classified as former Nazarenes is particularly worth examining in the light of the foregoing:

41%, or 372 affiliate with Independent, Bible, or non-denominational bodies

24%, or 218 are Baptists

18%, or 173 are Methodists

9%, or 89 are Presbyterians

8%, or 73 are found in other denominations

In the survey, 70% or 2, 272 respondents identified themselves as Nazarenes, and most of those as presently active in a local church.

A possible and partial explanation of these sobering figures on institutional attrition may lie in alumni response that repeatedly emerged during the course of conversations:

By far, the greatest number of former Nazarene cited "legalism" or "rules and regulations" as a cause of personal dissatisfaction and a "reason" for their change. Usually this unhappiness was expressed in terms of a disagreement with group taboos and negative social mores. This number approached 50 - 55% of the total respondents;

A second reason that emerged was perceived lack of what was sometimes called "spiritual food" or "Bible-based preaching". This often seemed to mean that they did not see themselves (or their family) as receiving the depth of teaching they needed for their own spiritual journey.

In this category of response there was also discontent with what was called "doctrinal" over "Biblical" preaching and teaching. These points were seldom well articulated but cropped up with enough frequency to be cited here:

A third reason claimed was the respondent's perception of a "lack of fit" between a new church encountered upon arrival in a new city or suburb, and the old one "back home". The new church in Houston is just not like what they left. It turned out that the Baptist church down the street is. And that's where they ended up. It is interesting that doctrinal issues did not perceptibly play much of part in the decision.

Finally, a reason infrequently and only occasionally mentioned was that of interpersonal conflict - someone had a fight with someone else in the church. Or someone was found with "feet of clay". That was enough and the respondent left shouting "a plague on your house".

The foregoing response categories rather continually surfaced. Whether these reflect the "real reasons" for attrition remains to be researched and further studied. The latter two of the four are probably inevitable in a highly mobile and increasingly pluralistic society offering the individual an ever-increasing number of choices. Nevertheless, this very fact may at the same time make increasingly important the addressing of the first and second. Certainly there are real reasons why people leave one organization for another - and the implication of their leaving can, if not attended to, be vastly debilitating to the organization left.

Much further research is needed in areas of church social polity and practice that are just suggested here. The church of the Nazarene is still a young organization. It has indeed been successful and today bears little resemblance to the fledgling organization of earlier generations. Nevertheless, its relative growth and past success should not blind any of us to the need for a solid and ongoing Spirit-filled analysis of the institution. Any really concrete evidence of significant attrition among those church population cohorts most educated and capable of leadership needs study and attention. It is hoped that this paper will be one small step to further research on the possible issues suggested.