

Slipping Out the Back Door

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An Examination of Nazarenes Who May Leave the Denomination Michael K. Roberts
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify those church members in the Church of the *Nazarene who are most likely to leave the denomination*. The data pertain to members of 12 Nazarene congregations across the United States. Social relationships within the congregation are found to have the most important effect on who might leave the church. Other significant variables are: level of education, frequency of personal evangelism, years of membership, distance of residence, and the religious experience of sanctification.

The Church of the Nazarene has been listed in recent times as one of the fastest growing denominations in the United States. Although the church has seen some good growth, one problem has still plagued the denomination; church drop-outs. For every two people the church receives, one person drops out. This social phenomena raises several questions. Why do people leave the denomination? Who are these people? Who are most likely to follow? Is there anything that the church can do?

Several studies have addressed this issue and some suggestions have been given. Savage (1976) suggests that drop-outs are due to basically psychological reasons (church discord, not accepted, loved, or unwanted). Some research (United Presbyterian Committee, 1976; Hale, 1977) suggests that some people drop out for personal contextual reasons or for lack of meaning in church programs or services.

Some research on college students give additional clues as to why people might leave (Wuthnow and Mellinger, 1976; Caplovity and Sherrow, 1977; Astin, 1977). This research found that students often leave religious institutions at this time as a rejection of traditional religious background and discovering new life-style orientations. Roozen (1980) found that most individuals who drop-out, return.

But the question still remains as to why people leave the Church of the Nazarene? Why is it that some people remain very loyal to the denomination while others never develop an attachment to the denomination? It is to this issue that this paper is addressed.

To explore why some church members may not put too much importance on being a Nazarene, a sample of Nazarene church members was used. The data for the analysis were obtained from a survey of twelve Nazarene congregations located in various areas of the United States in the summer of 1985. There were 1190 questionnaires mailed and 713 useable questionnaires were returned (60 percent).

The operationalization of each variable can be seen in Table 1. Five variables were formed through scaling: importance of being Nazarene, attendance at services, devotional practices, personal evangelism, and social relationships. All variables within each scale were correlated and were found to be significantly related.

The findings are reported in two tables: first, a table of the zero-order correlations among the variables; and second, a stepwise regression, showing the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable (see Table 2 and 3).

In Table 2, all the independent variables are significantly correlated with the dependent variable except one, gender. Males are not any more likely to be less satisfied with the Nazarene church than females.

The table reveals that the strongest correlation with the dependent variable is social relationships ($r=30$). Those members that are least socially tied to the congregation do not identify closely with the denomination. The second strongest relationship is with "personal evangelism" ($r=28$). Those individuals who rarely witness, testify, or evangelize, tend not to strongly attach themselves to the Nazarene church. Third, education affects strong attachments to the church negatively ($r=-27$). Those who have higher levels of education tend to not stress much importance to being a Nazarene.

Several other positive relationships can be found. Members who tend to be : older ($r=24$), sanctified ($r=22$), church members longer ($r=22$),, in most worship services ($r=19$), and practicing their faith ($r=18$), tend to identify with the Church of the Nazarene.

Two other significant relationships were negative: distance ($r= -14$) and income ($r= -16$). Those individuals who live further away from the church and who have higher incomes are most likely not to stress the importance in being a Nazarene.

Table 3 contains a stepwise regression of the variables in the model. In the first step, the variable which explains the greatest amount of the variance of the dependent variable is entered into the model first. Each of the following steps, the computer includes an addition variable which is the next best variable. Only significant variables at the .05 level are included.

Only six significant variables were included in the model: social relationships, level of education, personal evangelism, years of membership, distance of residence, and religious experience. Those variables which were no longer significant were: income, gender, devotional practices, attendance, and age.

In conclusion, there are some methodological problems with this paper (e.g., operationalization of variables, sample, attitude rather than behavior). However, there are several important implications: the importance of social relationships in retaining members, the losing of higher educated people, the importance of "personal evangelism," distance of residence, and the importance of the experience of sanctification. Also the insignificance of income, attendance, age, gender, and devotional practices.

Measurement

1. Importance of being Nazarene

How important is the following?

- a. Being a member in the Church of the Nazarene (as a denomination)
- b. Being a member in your own local congregation
- c. Wanting your children (or if you were to have children) to stay in the Church of the Nazarene

2. Years of Membership

How long have you been a member in the Church of the Nazarene (the denomination, not necessarily your present congregation)?

3. Attendance at Services

About how often do you do each of the things listed below?

- a. Attend Sunday School
- b. Attend Sunday Morning Worship Services
- c. Attend Sunday Evening Services
- d. Attend Mid-Week Evening Services

4. Devotional Practices

About how often do you do each of the things listed below?

- a. Contribute a tithe of your income to the local church
- b. Read the Bible
- c. Pray privately

5. Personal Evangelism

- a. Talk about religion with non-church members
- b. Try to lead someone to Christ
- c. Share with another church member the problems and joys of living a Christian life.

6. Social Relationships

- a. How often do you participate in church social activities?
- b. Think for a moment of your five closest friends. How many of them attend your congregation?
- c. How well do you think you fit in socially with the group of people who attend your church?

7. Distance of Residence from church

About how many minutes does it take you to travel to church from your residence?

8. Religious Experience

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am sure I am sanctified.

9. Gender

10. Age

How old were you on your last birthday?

11. Education

How much formal education have you had?

12. Income

What was your total family income before taxes in 1984?

[Table showing correlation among variables](#)

Stepwise Regression			
Step	Variable	Total R Square	Significance
1	Social Relationships	.0986	.001
2	Education	.1505	.001
3	Personal Evangelism	.1785	.001
4	Years of Membership	.1929	.001
5	Distance of Residence	.2082	.001
6	Religious Experience	.2160	.01

*No other variables met the .05 significance level for entry into the model (attendance, devotions, gender, age, income).