Shepherding Wandering Sheep: An Examination

of Elders' Attitudes Regarding

Inactive Christians

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Randall Justin Imel

Abstract

This study came about as a result of a decline in churches of Christ and the necessity for elders to seek members who have wandered.

The objective of this study was to examine the attitudes of elders in churches of Christ in Lincoln and Kanawha Counties of West Virginia concerning inactive Christians. An examination is made of the responsibilities of elders toward inactive Christians, reasons Christians become inactive, and practical steps elders can take to restore inactive Christians.

Nine elders participated in interviews that covered their previous experiences with elders and inactive Christians, their present experiences with inactive Christians, and the meaning they make of those experiences.

The results of the study are: the elders in the study are cognizant of their responsibilities toward inactive Christians; they believe they have appropriate communication skills to work with inactive Christians; they do not fear anger's being expressed by inactive Christians; they do not fear legal action from inactive Christians; and, they desire to know how to work with inactive Christians more effectively.

Dedication

This work is adoringly dedicated to Tammy LeAnn Imel, the love of my life. When writing the description of the virtuous woman, King Lemuel could have easily been describing you, Tam. You have worked diligently that I may obtain this degree – from helping the boys with their homework to making sure I had ample study time. Now it's my turn! Thanks so much.

This work must also be dedicated to my two "buddies," RJ and Wil. You two bring more joy to your daddy's life than words could ever express. Thank you for the patience you two boys have shown, patience well beyond your years. Now, "Dr. Daddy" will have even more time to throw a ball, to watch monster trucks, or go to Chuck E. Cheese.

This work must also be dedicated to two wonderful parents, Randy and Cathy. You provided an environment where Christian values flourished. You showed faith in all that you did. You continue to be the best parents a son could wish for. Thanks for all you mean to me.

This work must also be dedicated to two other parents, Bob and Ann. You raised a daughter who was everything I always wanted, and for that I am deeply grateful. You have shown great Christian character from the moment I met you, character which Tammy also exhibits. Thank you for believing in me.

Acknowledgments

First, I wish to acknowledge two men who had a vision for Christian education. Charles Coil founded International Bible College (now Heritage Christian University), where I received my undergraduate degree. Because of Brother Coil, I learned the text of Scripture not only academically, but I learned the value of helping people understand how the text of Scripture fits their lives. Dr. Rex A. Turner, Sr., founded Alabama Christian School of Religion (now Regions University), where I have received my graduate and post-graduate education. Because of Dr. Turner's vision, I have grown in my academic knowledge of Scripture, but also in my ability to apply that Scripture to my own life and the lives of those who hear me. Even though they have gone to their reward, they still speak (cf. Heb. 11:4).

I must also acknowledge my family for the sacrifices they have made in making this degree possible. My wife Tammy has done more than her fair share around the house to make sure I had ample time to devote to my studies. My two children, RJ and Wil, have put up with Daddy's reading a book when they wanted him to play. Those days are over!

I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Leon Estep for his patience and for his wise counsel. Dr. Estep has always been available by either telephone or e-mail, and I am deeply appreciative. Drs. Kimberly Estep and James Crabtree have also been available and helped refine this dissertation. Dr. Dale Bertram helped make sure this project met the rigors of qualitative research. Dr. Bill Bagents critiqued the proposal and offered invaluable input. For all their help, I am truly grateful.

I also wish to thank Joyce Williams at the Kanawha County Public Library for her unfailing support. Joyce has been able to find books and articles no other librarian could

find. She has found books in several states and in a few foreign countries. Without her, my studies would not have been nearly complete.

I also wish to acknowledge my deep gratitude for the brethren at the Alum Creek Church of Christ. During the past six years, they have treated me and my family with the utmost love and concern. I am deeply indebted to this family of believers.

Finally, I wish to thank the elders who participated in this study. Their willingness to share freely their ideas was a great benefit not only to this study, but also to me personally. I left each elder feeling more certain about the state of the church as she enters the twenty-first century. Thanks so much for your help and your inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the fall of 1997, the researcher began working with a small mainstream church of Christ. As part of the welcoming process for the new minister, the congregation hosted a pot-luck luncheon in the newly renovated basement. However, an active couple, whom the student shall call the "Smiths," was absent that Sunday. The church's elders asked the candidate to call upon the couple, which he did the following week.

When the student met with the couple, the Smiths stated clearly that they had no intentions of returning to the congregation. The couple believed eating in the church building to be without biblical precedent, and they had already placed membership in a congregation of the independent Christian churches/churches of Christ. The student relayed the information back to the elders. In meeting with the elders, the candidate asked the shepherds to go meet with the Smiths along with him. The elders, however, refused. The student encouraged the two elders to go, but they became aggravated and said that visiting with the Smiths would do absolutely no good.

The elders never explained their refusal to meet with the Smiths. What caused their reluctance to call on these inactive Christians? Were they afraid that the Smiths had a solid, biblical rationale for their view? Did the elders have a sufficient grasp of the

Scriptures to refute the Smith's objections? Did the elders simply want to avoid

conflict?[1]

The student wondered if other ministers in churches of Christ experienced similar

situations. If so, why do elders not readily approach inactive Christians? Do the elders

feel unqualified to approach wandering sheep? Do elders lack communicative skills to

work with inactive Christians? Do elders fear the anger? How might elders be

encouraged to work more with inactive members? This project will begin to lay

groundwork to understand elders' attitudes toward inactive Christians.

Statement of the Problem

Several Doctor of Ministry dissertations have been written within the churches of

Christ examining the inactive Christian problem;[2] however, none of those dissertations

specifically explores the attitudes of elders in local churches of Christ. This project will

explore that deficiency by investigating elders' views regarding their responsibilities,

their qualifications for the task, their communication skills, their ability to deal with

anger often expressed by inactive Christians, their fear of legal repercussions, and their

desire to learn how to work with inactive Christians more effectively.

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1. Halverstadt provides numerous reasons some Christians prefer to avoid conflict at all cost. See Hugh F. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 19-33.

2. See Gary M. Bradley, "Restoring Inactive Members of Churches of Christ" (D. Min. dissertation, Southern Christian University, 1998); Dana L. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts in the Merkel Church of Christ, Merkel, Texas" (D. Min dissertation, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1983); Mark A. Henry, "A Model of Training for Outreach to Soldiers at Fort Lewis, Washington, Who Are Inactive Members of the Churches of Christ" (D. Min. dissertation, Abilene Christian University, 1996); David M. Malone, "Assessing Patterns of Disengagement and Re-entry in Two Local Congregations of Churches of Christ" (D. Min. dissertation, Abilene Christian University, 1992); and John Frederick Roberts, "Closing the Back Door: Developing a Strategic Model of Identification for Preventing Church Dropouts" (D. Min. dissertation, Abilene Christian University, 1993).

Hypotheses

This project-dissertation will explore the following hypotheses:

1. Elders are aware of their responsibilities toward inactive Christians.

2. Elders do not feel qualified to work with inactive Christians.

3. Elders believe they lack communication skills to work with inactive Christians.

4. Elders fear anger which inactive Christians often express.

5. Elders fear working with inactive Christians exposes them and the congregations they serve to legal jeopardy.[3]

6. Elders desire to know how to work with inactive Christians more effectively.

Need for the Study

Need for the Study and God's Nature

God cares deeply about individuals who have wandered away. The opening pages of Scripture present God as seeking the wanderer.[4] After Adam and Eve sinned, they heard the LORD God walking in the garden and hid themselves from his presence; the Lord called out to Adam and Eve saying, "Where are you?" (Gn 3:8-9).[5] Granted, "the Lord God is depicted as the Judge calling, as it were in court, for an explanation;"[6]

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3. For a detailed treatment of why elders might fear lawsuits see pp. 33-36 below.

4. See Lawrence O. Olson, "Understanding and Ministering to the Inactive Member" (D. Min. diss, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 4-9, and Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 14.

5. Quotation taken from the NIV. All subsequent quotations will come from the NIV.

6. David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 88.

however, the Lord immediately held out hope for these two wanderers when he said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gn 3:15).

The book of Jonah demonstrates God's concern for the undesirable wanderer.[7] Jonah did not want to go to the Ninevites, for they had threatened the Israelites at least three times in the past.[8] Jonah viewed the Ninevites as the enemy of his people rather than people for whom God cared. When Jonah became angry that God had spared the city and angry that God provided a worm to eat the vine he had caused to grow, the Lord said to Jonah, "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jon 4:11). Concerning that question, Ray Bakke, professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote,

> This question still hangs over those modern Christians who minister in cities which they do not love, and who are unwilling to accept people and forgive them. The book pricks the conscience because it is about the superiority the Israelites felt to every other race—a feeling which led them to turn God's love, which was intended for other people, upon themselves in self-congratulation. Much of the church is in this condition today. We need to reread the Jonah story and see the theology behind it—of a God who is struggling to make us go beyond our boundaries, values and natural affiliations to love the people he loves.[9]

Indeed, modern Christians need to see God as the God who loves all, the faithful, the wanderer, and the reprobate so they will share God's love with the faithful, the wanderer, and the reprobate.

Christ's advent brought the hope God offered to the first man and his wife to fruition. Paul wrote, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman,

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7. Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian* With Jim Hart (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987).
8. Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976-1992). Accessed as a CD-ROM.
9. Bakke, *The Urban Christian*, 67.

born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons"

(Gal 4:4-5). Redeem refers to buying something or someone enslaved or delivering

something or someone;[10] the preposition *ek* before *agoradzō* is perfective, meaning

something like "to buy out" or "to redeem completely."[11] God's giving complete

redemption to the wanderer through the Son illustrates his care for the wanderer.

The Son understood his mission as the reclamation of the wanderer. After Jesus

announced that salvation had entered Zacchaeus' home, he declared, "The Son of Man

came to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). Luke 19:10 "expresses the heart of

Jesus' ministry as presented by Luke, both his work of salvation and his quest for the

lost."[12] Some of those whom the Son of Man came to seek and save had never enjoyed a

divine relationship, but others had experienced such a relationship and wandered away.

Jesus spoke regarding his concern for those who had wandered away in his

parables of Luke 15.[13] Concerning Jesus' portrait of God in Luke 15, William Barclay,

former professor of divinity and biblical criticism at Glasgow University, well

commented:

> No Pharisee had ever dreamed of a God like that. A great Jewish scholar
> has admitted that this is the one absolutely new thing which Jesus taught
> men about God—that he actually searched for men. The Jew might have
> agreed that if a man came crawling home to God in self-abasement and
> prayed for pity he might find it; but he would never have conceived of a
> God who went out to search for sinners. We believe in the seeking love of
> God, because we see that love incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
> who came to seek and to save that which was lost.[14]

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10. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

11. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 426.

12. Gaebelein, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Accessed as a CD-ROM, s.v. "Luke 19:10."

13. See Jordan V. Corbin, "The Inactive Member: A Reclamation Strategy" (D. Min. diss, Drew University, 1987), 31-37 for a discussion of how these parables show God's concern for the wanderer.

14. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press. 1975), 203.

If a shepherd is caring for one hundred sheep when one wanders away, "Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (v. 4). Surely no shepherd would dare leave his sheepfold unattended; Eliab, David's eldest brother, became infuriated when he thought his brother had left the family's sheep unattended (1 Sm 17:28).[15] Since shepherds often traveled together,[16] this shepherd could likely leave his sheep in the care of a trusted co-worker until he returned.[17] The shepherd's willingness to leave the ninety-nine to find the one who had wandered demonstrates Christ's concern for the wanderer.

Jesus also expressed such concern when he spoke of the lost coin (vv. 8-10). When a woman realized she has lost a coin, she got a light, cleaned the house, and searched carefully until she found her coin (v. 8). The New International Version clearly implies that the coin became lost because of the woman's actions, not its own, and reads, "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one." Jordan V. Corbin, a doctoral student at Drew University commented:

> The coin may be representative of people who have experienced problems caused and initiated by other people. Occasionally a person leaves the fellowship because another person of great importance to him has disappointed them [*sic*] or wounded them [*sic*] with word or act. The result may be departure.[18]

Many wander from the flock because others wounded them. In a study of four suburban United Methodist Churches, John Savage, a United Methodist pastor and a psychotherapist, discovered 45.5 percent of inactive members had conflict with the pastor, 54 percent had conflict with other church members, and 63 percent had conflict

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15. Ibid.
16. Barclay notes that "many of the flocks were communal flocks, belonging, not to individuals, but to villages. There would be two or three shepherds in charge." Barclay, *Luke*, 200.
17. Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Accessed as a CD-Rom.
18. Corbin, "The Inactive Member," 33.

with family members.[19] In fact, 95 percent of bored or inactive members interviewed

"could tell quite clearly what the event was, when it happened, and could express strong

feelings about it."[20] Along these lines, Corbin noted, "It may be necessary for the one

who seeks the lost to be forgiven,"[21] a sentiment Jesus himself taught.[22]

In both the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, Jesus clearly established

the worth of individuals.[23] The shepherd could have been content with the ninety-nine

sheep he still had in his flock, and the woman could have been content with the nine

coins she still possessed. However, both the shepherd and the woman went to

extraordinary means to find the one item which had been lost. Likewise, the church

needs to go to extraordinary means to find the one member who has been lost.

Jesus spoke not only about the one who wandered away and the one who was lost

through the actions of others but also about the one who purposefully decided to leave.

Jesus told of two sons; the younger said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the

estate" (v. 12). While the father was under no obligation to honor this request,[24] he chose

to do so. The son took the one-third of the estate which would have fallen to him,[25] and

he went to a foreign land and "squandered his wealth in wild living" (v. 13). After his

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19. John S. Savage, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member: Psychological and Theological Implications* (Reynoldsburg, OH: LEAD Consultants, 1976).

20. Ibid., 56.

21. Corbin, "The Inactive Member," 34.

22. Matthew 5:35-24 – "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

23. Corbin, "The Inactive Member."

24. "To ask one's father for one's share of the inheritance early was unheard of in antiquity; in effect, one would thereby say, 'Father, I wish you were already dead.' Such a statement would not go over well even today, and in a society stressing obedience to one's father it would be a serious act of rebellion (Dt 21:18-21) for which the father could have beaten him or worse. That the father grants the request means that most of the hearers will not identify with the father in this parable; from the start, they would think of him as stupidly lax to pamper such an immoral son." Keener, *Background Commentary*. Accessed as a CD-ROM, s.v. "Luke 15:11-12."

25. Deuteronomy 21:17 required that the firstborn receive a double-portion of the inheritance – "He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him." Since Jesus' parabolic man only has two sons, the elder would have received two-thirds of the estate, and the younger would have received one-third.

money was gone and famine had struck the land, the young man "came to his senses" (v.

17) and returned to his father. The son returned to his father in repentance, just as

inactive members need to return to their Father in repentance.

<div align="center">The Need for the Study and the Nature of Elders' Work</div>

Scripture provides three levels of responsibility toward inactive members.

Actually, all Christians have a responsibility toward inactive members. To the Galatians,

Paul wrote, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of

Christ" (6:2). Previous research indicates inactive Christians leave the church because of

several burdens. If the church as a whole were to assist one another in carrying burdens,

more members would undoubtedly remain faithful.

A higher level of responsibility rests upon those who are spiritual. Again, Paul

wrote, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him

gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Gal 6:1). The adjective

pneumatikos (spiritual) occurs twenty-six times in the Greek New Testament, and only

one use falls outside the Pauline corpus.[26] *Pneumatikos* in biblical literature can refer to

the inner life of man or to the divine; in the substantive (as in Gal 6:1), the adjective

refers to spiritual things or individuals possessing the Spirit.[27] Paul uses the adjective to

describe Spirit-filled people in 1 Corinthians 3:1; 14:37, and Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians

2:13 and 12:1 possibly use *pneumatikos* in this sense. In the context of 1 Corinthians

14:37, *pneumatikos* obviously refers to those who were endowed with miraculous gifts, a

meaning quite unlikely in the present context.

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26. John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W. Goodrick, and James A. Swanson, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 819. The non-Pauline use occurs at 1 Pet. 2:5.

27. Gingrich and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

In the context of Galatians 6:1, *pneumatikos* certainly means "spiritually mature." There are two important reasons for this understanding. First, "spiritual" operates as the antonym of "immaturity" in 1 Corinthians 3:1; Paul wrote, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ." Second, Galatians 5 speaks of the mature as "led by the Spirit" (v. 18). Those who live by the Spirit do not gratify the flesh's desires (v. 16). The apostle enumerated acts belonging respectively to the fleshly existence and to the spiritual existence (vv. 19-23); sinful behavior differs from spirituality (as in 1 Cor 3:1). Those who "keep in step with the Spirit" live "by the Spirit" (v. 25); being spiritual means living attuned to the Holy Spirit of God.

Thus, those who have obtained Christian maturity ought to seek those who have wandered. Because restorers will likely face temptation, they need a level of Christian maturity to recognize temptation and to deal appropriately with the temptation. Temptation could easily entangle immature Christian; therefore, they are not the most appropriate seekers of the wandering.[28]

A still higher level of responsibility rests upon the local eldership. Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). J. W. McGarvey, a scholar in the Restoration Movement among churches of Christ, notes that caring for and shepherding the church "required such watchfulness as would allow nothing in the condition of the church to escape [the elders'] notice; and . . . required them to do for the church all that an eastern shepherd

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28. Jesus recognized that some new converts would be entangled with temptation. Speaking of the seed thrown on rocky ground, Jesus said some "hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away" (Mk 4:16-17). Paul also recognized this difficulty. Concerning appointing new converts as elders, Paul admonished Timothy, that an elder "must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (1 Tm 3:6).

does for his flock."[29] Since Jesus pictured the shepherd as going after the wandering

sheep, could he expect elders to do anything less than seek the wanderer?

Elders know which sheep wander, for God entrusted the flock to them. The

author of Hebrews exhorted the Christians to whom he wrote, "Obey your leaders and

submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.

Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no

advantage to you" (Heb 13:17). Whether the phrase means "keep watch over you" or

"keep watch for your souls,"[30] the author certainly spoke of spiritual care. "The leaders

are concerned for the deep needs of their people, not simply for what lies on the

surface."[31]

Need for the Study and the State of the Inactive Christian

Spiritually mature Christians must go to the inactive Christian, for the inactive

Christian's spiritual state is precarious, to say the least. Some claim that once a person

comes to Christ, he cannot abandon his salvation. John Calvin, the well-known

theologian of the Protestant Reformation, advocated such a view; he wrote:

> It daily happens that those who seemed to belong to Christ revolt from
> him and fall away: Nay, in the very passage where he declares that none of
> those whom the Father has given to him have perished, he excepts the son
> of perdition. This, indeed, is true; but it is equally true that such persons
> never adhered to Christ with that heartfelt confidence by which I say that
> the certainty of our election is established: "They went out from us," says
> John, "but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would, no
> doubt, have continued with us," (1 John 2:19). I deny not that they have
> signs of calling similar to those given to the elect; but I do not at all admit

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29. J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of Apostles* Vol. 2 (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n. d.), 191.

30. Gaebelein, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*.

31. Ibid.

that they have that sure confirmation of election which I desire believers to seek from the word of the gospel.[32]

In other words, Calvin argued, those who appear to fall away were not truly Christians from the beginning.

Contrary to Calvinistic claims, the New Testament teaches that one can indeed fall after being a true Christian. To the Galatians adopting the Old Law as their guide, Paul wrote, "You have fallen from grace" (Gal 5:4). These disciples did not fall from a state of perceived grace, but they actually fell from grace. After reminding the Corinthians of God's judgment upon unfaithful Israelites, Paul admonished them, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor 10:12). The admonition that one should be careful about falling seems strange indeed unless Christians actually fall from grace.

Those who fall from grace find themselves in an unsafe situation spiritually. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62). The Lord has declared, "My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him" (Heb 10:38). Because of God's displeasure with the one who shrinks back, he punishes the backslider more severely.

Peter speaks of such punishment in the context of false teachers.[33] The apostle wrote,

> If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was

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32. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.7.

33. Although Peter has been speaking of false teachers, he says at v. 19, "a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him." Kelcy argues, "Peter's reference to 'a man' in verse 19 seems to make his present reference somewhat general so that it might refer either to the false teacher, or his victim, or to both," Raymond C. Kelcy, *The Letters of Peter and Jude* The Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet Company, 1972), 150.

> passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud" (2 Pt 2:20-22).

Peter spoke of true Christians and not pretenders, for he said "they have escaped the corruption of the world." Jesus' blood cleansed the individuals of whom Peter spoke, but those Christians chose to abandon that position. Because they had escaped the world's pollution and had become overcome by such filth again, "they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning." Peter likely alludes to Jesus' teaching concerning a man who has been cleansed of an evil spirit but overtaken again by a demon (Mt 12:45; Lk 11:26).[34] Because "a Christian who forsakes his first love becomes more and more insensitive to the voice of God and of conscience,"[35] he is worse off than he was at the beginning.

Why else might Christians who fall away be worse off "at the end than they were at the beginning?" Jesus made a distinction concerning punishment for those who mistakenly disobey and those who know better but choose not to obey. The Lord said, "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few stripes" (Lk 12:47-48). The one who knows the right thing to do will face more severe punishment than the one who disobeys ignorantly. Additionally, Christians who turn back from their first love crucify "the Son of God all over again and [subject] him to public disgrace" (Heb 6:6). "The author is saying that those who deny Christ in this way are really taking their stand among those who crucified Jesus. In heart and mind they make themselves one with those

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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.

who put him to death on the cross at Calvary."[36] What a horrible group with which to cast oneself. In addition, those who abandon Christianity and continue to sin deliberately have nothing to expect save "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Heb 10:27). To prevent such expectation, James admonished his readers, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:19-20). Christians need to seek their erring brethren that they might "cover a multitude of sins."

<div align="center">Need for the Study and the Decline of Churches</div>

Approximately 7,000 persons leave organized religion every day.[37] However, the Gallup organization has found that since 1939 church and synagogue attendance has not declined; 41 percent responded affirmatively when asked if they had attended church or synagogue in the past seven days in 1939 compared with 44 percent in April 2005.[38] What might account for an actual increase in church attendance as measured with Gallup compared to the results showing a decline of 7,000 daily? Obviously social desirability bias could easily play a role in such acceptable behavior as church attendance; social desirability bias refers to the answering of a question "through a filter of concern about what" the researcher wants to hear.[39] Two researchers who studied a large, white,

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36. Gaebelein, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, accessed as a cd-rom.

37. John C. Robertson, Jr., "The Challenge of Secular Humanism to Christianity," *Journal of Dharma* 20 (1995): 352.

38. "The Gallup Poll: Religion," Available at http://poll.gallup.com/ content/default.aspx?ci=1690&pg=2&VERSION=p (accessed October 14, 2005).

39. Allen Rubin and Earl Babbie, *Research Methods for Social Work*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Books, 2001), 179.

middle-class church in the Deep South found overreporting on telephone surveys of who attended services to be around 59 percent.[40]

While the candidate lacks data to draw conclusions of overreporting among churches of Christ, the available data are somewhat mixed.   Between 1990 and 1994, mainline churches of Christ showed a 9 percent increase in membership.[41] However, between 1994 and 1997, Mac Lynn, a researcher in the churches of Christ, noticed a small numerical decline in churches of Christ.[42] In 1997, Lynn noticed a significant number of youth leaving the church.[43] Between 1997 and 2000, Lynn found that membership in churches of Christ had risen by approximately nine thousand, but those claiming to be adherents fell by roughly 1,500.[44] Studies show that churches lose between 40 and 50 percent of those they baptize within five years.[45] Gary Bradley, minister for the Mayfair Church of Christ in Huntsville, Alabama, fears that in most churches of Christ dropouts exceed the number of converts.[46]

In West Virginia, where this study took place, the data look less mixed and more ominous. In the South Atlantic States, Lynn found that West Virginia led in membership per capita.[47] All states in the South Atlantic region have shown consistent gains in members of churches of Christ since 1990, except West Virginia, which "has been declining in membership since 1980."[48] Using Lynn's census, churches of Christ have

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40. Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "Testing the Attendance Gap in a Conservative Church," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 175-186.

41. Flavil Yeakley, Jr., "Recent Patterns of Growth and Decline Among Heirs of the Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 37 (1995): 45-50.

42. Mac Lynn, *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 1997 ed. (Nashville, TN: 21st Century Christian, 1997).

43. Ibid.

44. Mac Lynn, *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2000 ed. (Nashville, TN: 21st Century Christian, 2000).

45. Clayton Pepper, *Church Growth Today* (Abilene, TX: Quality Publications, 1998).

46. Bradley, *Resorting Inactive Members*.

47. Lynn, *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2000 ed.

48. Ibid., 19.

decreased in West Virginia by 15.06 percent since 1980.[49] Although the data do not

allow the researcher to know how many members died or have moved out-of-state, they

do show that West Virginia churches of Christ have declined in membership.

Purpose of Study

This study will have the following purposes:

1.   To assess the attitudes of elders in churches of Christ in Kanawha and

Lincoln Counties of West Virginia regarding inactive Christians

2.   To assess elders' views of their ability to work with inactive Christians

3.   To assess elders' willingness to learn how to deal with inactive Christians

more effectively

Limitations

This study will have the following limitations:

1.   Since the study will explore the attitudes of elders within churches of

Christ, the results may not be generalizable to leaders in other religious

heritages

2.   Since the study will explore a small number of elders in churches of

Christ, the results may not be generalizable beyond the elderships studied

3.   Because the student preaches in the area of study, social desirability bias

may blur the data

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49. Stanley E. Granberg, "The Growth and Decline of the churches of Christ in the United States: A Visual Review, 1980-2000," http://www.kairoschurchplanting.org/default.asp?id=5 (accessed October 14, 2005).

Assumptions

This study will have the following assumptions:

1.   The participants will honestly answer interview questions

2.   The interview questions will allow elders to portray accurately their attitudes

3.   The student's interview skills will allow for good collection of data

4.   At least ten elders will be willing to participate in the study

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, inactive members refers to "individuals who have chosen not to participate in the worship life, financial support, and program activities of the"[50] congregation for a period of eight weeks,[51] except for special events such as weddings or funerals or for special days such as Christmas or Easter.[52] This definition would exclude those who cannot participate in the work of the congregation due to health or who have moved to a new location.[53]

Restoration means bringing "back to a former position or condition."[54] In the context of inactive Christians, restoration will refer to bringing inactive Christians back to their former condition of active participation in the church's life.

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50. Kenneth C. Haugk. *Reopening the Back Door*. (St. Louis, MO: Tebunah Ministries, 1989), 17.

51. Although several studies provide a longer time frame (e.g., six months), Savage has shown that after eight weeks of inactivity, individuals re-engage their energies, Savage, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member.*

52. Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 14.

53. Ibid.

54. Thomas H. Holland, *Entreating the Erring* (Brentwood, TN: Penmann Books, 2000), 32.

Elders function in a specific manner in the local church.[55] The New Testament views them as men who are honored, recognized as examples, preserve traditions, interpret Scripture, settle disputes, assign discipline, manage the local congregation, and have the responsibility to care for the well-being of other Christians.[56] Congregations recognize the men interviewed in this study as elders.

Mainstream churches of Christ hold the following doctrines to be non-negotiable: "faith in God; the certainty of the virgin birth, atoning death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ; baptism for the remission of sins; and correctness in worship, which includes the Lord's Supper each Sunday and *a cappella* music in worship."[57] Their willingness to use multiple cups at the Lord's Supper, to use Sunday schools, to cooperate with one another in carrying out benevolent work, and to have kitchens in church buildings delineates them from other churches of Christ.[58]

Organization

Chapter I of the study will include an introduction which will explain how the student came to be confronted with elders' attitudes toward Christian inactivity, a statement of the problem, assumptions of this study, limitations of this study, the importance of the study, and the definition of important terms in this study.

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55. Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 324.

56. Ibid.

57. Lynn, *Churches of Christ*, 2000 ed., 24.

58. These distinctions between mainstream churches of Christ and other congregations are outlined in Lynn, *Churches of Christ*, 2000 ed., 24.

Chapter II of the study will review the literature relevant to the study. The chapter will provide the theological basis for elders' working with inactive Christians, examine reasons individuals leave active participation in the church, explore why inactive Christians return to the church, and discuss practical steps elders can take to work with inactive Christians.

Chapter III will explain the methodology used in the study. Included will be a description of the sample, selection process, the instrumentation, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter IV will present findings from the interviews. The chapter will first provide case studies of the participants and then give a holistic understanding of the data.

Chapter V will discuss the study's results. Included in the discussion of results, the reader will find a summary of the dissertation, an examination of how well the data fit the hypotheses, other findings from the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Since Christianity's earliest days, individuals have ceased active participation in church life. Jesus himself spoke of individuals who would come to him and later leave the faith (Lk 9:62; 11:24-26). Shortly after the church's establishment, Simon fell away after he came to Christ.[1] When Simon saw that the apostles could bestow the Holy Spirit, he offered the apostles money for that same capability, saying, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:19). Peter rebuked Simon with strong words: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (Acts 8:20-21). Peter encouraged repentance and prayer for Simon (Acts 8:22), and Simon expressed a repentant attitude

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1. Some would argue that Simon makes a poor choice to speak of working with inactive Christians, for he was never converted, an argument Ben Witherington III makes; see Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 288-289. However, Basil Overton, former editor of *The World Evangelist*, provides three lines of evidence that Simon truly converted before his fall back into sin. First, Simon did exactly the same thing as the Samaritans, viz., they believed and were baptized. Second, Peter does not tell Simon that he would perish because he never converted but because he attempted to buy the power to pass along the Holy Spirit. Third, at Pentecost, Peter told the crowd to repent and be baptized, but he told Simon to repent and pray; had Peter thought of Simon as an alien sinner, he surely would have told him to repent and submit to baptism. See, Overton, *Conversions in Acts* (J. C. Choate Publications: Winona, MS: 1981), 24-25.

when he said to the apostles, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me" (Acts 8:24).[2]

Later in church history many Christians left the church during the Decian persecution. In AD 250 the Roman emperor Decius issued an edict which required an annual sacrifice jointly to the Roman gods and the emperor.[3] Those refusing to offer such sacrifices faced death, and "a commission was appointed in each city to enforce the emperor's decree."[4] Authorities gave those individuals who sacrificed to the idols certificates, called *libelli*, which provided protection against prosecution, and many Christians sacrificed to the idolatrous gods to receive *libelli*.[5] In an attempt to maintain their faith, many Christians sought forged documents from the police stating that they had sacrificed to idols, when in fact they had not.[6]

Decius' persecution did not last long; he only reigned from 249 to 251.[7] After the persecution ended, many Christians who had abandoned their faith wished to reconcile with the church. Some Christians wished to accept their lapsed brethren back with open arms while others believed that those who had committed idolatry had sinned so grievously that they could no longer find any forgiveness.[8] Cyprian's solution lay in the middle. "Against those who would be too lenient, he advocated periods of fasting and prayer and the giving of possessions to the poor for forgiveness and restoration. Against

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2. Ancient Christian tradition ascribes the Gnostic heresy to Simon; see F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 166-167. Whether Simon founded the Gnostics or not, and evidence does support the assertion that he did, his repentance depicted in his response to Peter need not be discounted. Simon could easily have repented of the specific sin Luke records and have fallen again later.

3. Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 92.

4. Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 83.

5. J. Roldanus, "No Easy Reconciliation: St. Cyprian on Conditions for Re-Integration of the Lapsed," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 92 (1995): 24; John H. Taylor, Jr., "St. Cyprian and the Reconciliation of Apostates," *Theological Studies* 3 (1942): 30.

6. Roldanus, "No Easy Reconciliation, 24.

7. Ibid.

8. Taylor, "St. Cyprian and Reconciliation," 32.

those who would be too strict, he advocated eventual mercy and renewal of fellowship,

but only after the sinner had proven sorrow and a change of heart and life."[9] In Cyprian's

own words:

> If anyone performs prayer with his whole heart, if he groans with genuine
> lamentations and tears of repentance, if by continuous just works he turns
> the Lord to the forgiveness of his sin, such can receive His mercy, who has
> offered His mercy with these words: "When you turn and lament, then you
> shall be saved and shall know where you have been"; and again: I desire
> not the death of the dying, says the Lord in the Lord's own words: "Turn,"
> he says, "to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, patient
> and rich in mercy and who turns his thought toward the evil that has been
> done." He can grant mercy; He can turn aside His judgment. He can with
> indulgence pardon him who is repentant, who performs good works, who
> beseeches.[10]

In other words, God could forgive those who had fallen into paganism, but he could only

do so provided the erring Christians demonstrated true repentance. Additionally,

according to Cyprian, the sinner's forgiveness rested upon divine mercy.

Jesus clearly understood individuals could abandon their faith. Peter and Cyprian,

both leaders in the church at different times, responded to individuals who had left the

church. Peter urged immediate repentance and prayer, while Cyprian urged restoration

after a period of visible repentance. Leaders in the modern church also deal with

delinquent Christians. In order to deal with such Christians, leaders must understand why

individuals leave the faith, for different motivations for leaving the church call for

different strategies in reclamation. Second, leaders need effective strategies to seek the

lost sheep. This chapter will explore both the causes of delinquency and restorative

strategies for church leaders. The chapter will begin, however, by outlining the

responsibilities of church leaders toward inactive Christians.

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9. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 119-120.

10. *On the Lapsed*, 36.

The Responsibility of Elders Toward Inactive Christians

All Christians possess a level of responsibility toward their wayward brethren. James framed this truth in the following manner: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:19-20). James refers to "someone" bringing back the sinner from his error, not a church leader. Paul also mentioned others besides church leaders reclaiming Christians caught in sin. The apostle wrote, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal 6:1). Instead of a generic "someone" bringing back the erring brother, Paul calls upon the spiritually mature to minister in such a manner. The spiritually mature would include church leaders and non-leaders. However, elders, because of their maturity, possess a unique position to work with inactive brethren. The Scriptures call upon church leaders to involve themselves in precisely that ministry.

Paul's Instructions to the Ephesian Elders

When he knew he would see the Ephesian elders no more, Paul called for those elders to meet him at Miletus. The speech Paul gave the Ephesian elders

> is an important speech, because it serves as Paul's last will and testament and belongs to the genre of farewell speeches. It has none of the elements of a missionary speech (no *kerygma*) or a defense address (no *apologia*); rather it is totally pastoral in its conception, as Paul reflects on his own work, ministry, and testimony, and exhorts the presbyters of Ephesus to imitate his service of the Word.[11]

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11. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 674

In other words, Paul provided the Ephesian elders with counsel to follow in light of his coming departure. The apostle addressed the elders saying, in part:

> Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:25-31).

Paul's address to the elders, like 1 Peter 5 to be exegeted below, draws upon the rich imagery in biblical tradition of God's people as God's flock (e.g., Mi 5:4; Is 4:11; Jer 13:17; Ez 34:12).[12] Paul exhorted the elders of Ephesus to shepherd the church of God. The Greek term Paul employed (*poimainō*) refers to shepherds tending flocks.[13] Concerning the instruction for the elders to shepherd the church in their charge, F. F. Bruce, late professor emeritus at Manchester University, wrote, "The Holy Spirit had entrusted them with the charge of the people of God in Ephesus; they had to care for them as shepherds cared for their flock."[14]

How did shepherds in antiquity care for their sheep? Fist according to Jesus, ancient shepherds knew their sheep. Christ said that the shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (Jn 10:3). This calling of the sheep by name strongly implies that the shepherd knew his sheep; if the shepherd did not know his sheep, how could he call them by name? Certainly shepherding the flock of God requires that elders know those in their flock.

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12. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 623.
13. Gingrich and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 683 (see chap. 1, n. 10). The term is used in Lk. 17:7 and 1 Cor. 9:7 to refer literally to watching after sheep.
14. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 392.

Knowing the flock, not just by name, but having an intimate relationship with the flock, allows elders to work actively to prevent the falling away of those in their charge. In Dana L. Gill's study of inactive members in the congregation where he ministered, inactive members knew the elders far less than did active members. Twenty-five inactive members of the sample of 108 did not know the elders at all, while the researcher expected only thirteen to give such a response.[15] On the other hand, none of the control group of active members said that they did not know the elders at all, while the researcher expected twelve in this category.[16]

Elders who know well the flock in their charge will recognize when a sheep wanders and go to reclaim him or her. In a rhetorical question, Jesus asked, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (Lk 15:4). If the shepherd does not know his sheep, how will he know one has wandered and how will he know he has found his sheep, opposed to the sheep of another shepherd, when he finds it? F. LaGard Smith, current visiting professor of law at Liberty University, wrote, "In an area of great fluidity in 'church membership,' do elders today (especially in larger congregations) know who is coming in to be fed, and who is leaving, perhaps because they are *not* being fed?"[17] Elders must know the sheep in their flock.

Second, shepherds in antiquity led their sheep by their voice. Jesus said, "When he [the shepherd] has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (Jn 10:4). Shepherds led and sheep followed. How do New Testament elders lead their flock? First, Jesus mentioned that the leading

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15. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 45-46 (see chap. 1, no. 2).

16. Ibid.

17. F. LaGard Smith, *Radical Restoration: A Call for Pure and Simple Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Cotswold Publishing, 2001), 182.

occurs audibly; in other words, shepherds speak to their flock. The New Testament envisions elders teaching the congregation. Only one "able to teach" can function as an elder (1 Tm 3:2). Christ gave some to be teaching-pastors (Eph 4:11). Elders who labor in "preaching and teaching" deserve special honor (1 Tm 5:17). Second, New Testament elders led the Christians in their charge by "being examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5:3).

Teaching the church directly bears on the elders' work of reclamation. Elders, through their teaching role, can provide preventive instruction on the dangers of apostasy. Additionally, in their teaching role shepherds can encourage other spiritually mature Christians to work for the reclamation of inactive brethren. As elders provide an example of reclamation to the congregation, spiritually mature members will likely find encouragement to seek wandering sheep themselves. Also, as the shepherds provide an example of life to the inactive members of their congregations, they will have much moral capital to encourage wayward members to return home.

Third, shepherds in ancient times defended their sheep even at the risk of their own lives. Jesus provided an example to modern elders when he said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it" (Jn 10:11-12). Killing both lion and bear, David defended his flock at the risk of his own life (1 Sm 17:34-36). Paul envisioned New Testament elders functioning in a similar manner; he told the Ephesian elders, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31).

How do elders who function as ancient shepherds by defending their sheep at the risk of their own lives impact inactive Christians? First, elders must keep false doctrine at bay. Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders on Crete because there were "many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group" (Ti 1:10). The Cretan elders had the responsibility of preventing false doctrine from spreading through the congregations on the island. The shepherding role of preventing false doctrine greatly affects the reclamation ministry. As demonstrated below, doctrinal disparity often leads to inactivity. Elders in assimilating new members into the congregation must see that new converts receive adequate instruction in the faith to prevent doctrinal disparity. Additionally, elders who closely monitor the teaching in a congregation will prevent error from leading some members into apostasy.

Second, elders function as ancient shepherds in defending the congregation by keeping watch on intracongregational conflict. In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he foresaw that the congregation or congregations in which they pastored would become embroiled in conflict. Once more the following words deserve special attention: "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Paul knew conflict would split congregations apart. As demonstrated below, intracongregational conflict leads to apostasy. Good shepherds work to prevent conflict from escalating to the point that some leave the church.

James' Instructions to the Elders

James 5:13-20 deserves special attention in writing about the eldership. James, the Lord's brother, wrote:

> Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy?
> Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the
> elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name
> of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person
> well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.
> Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that
> you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and
> effective.
> Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would
> not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he
> prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.
> My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and
> someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner
> from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude
> of sins.

How should Christians understand these instructions for the sick to call for the

elders for anointing and prayer? Many have seen this passage as an appeal for a ministry

of the elders to the sick.[18] In fact, one author wrote of this passage, "James envisions a

bedridden Christian whose weakened condition requires special prayer and attention.

Hence he urges the sick person to call for the elders of the church."[19]

However, such a view ignores the context in Scripture concerning healing of

sickness.[20] Nowhere else in the New Testament does healing occur through the elders in

local congregations. Although "gifts of healing" find mention in 1 Corinthians 12,

nowhere else in the New Testament do the inspired writers call for a ministry of healing.

Additionally nowhere in the New Testament do writers connect prayer and healing so

closely as in the present passage.

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18. See, for example, Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 198-210; J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 189-200; Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 136-138; and Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1991), 300.

19. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 254.

20. See Daniel R. Hayden, "Calling the Elders to Pray," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 258-259.

Although the word "sick" occurs twice in the New International Version given above, two different words occur in the Greek text.[21] The first term (*astheneō*) refers to being weak. The term occurs thirty-four times in the Greek New Testament, referring twenty times to physical weakness (primarily in the Gospels and Acts) and fourteen times to spiritual weakness (primarily in the Epistles).[22] Paul often used the word to refer to spiritual weakness (e.g., Rom 14:1-2; 1 Cor 8:11-12).[23] Translating the term as spiritual weakness would not at all be out of step with the Epistles.

The other term translated "sick" in the above text (*kamnō*) occurs only one other place in the New Testament where the term refers to weariness:[24] "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary [*kamnō*] and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb 12:3-4). Although the term can refer to physical illness, the term primarily refers to being weary or fatigued. Because of the usage of the term in Greek, viewing the term here as referring to the weak makes far more sense than viewing the term as referring to the physically ill.

The largest obstacle to understanding the illnesses of James 5 as spiritual rather than physical illnesses is the reference to the promise of healing in verse 16.[25] The Greek word (*iaomai*) does refer to the healing of the physically ill in the New Testament.[26] However, the term occurs in Hebrews 12 referring to spiritual healing, as the context makes obvious. The author began the chapter by encouraging his readers to fix their eyes on Jesus, "the author and perfector" of their faith, so that they would "not grow weary

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21. Ibid., 259-261.
22. Ibid., 260.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 261.
26. Ibid.

and lose heart" (1-3). The author encouraged his readers to view their current trials as divine discipline (4-11). The writer concluded the section with these words: "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed (*iaomai*)" (12 -13). Obviously the healing the author of Hebrews envisioned involved not physical healing for the lame, but the strengthening of Christians lame from weariness.

If the above exegesis accurately portrays James' intent, what do those words say concerning elders ministering to inactive Christians? First, James specifically singles out elders for this work. If a member of the church becomes discouraged and weak, he should call for the elders to pray with him. Second, elders have a responsibility to know who among them struggles with weakness. Granted, James instructs the weak and struggling to call for the elders, but elders cannot wait for members to call them in such situations; they need a proactive stance in the local congregation as illustrated by the shepherd imagery used in other texts.

<div align="center">Peter's Exhortation to His Fellow Elders</div>

Peter also spoke of the work of elders in his first epistle. He wrote:

> To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Pt 5:1-4).

Peter appealed to the elders among his readers. Although Peter addressed the

elders, the phrase "among you" makes clear that he writes to these elders in "their relation to the churches."[27] In other words, elders do not function without a flock; they only serve in their capacity as elders within the church. Obviously, the context of Peter's address to the elders requires the conclusion that they acted in an official capacity in the church; the mention of "young men" in verse 5 illustrates the term keeps some of its original meaning of "older person."[28] Therefore, "elder" could very well carry the connotation of a mature person in 1 Peter 5; elders function in their capacity because they have matured in the faith. In the ancient world, "elders" referred to the heads of households who held prestige because of their age and experience.[29]

Peter called himself a "fellow elder" in the above-cited passage; interestingly, Peter made no claim to his apostolic authority in telling these elders to pastor the flock, but he referred to himself as an elder. Some have used the absence of apostolic authority in the passage to argue for the book's pseudoprigraphy.[30] However, why would a pseudopigraphical author not stress apostolic authority in this passage? Surely such would have added more to his argument.[31] Others argue that Peter served as an elder in the sense that he was an apostle; however, because the New Testament differentiates between apostles and elders, Peter's serving as an elder probably had nothing to do with the fact he also served as an apostle.[32] "It is clear, then, that this is an inclusive term that, rather than stressing his authority, stresses his empathy with the elders in their work."[33]

27. D. Edmond Hiebert, "Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982): 331.

28. Ibid.

29. John H. Elliott, "Elders as Leaders in 1 Peter and the Early Church," *Current in Theology and Mission* 28 (2001): 552.

30. Hiebert, "Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds," 332.

31. Ibid.

32. Coy D. Roper, "Elders as Shepherds of Suffering Saints: An Exegesis of 1 Peter 5:1-5" (research paper, Harding University Graduate School of Religion, 1993), 10.

33. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 176.

After the apostle also identified himself as a witness of Christ's sufferings and as a participant in the soon-to-be-revealed glory, he exhorted the elders to shepherd the flock in their charge. Paul also addressed the elders in Ephesus as shepherds in the passage exegeted above. Peter's unique contribution to the concept of elders serving as shepherds lies in the instructions Peter gives concerning how God intended elders to shepherd. God intended elders to shepherd by overseeing the flock out of a willing spirit and serving as examples.

God intended elders to shepherd the flock by exercising oversight for those God has placed in their charge. The noun form (*episkopos*) of the participle Peter used often occurs in English versions as "bishop," indicating "that as yet no difference between 'elders' and 'bishops' had developed when this letter was written."[34] In encouraging these elders to oversee the flock, Peter encouraged these elders to look after the spiritual condition of the sheep they oversaw.[35] Peter used the ingressive aorist in exhorting the elders to oversee the congregation; in so doing, "he indicates that this is something that needs to be done with ever new vigor rather than as a routine undertaking."[36]

Proper elders shepherd and oversee God's flock, not because they must, but because they are willing. Elders, in other words, serve in their capacity, not because they have no other choice, but out of a real desire to serve the Lord and his church.[37] By acting out of desire, the elders would act in a godly manner, for "none of God's acts for humanity was done out of necessity, but voluntarily, out of grace."[38] Clearly elders who served out of willingness would view their work as an honor rather than a burden.

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34. Hiebert, "Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds," 335.
35. Ibid.
36. Davids, *First Peter*, 178.
37. Roper, "Elders as Shepherds," 12-13.
38. Davids, *First Peter*, 179.

Proper elders do not serve out of a desire for money but eagerly. Because some elders in the apostolic age received compensation for their work (1 Tm 5:17-18) and had access to the church's funds (Acts 11:30), monetary gain could entrap some elders. To counter such a temptation, elders serve eagerly, with an intrinsic motivation that preceded any thought of financial gain.[39]

Finally, proper elders do not "lord it over" those in their charge, but they provide an example for others to follow. The term "lord it over" indicates "a heavy-handed use of authority for personal aggrandizement, manifesting itself in the desire to dominate and accompanied by a haughty demand for compliance."[40] Peter had heard Jesus speak about the inappropriateness of a domineering leadership among his people. Jesus had said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mk 10:42-44). Proper elders demonstrate they serve all by providing an example; in providing an example for the congregation, elders "lead, not drive" those in their charge.[41]

Peter provided elders a reason for their humble behavior: when Christ, the Chief Shepherd, appears, elders shall receive an unfading crown of glory. The depiction of Christ as the Chief Shepherd undoubtedly served to remind the first century elders they did not own the flock, but they merely served under Christ.[42] Because the flock belonged to Christ and not these elders, they had a responsibility to guard the flock as Christ desired. When Christ returned, he would bring an unfading crown of glory for these

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39. Roper, "Elders as Shepherds," 13.
40. Hiebert, "Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds," 337.
41. Ibid., 338.
42. Davids, *First Peter*, 181.

elders. The crown of glory refers to the glory Christ will bestow on his undershepherds, glory which shall never end.[43]

What do Peter's words tell the modern church about elders who work with inactive Christians? As mentioned above, Peter envisioned elders as men mature in the faith. The elders' maturity makes them ideal to work with inactive Christians, for Paul desired the spiritually mature to work with brethren caught in trespasses (Gal 6:1). Peter wrote of elders "serving as overseers" in their respective congregations; as overseers, elders possess the responsibility to look after the spiritual welfare of those entrusted to them. The elders' willingness to work as elders should invigorate them as they seek the sheep gone astray. Additionally, realizing that they serve under Christ should cause elders to go eagerly in his name to win back those who have wandered from Christ.

A Difficult Situation

Among churches of Christ, the actions of the elders in the church at Collinsville, Oklahoma, illustrate quite well the difficulties elders face when working with inactive members. Marian Guinn obeyed the Gospel in March 1974 when one of the Collinsville church's elders, Ron Witten, baptized her.[44] A few years after Guinn joined the Collinsville church, the three elders, Ted Moody, Ron Witten, and Allen Cash, learned that she and former Collinsville mayor Pat Sharp were involved in a sexually immoral relationship.[45] The elders met with Guinn on at least three occasions and urged her

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43. Ibid., 182.

44. Ralph D. Mawdsley, "The Modus Operandi of Church Discipline," *Fundamentalist Journal* 3 (1984): 22.

45. Lynn Buzzard, "Is Church Discipline an Invasion of Privacy? Recent Court Cases Force the Question," *Christianity Today*, November 9, 1984, 37; and Paul J. Cleary, "An Affair for the Church?" *The National Law Journal*, April 2, 1984, 6.

repentance.[46] Although the elders sought Guinn's repentance, she refused to cut off her

relationship with Sharp, and the elders withdrew fellowship from her on October 4,

1981.[47]

The episode gained national media attention when Guinn sued the church elders

and former minister Barry Stephens for $1.35 million for invasion of privacy and

emotional distress.[48] After the week-long trial, the jury deliberated five hours and

awarded the plaintiff $390,000.[49] Jurors interviewed later "said their verdict was

intended to show that there were limits to the length churches could go to discipline their

members."[50] The church appealed the ruling to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Christian

attorneys from Nashville, Los Angeles, and law professors at Pepperdine University

assisted Truman Rucker, the church's attorney, in preparing his appeal.[51] The Oklahoma

Supreme Court declared that Guinn could only seek damages for the infliction of harm

after she resigned her membership, and they remanded the verdict back to the lower

court.[52] Before the case went before another jury, the church and her elders settled out of

court; the settlement prohibits the parties from discussing the settlement.[53]

While the researcher realizes the difficulties, he regrettably found that many

churches chose not to practice discipline following the lawsuit. "In a practical vein,

Collinsville has probably caused church elders to be almost too reluctant to grasp the

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46. *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*, 8 Okla. 775 P 2d 766 (1989).
47. "Shunned Woman Says Elders Betrayed Her," *New York Times*, March 14, 1984, national edition.
48. "Scriptures Required Denouncing Woman in Church, Elders Testify," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1984, national edition; "Woman Sues Church Elders on Punishment," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1984; Mark Starr and Daniel Shaprio, "Suing Over a Scarlet Letter," *Newsweek*, February 27, 1984, 46; "Marian and the Elders;" and "Oklahoma: Lawsuit Postponed," *Christian Chronicle*, February 1984, 7.
49. "Award in a Church-Privacy Suit," *New York Times*, March 16, 1984, national edition.
50. Ibid.
51. Ray Vaughn, Jr., "Collinsville: Appeals Procedures," *Christian Chronicle*, April 1984, 23.
52. *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*.
53. R. Scott Lamascus, "Collinsville Case Leaves Religious Issues Unsettled," *Christian Chronicle*, September 1989, 1.

razor sharp thorn of church discipline. As someone stated, Collinsville has had a *chilling*

effect."[54] Flavil Yeakley, professor at Harding University, surveyed churches of Christ

concerning their practice of church discipline, and he found that "the practice of

withdrawing fellowship from anyone for any reason has declined significantly since the

court's decision."[55] Robert E. Whiddon, Jr., when writing a doctoral dissertation on

church discipline in the churches of Christ at Trinity Theological Seminary, found the

chilling effect of Collinsville in his literature review. He wrote:

> The literature available presented a clear picture of how the
> Collinsville case devastated the Churches of Christ. The average article
> written in brotherhood magazines before Collinsville was markedly
> general in nature. It was pointed out that half of the articles were general
> studies or overviews of the subject of church discipline. The remainder of
> the pre-Collinsville articles dealt with specific details of church discipline,
> yet the nature of the articles were [sic] general.
> The moment the Collinsville case broke into the spotlight, a
> marked change occurred in the writing styles and nature of articles. Many
> articles were written with the idea of how to practice discipline without
> getting sued. The main idea then changed from a ministry of recovery to
> the ministry practiced by the church only towards its own members.
> Lawyers, not theologians, became the experts in church discipline.[56]

No longer were congregations solely concerned about carrying out biblical instructions,

but they also desired to insulate themselves from lawsuits.

   Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville and the "chilling effect" the case had

upon churches of Christ stand as stark reminders of the perils elders face in restoring the

erring. While the majority of inactivity does not result from blatant sin as in the case of

Guinn, how open would inactive Christians be to outreach by the elders? Would they,

like Guinn, feel their privacy had been violated and file suit? How should elders deal

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54. James O. Baird, "Perspectives: Writer Discusses Collinsville in Retrospect," *Christian Chronicle*, March 1989, 18.
55. Tom Price, "Church Discipline and Reconciliation," *Christian Century*, July 29-August 5, 1992, 703.
56. Robert E. Whiddon, Jr., "The Current Status of the Practice of Church Discipline in the Churches of Christ in America" (PhD diss., Trinity Theological Seminary, 1996), 69-70.

with such accusations? These difficult questions demonstrate clearly the perils elders face in working with delinquent Christians.

Causes of Inactivity

Numerous scholars have studied the psychological aspects of church involvement and have discovered multiple variables that make one more likely or less likely to participate in church life.[57] While the candidate clearly sees overlaps between those studies and an examination of inactivity among Christians, the candidate will make no attempt to review those studies in this chapter for two reasons. First, those studies examine why individuals participate or do not participate in church activities, but they do not examine why individuals go from active participation to inactivity. Second, when examining subjects who do not include themselves in religious activities, researchers examine both those who have never participated and those who once participated but no longer do so. Therefore, the populations of such studies do not provide useful data for examining specifically the inactive member.

Instead, this present chapter explores the movement from active service to inactivity. What variables lead individuals to cease church participation? What actions can active Christians take to reinvigorate the former member? Why should elders in churches of Christ concern themselves with reaching delinquent members of their respective congregations?

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57. E.g., see Jon P. Alston, "Social Variables Associated with Church Attendance, 1965 and 1969: Evidence from National Polls," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (10): 233-236; Irving E. Bender, "A Longitudinal Study of Church Attenders and Nonattenders," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (7): 230-237.

The Parable of the Sower

Mark recorded that Jesus sat in a boat by the lake and taught a crowed gathered

there. He told them:

> Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed,
> some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on
> rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly,
> because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were
> scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell
> among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not
> bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and
> produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times (Mk
> 4:3-8).

When the disciples did not understand the parable, Jesus gave the following explanation:

> The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path,
> where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes
> away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky
> places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have
> no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes
> because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown
> among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness
> of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word,
> making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word,
> accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what
> was sown (Mk 4:14-20).

Although the so-called Parable of the Sower occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels,

the candidate chose to focus on Mark's account, for the Parable of the Sower plays an

important role in Mark's Gospel.[58] Through the telling of the Jesus story in Mark, the

astute reader sees the different soils discussed in the parable through the characters in the

Gospel. Not only does the parable function importantly in Mark's Gospel, the parable

puts on Jesus' lips important points about what contributes to inactivity.

As the sower went forth to scatter seed, some seed fell on the path and birds

quickly devoured the seed. Such individuals, according to Jesus, hear the word, but Satan

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58. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 148-164.

quickly comes and removes the word. In Mark's Gospel, the scribes, the Pharisees, the

Herodians, and the Jerusalem Jews well fit the description of this hardened soil.[59] "What

is important to the author about these opponents, and thus what is stressed in their

characterization, is their monolithically negative response to Jesus."[60] The characters

first appear when Jesus healed the paralytic (2:1-12) where the scribes accused Jesus of

blasphemy. In 3:6, the Pharisees and Herodias began their conspiracy to kill Jesus, a

wish they finally fulfilled in 14:64 when the Jewish aristocracy condemned Jesus to

death.[61]

The sower additionally scattered seed in thorny soil. The seed germinated quickly

but also died quickly, for the roots had no depth. Such individuals, according to Jesus,

quickly accept the word preached to them, but they quickly fall from the faith when

trouble or persecution arise on account of the word. In the context of Mark's Gospel, the

rocky soil obviously refers to the apostles, specifically Peter, James, and John.[62] When

Mark discussed the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, he emphasized the

quickness of their response.[63] Concerning the calling of Peter and Andrew, Mark wrote,

"As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew

casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I

will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him" (Mk 1:16-

18). Jesus called James and John "without delay" (Mk 1:20).

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59. Ibid., 154.

60. Mary Ann Tolbert, "How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character," *Interpretation* 47 (1993): 352.

61. Several redaction critics as well as narrative critics also point out that the main word used to describe Satan's tempting (*peiradzō*) is used three times to describe the Pharisees' activities (8:11; 10:2; 12:15). See Terence J. Keegan, "The Parable of the Sower and Mark's Jewish Leaders," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 509.

62. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 154-156. Ben Witherington III, professor of New Testament interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary further notes, "V. 17 would certainly be appropriate for a congregation under the Neronian gun and facing persecution," *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 168.

63. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 154.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples fell away as quickly as they had accepted him. At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, "You will all fall away" (Mk 14:27). Peter denied that he would fall away even if every other disciple did so. Jesus replied to Peter, "I tell you the truth, today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times" (Mk 14:30). Shortly after Jesus' arrest, Peter denied the Lord three times, just as Jesus had predicted (Mk 14:66-72).

Throughout the Gospel, the disciples reacted in a manner consistent with the rocky ground Jesus described.[64] After Jesus walked on the water and calmed the storm, the disciples "were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened" (Mk 6:51-52). When the disciples worried over their lack of bread, Jesus reminded them of his feeding of both the four and the five thousand, and he asked them, "Do you still not understand?" (Mk 8:21). The disciples lacked appropriate faith to cast out a demon (Mk 9:17-18, 29), but they did rebuke one who could heal (Mk 9:18). In short, the disciples failed to mature and produce fruit, but they did quickly fall away.

Other seeds fell among thorny soil, which prohibited the seeds from reaching maturity. In interpreting the parable for his disciples, Jesus said this soil represents those who hear the word, but the desires for the affairs of this world prevent the seed from bearing fruit. Three characters in Mark's Gospel fit the typology of the thorny soil.[65] The first character, the rich young man, came to Jesus seeking eternal life, but when he learned he must sell his possessions to follow Jesus, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mk 10:22). Herod, another character fitting the thorny soil typology, enjoyed hearing John the Baptist (Mk 6:20) but had the prophet killed after his step-

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64. Tolbert, "How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character," 353.
65. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 157-158; see also Tolbert, "How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character," 354.

daughter enticed him through dance (Mk 6:22-28). Pilate, the third character fitting this

typology, first appears positively in Mark's Gospel by attempting to secure Jesus'

release; however, finally the "worries of this life" caused Pilate to acquiesce to the

crowd's desire to have Jesus crucified.[66]

The sower also scattered seed on good soil, and the seed brought forth abundant

crops. Such individuals, according to Jesus' interpretation, hear the Gospel, accept the

word, and bring forth abundant fruit. Those healed by Jesus in Mark function as the good

soil in the Parable of the Sower.[67] The demon-possessed man in Mark 5 clearly fits the

good soil typology. After his healing, this new disciple begged Jesus for the privilege of

traveling with him (Mk 5:18). Jesus refused the man's request but instructed him to go

back to his family and tell them how the Lord had blessed him (Mk 5:19). The man did

much more than simply tell his family the good news of Jesus; Mark recorded, "So the

man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.

And all the people were amazed" (Mk 5:20). The believing man brought forth much

fruit.

At first glance, readers might wonder how such a narrow interpretation of the

Parable of the Sower can provide insights into inactive Christians removed two millennia

from the characters fitting the typology in Mark's Gospel. Such concerns ignore a couple

of important points. First, the other two Synoptics develop the parable differently and

thus allow for a more universal application. Second, individuals today fit the typology

just as did the characters in Mark's Gospel. Some, like the Pharisees, Herodians, and

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66. Keegan also sees the crowds as representative of the thorny soil. They hear Jesus gladly (12:37), but stirred by the chief priests they cry out for Jesus' death. See Keegan, "The Parable of the Sower," 510.

67. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel*, 164-172. Keegan disagrees, however, and sees the good seed waiting "fulfillment in the anticipated future that is beyond the limits of the story time of the Gospel," Keegan, "The Parable of the Sower," 512.

Jerusalem Jews still reject the message from the first time they hear the word. Others,

like the disciples, desire to follow Christ, but they stumble when they encounter

difficulty. Still others like the rich young man, Herod, and Pilate begin to follow Jesus,

but the cares of this world soon overwhelm them and they slip into inactivity. Some, like

those healed, hear the word, accept the message, and respond by bringing forth abundant

fruit.

As the Parable of the Sower illustrates, individuals leave active service in the

church for a variety of reasons. Some researchers described below have attempted to

oversimplify the process which leads some individuals to inactivity. John Frederick

Roberts probably stated the matter best in his dissertation at Abilene Christian University

when he wrote, "No single description fits every dropout. Single or multiple factors may

be involved in each case."[68] Therefore the research discussed below explores multiple

factors.

<div align="center">Demographical Description of Inactive Christians</div>

Before exploring causes which lead to inactivity, readers can benefit from

understanding the profile of the typical inactive member. Nearly every study on the

demographics of dropouts agrees that males apostatize much more frequently than

females. Why do males leave the church more frequently than females? Two writers

offered their opinion:

> Cultural expectations with regard to church attendance are different for
> males, who are much less likely to receive social disapproval for dropping
> out of the church. In fact, in some circumstances continued church
> affiliation on the part of males is viewed as a sign of weakness. For

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68. John Frederick Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 4 (see chapt. 1, n 2).

females, on the other hand, to be outside the church may well be seen as a character flaw, if not indicative of questionable morality.[69]

Thus, societal pressures affect males and females differently, causing more males to leave the church.

Not only do males leave the church more than females, but young people leave the church in greater numbers than their older counterparts. Forty-five percent of all Catholic dropouts stopped attending Mass by the age of twenty-two.[70] Research conducted in 1975 demonstrated a 60 percent decline in Sunday school enrollment in the Presbyterian Church from the sixth to the tenth grade.[71] Two researchers estimate that around 40 percent of Seventh Day Adventist youth leave the church of their youth by their mid-twenties.[72] Other research shows that 83.7 percent of drop-outs left church participation before they turned thirty-five.[73] Yeakley estimates that half of all the children of adult members baptized in churches of Christ drop out.[74]

Why do younger individuals leave the church more often than their older counterparts? Younger individuals do not leave the church because they have lost faith, but, in one study, 44 percent of young people left the church but still had interest in faith and could not "relate to the present church."[75] Perhaps younger people cannot relate to the church because of dissatisfaction with church doctrine; in a study of Catholic drop-outs, Dean R. Hoge, professor of sociology at The Catholic University of America, found

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69. C. Kirk Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof, "Apostasy in American Churches: Evidence from National Survey Data," in *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 38.

70. Ibid., 84.

71. Dean R. Hoge and Gregory H. Petrillo, "Determinants of Church Participation and Attitudes Among High School Youth," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (1978): 359.

72. Roger L. Dudley and Randall L. Wisbey, "The Relationship of Parenting Styles to Commitment to the Church Among Young Adults," *Religious Education* 95 (2000): 46.

73. David A. Roozen, "Church Dropouts: Changing Patterns of Disengagement and Re-entry," *Review of Religious Research* 21 (1980): 434.

74. Yeakley, *Why Churches Grow*, 3rd ed. (Broken Arrow, OK: Christian Communications, 1979), 6.

75. Hoge and Petrillo, "Determinants of Church Participation," 364.

dissatisfaction with Catholic doctrine as an important factor with 42 percent of young

drop-outs.[76] Peer pressure lessens the chances young people will remain faithful so much

so that two researchers declared "it seems that a high school youth will seldom participate

in church youth programs if his closest friends do not."[77]

Parents play a huge factor in the youth drop out rate. Dana Larry Gill, in

completing his Doctor of Ministry at Harding University Graduate School of Religion,

studied inactive Christians at the church of Christ in Merkel, Texas. In his study, Gill

used faithful members of the Merkel congregation as a control group and discovered the

religious preference of the mother did not greatly affect adult faithfulness, but a slightly

higher percentage of faithful members had fathers who were faithful members of the

churches of Christ.[78] Another study found the attendance of both parents played a huge

role in whether or not children would remain faithful, but even more importantly, "the

amount the parents carry their religion over into all of life" played an enormous role in

faithfulness once children make their own decisions.[79]

Even when parents desperately desire to transmit their religion to their children,

several family factors often keep children from the religion in which their parents reared

them. Children coming from religiously mixed marriages leave the church in far greater

numbers than those coming from religious homogeneous marriages. [80] Tensions between

parents also prohibit many youth from remaining in the religion in which their parents

trained them. Children from supportive homes remain in the church far more than

children from controlling parents. In a study of Seventh Day Adventist youth, a caring

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76. Hoge, *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees*, 89. In a study of Seventh Day Adventist youth, the researcher discovered that the youth "who agreed that the Adventist church is God's true church were more likely to be committed and active," Roger L. Dudley, "Indicators of Commitment to the Church: A Longitudinal Study of Church-Affiliated Youth," *Adolescence* 28 (1993): 24.

77. Hoge and Petrillo, "Determinants of Church Participation," 370.

78. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 32-33 (see chapt. 1, n. 2).

79. Hoge and Petrillo, "Determinants of Church Participation," 366.

80. Ibid., 360.

mother greatly predicted the activity of subjects in their early twenties.[81] Youth may, through no fault of the parents, consistently doubt their childhood religious training; many such youth leave the church.[82]

Many churches actively coordinate youth programs for young people with the aspiration such activities provide youth greater incentive to remain in the church as they mature. In studies of youth drop-outs, the quality of the adult leaders played an important role in whether the youth would remain faithful or leave the church. Specifically, research has shown "whether the pastor and the youth leaders were approachable and understanding" impacted whether youth would remain in the church or find socialization and support elsewhere.[83] In a study of 390 high school students attending youth conferences supported by three Protestant denominations, youth who were less alienated from the church believed both their parents and religious leaders possessed appropriate religious qualities.[84] Additionally, for those same students the researchers found that "relations with pastors and opportunity for church involvement are the strongest factors related to teenage attitudes toward religion."[85]

In a study of Seventh Day Adventist youth, the youth who felt they had a better relationship with Jesus remained in the church far more than youth who had no comparable relationship.[86] Additionally, those Adventist youth who believed they would receive salvation if the Lord "were to come right now" remained with the church far more than other youths.[87]

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81. Dudley and Wisbey, "Parenting Styles and Commitment," 47.
82. Bruce Hunsberger, "A Reexamination of the Antecedents of Apostasy," *Review of Religious Research* 21 (1980): 167.
83. Ibid.
84. Roger L. Dudley and C. Robert Laurent, "Alienation from Religion in Church-Related Adolescents," *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1989): 418.
85. Ibid.
86. Roger L. Dudley, "Indicators of Commitment to the Church," 24.
87. Ibid.

C. Kirk Hadaway, current director of research for the Episcopal Church Center, performed a cluster analysis to identify the attributes of the typical American apostate using the National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) General Social Survey from 1972 to 1985.[88] Hadaway termed the first cluster in his analysis the "Successful Swinging Singles."[89] The researcher found these apostates to be young, cosmopolitan, single, and financially secure. The second cluster, the "Sidetracked Singles," resemble the first cluster in many respects, but they differ dramatically in their outlook on life; only 1.3% of this second cluster identified themselves as happy.[90] Hadaway summarized this group by saying, "They have been shunted to the side-track, watching the good life pass them by."[91] The third cluster, "Young Settled Liberals," come largely from youth, have spouses, and have happiness and well-being.[92] This cluster apostatized for two main reasons: their liberal views regarding abortion, homosexuality, and marijuana place them outside the mainstream of most ecclesiastical bodies and their satisfaction with life leads them to believe they have no need for the church.[93] The fourth group, "Young Libertarians," find value in freedom of action and thought; Hadaway wrote that for this group "apostasy may be more of a rejection of a religious label than a rejection of religious belief."[94] The fifth cluster, Irreligious Traditionalists, appear as something of an oddity in that they appear most like the typical church member: they are older, married, and conservative.[95] What has caused them, then, to reject religion? Hadaway found a few interesting possibilities. First, of all the clusters he identified, this fifth cluster

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88. C. Kirk Hadaway, "Identifying American Apostates: A Cluster Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989).
89. Ibid., 206.
90. Ibid., 208.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 210.
93. Ibid., 211.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., 212.

largely rejects the concept of an afterlife; 63.3 percent in this group stated that they did not believe in life after death.[96] Second, they have largely moved to different states, which other studies have demonstrated to free individuals from previous religious constraints.[97]

<p style="text-align:center">Causes Prior to Initial Conversion</p>

Yeakley examined the characteristics of prospects for religious conversion.[98] Some variables showed differences in those who converted and between those who dropped out or did not convert. Yeakley found that those subjects with the most heterogeneous sphere of religious influence were more likely to convert and those with the most homogeneous sphere of religious influence were unlikely to convert and highly likely to become inactive if they did convert.[99] Thus, those whose close family all belonged to the same religious group dropped out of the church much more frequently than those whose close family members belonged to various groups. Using the measure of stress developed by Thomas H. Holmes, Yeakley measured the stress each subject had experienced shortly before a member of the churches of Christ contacted them; he found that converts had much more stress than either the non-converts or drop-outs before being contacted by a member of the churches of Christ.[100] Yeakley asked the subjects about their dissatisfaction with their previous church or non-religious life before religious persuasion.[101] Yeakley also found that converts largely came from roughly the same

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96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.
98. Flavil Ray Yeakley, Jr., "Persuasion in Religious Conversion," (Ph. D. thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975). Yeakley's findings can also be found in his work *Why Churches Grow*.
99. Yeakley, "Persuasion in Religious Conversion," 37-38.
100. Ibid., 30, 42.
101. Ibid., 31.

theological position as the churches of Christ while drop-outs and non-converts largely

came from groups either more conservative or liberal than the churches of Christ.[102]

The Role of the Congregation

Yeakley also tested variables relating to group characteristics in religious

persuasion. He found that the greater the similarity in age, in socio-economic status, and

in educational level between the congregations and the communities they serve, the

greater the likelihood individuals would convert and remain converted.[103] However,

Yeakley found "upward social mobility" in congregations gaining and keeping converts;

congregations which were slightly higher than prospects in socio-economic status and

education were more likely to gain and keep converts.[104] Heterogeneous congregations

in regard to age, socio-economic status, and education were more successful in gaining

and keeping converts than were congregations that were largely homogeneous.[105]

Yeakley also used the Religious Construct Test to test similarity between the minister and

the subject's cognitive complexity; Yeakley found that "if a cognitively complex person

affiliated with a congregation in which the minister is cognitively simple, the subject was

much more likely to drop out."[106]

The Role of the Persuaders

Individuals who attempted to persuade others played an important role in whether

or not the subjects would convert and whether the subjects would drop out if they did

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102. Ibid., 53.
103. Ibid., 67-74.
104. Ibid., 79.
105. Ibid., 85.
106. Ibid., 121

convert. When cognitively simple persuaders taught cognitively complex subjects, most subjects did not convert and those who converted soon ceased active service in the congregation.[107] Age differences between persuaders and their prospects played an important role in whether the prospect would convert and whether or not he or she would drop out; the mean age difference in Yeakley's study for converts was 11.26, for the non-converts the mean age difference was 25.9, and for the drop-outs the mean age difference was 23.59.[108] The similarity in educational level between persuaders and prospects "was an important factor" in Yeakley's study.[109] When subjects had an educational level which differed from their persuaders by two or more points, only 34 percent converted while 60 percent did not convert and 62 percent dropped out.[110] Likewise, when subjects and their persuaders differed by two or more levels in regard to socio-economic status, 68 percent did not convert and 88 percent dropped out while only 20 percent converted.[111]

The persuaders' message also played a huge role in whether individuals converted and remained faithful. When the persuader viewed evangelism as a manipulative monologue, the prospect was likely to convert but then drop out after his conversion.[112] Eight-five percent of the drop-outs in Yeakley's study saw their teachers as salesmen.[113] Another high percentage of the drop-outs, 83 percent, said that their teachers had asked them their views on issues "but seemed to do so simply to manipulate."[114]

Churches have much to learn from Yeakley's work. Persuaders and prospects need to be paired as closely as possible on variables such as age, education, and socio-economic status. If the persuader and prospect cannot be exactly matched on such

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107. Ibid., 123.
108. Ibid., 123-124.
109. Ibid., 125.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid., 127.
112. Ibid., 142
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid., 143.

variables, churches would do well to use persuaders slightly higher on the education and socio-economic variables because of the desires of upward social mobility.[115] Persuaders must show genuine interest in those whom they seek to convert; they dare not manipulate them or treat them as a salesman might treat a potential costumer.

The individual or individuals responsible for conversion also seem to influence whether converts will remain with the church or will leave. In a study of a local congregation, family members influenced sixty-five of the active members while the researcher only expected fifty-one to give that response.[116] On the other hand, dropouts were greatly influenced by church leaders; church leaders influenced thirty-four dropouts while only eighteen active members had been thus persuaded.[117]

<div align="center">Causes Following Initial Conversion</div>

Discipling

The amount of teaching following initial conversion seems to play a role in who remains faithful and who becomes inactive. In a study of a local congregation of the churches of Christ, 34 percent of drop-outs had no instruction whatsoever following their initial conversion.[118] Far fewer active members than the researcher expected said they had received no instruction following conversion.[119] This demonstrates the importance of continuing teaching individuals after their baptism.

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115. Yeakley discussed upward social mobility and its influence upon evangelism. See his "Persuasion in Religious Conversion," 74-80.

116. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 56.

117. Ibid., 56-57.

118. Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 43.

119. Ibid.

God intended converts to learn after their conversion as well as before they come to him through Christ. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples, he said:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Mt 28:18-20).

As disciples are made, they are to be baptized in the name of the Triune God and taught to observe all of Christ's instructions. Baptizing and teaching serve as participles of manner.[120] Participles of manner, also known as modal participles, indicate "the manner in which the action of the main verb takes place."[121] Thus, disciples are made by being baptized and by being taught.

Not only are disciples made by being baptized, but they are also made by being taught "to obey everything" Jesus had commanded his apostles. In this way, then, the disciples are called upon to teach as Jesus taught throughout Matthew's Gospel.[122] Keeping this instruction in the context of Matthew's Gospel, teaching disciples to obey what Jesus taught probably refers to Jesus' teachings contained in Matthew such as the Sermon on the Mount and the many parables. While the context does requires teaching new disciples Jesus' instruction as recorded in Matthew, Jesus did instruct his disciples to teach new disciples "to obey everything." No teaching of Jesus can be excluded. Obviously, when the church does exclude some of Jesus' teachings, disciples will not likely remain active in the church.

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120. Rogers and Rogers, *The New Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 66 (see chapt. 1, n. 12).

121. J. A. Brooks and C. L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), 150.

122. D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28, Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 33B. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), 888.

Anxiety-Provoking Events

Anxiety causes many individuals to drop from active service. Savage studied active, less active, and inactive members in four suburban United Methodist Churches.[123] Savage found a drop-out pattern where individuals move from active service to less active service and eventually leave the church. In Savage's research, anxiety often began the process of moving one from active service. This anxiety comes in four forms: reality (anxiety based on actual events), neurotic (anxiety coming from thought patterns not anchored in reality; delusions often accompany such anxiety), moral (anxiety resulting from conflict between one's behavior and what he believes his behavior should be), and existential (anxiety resulting from the reality of death).[124] In the interviews conducted as part of Savage's research, 95 percent of participants in the less active and inactive categories "could tell quite clearly what the event was, when it happened, and could express strong feelings about" the event which caused their anxiety.[125] Three variables brought about anxiety to such intensity that individuals left the church: conflict with the minister, conflict with another family member, and conflict with another church member.[126]

Anxious individuals attempt to resolve the anxiety.[127] When anxious, congregants often provide verbal clues such as "It's too much" or "It's no use" or "I can't take it anymore" to signal their apprehension.[128] If no one offers to resolve the anxiety, congregants move from anxiety to anger; however, if the uneasy congregants find no

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123. Savage, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*, 8-9 (see chapt. 1, n. 20).
124. Ibid., 56.
125. Ibid. In Gill's study of the church of Christ in Merkel, Texas, 59 percent of inactive members said that they gradually lost interest in the church while only 41 percent could cite a single sudden cause for their leaving the church. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 38-39.
126. Savage, *Apathetic and Bored Church Member*, 56.
127. Ibid., 57.
128. Ibid.

resolution in their anger, they move further and further away from the situation where they center their anger.[129] For example, Savage found 95 percent of active members serving on a committee but no inactive members serving on committees.

The failure of individuals from the congregation to contact inactive members reinforces their belief that no one in the congregation cares for them.[130] None of the inactive persons interviewed in Savage's study reported anyone from the congregation ever attempted "to find out why they were losing interest or had dropped out."[131] Savage reports that a third of the inactive members cried in the interview, revealing the intensity of their anxiety and anger.[132]

Individuals internalize the anxiety and anger in one of two ways. Some internalize the anxiety and anger through apathy, a feeling that nothing can change one's predicament.[133] Fifty-seven percent of the inactive members in Savage's work did not call upon the church for her services.[134] Apathetic congregants leave the church because they can find nothing outside of themselves to help solve their problems, but bored individuals leave the church because they can find no inner resources to deal with their difficulties. Instead of blaming others, bored individuals blame themselves for the problems at church and leave active service.[135]

Drop-outs, whether they cease active service for boredom or apathy, usually wait six to eight weeks before reinvesting their energies in a new activity.[136] "If no one from the church attends to their needs, they will re-engage their time and energy in other

129. Ibid.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid.
132. Ibid.
133. Ibid., 63.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid., 64.
136. Ibid., 69.

pursuits."[137] Savage discovered that about half of drop-outs invest the time and energy previously devoted to church work to community activities, and the other half devote themselves to family activities.[138] Elders, therefore, cannot wait to call upon inactive members, but they must do so immediately. As soon as elders notice members moving toward inactivity, they must contact those members to seek appropriate reconciliation.

Lawrence Olson, professor of ministry and religion at Martin Luther College, replicated Savage's study in Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations in Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.[139] While Olson's work largely reached the same conclusions as Savage's study, Olson's work differed in one substantial way: only 33 percent of the inactive members in Olson's study reported an "anxiety-provoking event."[140] Olson believes methodological differences in the two studies resulted in the different findings. Because Savage sent letters asking for participation, "it may be that only those inactive individuals who had a story to tell related to a specific anxiety-provoking event were motivated to respond, and thus the sample was, to a certain extent, self-selected."[141] In Olson's study, on the other hand, the researcher sent a letter alerting individuals that a phone call would soon follow, but the researcher did not ask a response of the individual.[142] Thus, individuals who dropped from active service for a variety of reasons participated in Olson's work. Olson concluded, as this literature review reveals, "that the reasons for inactivity are more complex than what Savage discovered in his research."[143]

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137. Ibid.
138. Ibid.
139. Olson, "Understanding and Ministering to the Inactive Christian." (see chapt. 1, n. 5).
140. Ibid., 77.
141. Ibid., 78.
142. Ibid.
143. Ibid., 79.

Although anxiety-provoking events precede the exit of many from the church, few active members have not faced anxiety-provoking events. What allows certain members to remain faithful in spite of such events while others leave shortly after experiencing such events? First, formerly active members may face greater crises in their families; in one study of a local church of Christ, inactive members faced greater divorce rates and family crises than did active members.[144] Second, and perhaps more importantly, formerly active members said that they attempted to "solve problems through [their] own strength and resources" far more frequently than did active members.[145]

Changes in Motivation

Sometimes a change in motivation leads individuals toward inactivity. In his study, Hoge termed the largest group of drop-outs "weary dropouts."[146] These individuals lost motivation to attend Mass and soon ceased their presence. Subjects provided six distinct reasons for their loss of motivation.[147] For some, they became disenchanted with the church or found the institution meaningless shortly before they dropped out. Others had children who had recently left home, removing the motivation to provide spiritual formation for their children. Some respondents had recently accepted a new job, worked longer hours, or simply did not have time to worship. In a study of Mormon drop-outs, the researchers discovered that just over half of the drop-outs had found other activities which in turn caused the drop-outs to spend less time in church

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144. Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 94. However, the data somewhat beg the question. Did those members leave the church solely because they faced such crises, or did the church fail to respond adequately to such crises in showing love and support? The church may have failed to respond adequately to such crises, for sixty-seven percent of formerly active members said a weakness of the congregation under study was ministering "to members dealing with crises or personal problems," p. 96.
145. Ibid.
146. Ibid., 105.
147. Ibid.

activities.[148] Other participants in Hoge's study had been encouraged to attend by

spouses, fiancés or fiancées from whom they had recently separated. Additional subjects

found little support at home and decided they could no longer contend with the struggle.

Others had recently endured a conflict with a priest, nun, or another parishioner.

Assimilation

How well the church does in assimilating new members plays a role in whether or

not those new members will remain faithful. In a study of a local church of Christ,

inactive members did not feel as needed as did the active members. Fifty-five inactive

members said that they did not feel at all needed by the church, while the researcher

expected only thirty-two in this category.[149] Gill noted, "Members must be drawn into

the mission of the church. People will not remain active in serving Christ and the church

when they feel left out and unimportant."[150]

Members' involvement in the local congregation impacts whether they will

remain faithful or drop out. In Gill's study, the researcher expected to find twenty-five

drop-outs "very active" in the church's work and fifty drop-outs "somewhat active" in the

church's work; however he found only eleven and thirty-eight respectively.[151] Not only

do churches need to find roles for individuals to fulfill, but churches must actively seek to

disciple new members. In a study that defined discipleship as "training and equipping

believers to integrate the faith's teachings into their lives," the researcher discovered

148. Stan L. Albrecht, Marie Cornwall, and Perry H. Cunningham, "Religious Leave-Taking," in *Falling from Faith*, ed. by David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 68.

149. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 60.

150. Ibid.

151. Ibid., 69-70.

discipleship had a greater impact on religious commitment after conversion than other ministries.[152]

As important a role as assimilation plays in the faithfulness of new members, one person cannot assimilate all new members him or herself. As R. Larry Moyer, executive director of EvanTell in Dallas, Texas, said, "Follow-through is not the responsibility of only one person—or even of the one who led the individual to the Savior. Instead it is the responsibility of the entire church. No one person can do it alone."[153] However, elders can and should take an active lead in the assimilation process as part of their pastoral role discussed above.

Worldview

John Frederick Roberts, in a study of the Wilbarger Street Church of Christ in Vernon, Texas, found vast differences in the way active Christians and inactive Christians viewed the world.[154] For example, active members were significantly more likely to view maturity as defined by following the Bible as were inactive members.[155] Active members were significantly more likely to turn to verses of Scripture when facing personal crises, but inactive members largely desired patience for the crises to pass.[156]

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152. Peter W. Wielhouwer, "The Impact of Church Activities and Socialization on African-American Religious Commitment," *Social Science Quarterly* 85 (2004): 771, 788.

153. R. Larry Moyer, "Assimilating New Converts into the Local Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1994): 340.

154. Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 82-88. The data Roberts presents do not provide a causal relationship. Did the disparity in world view lead to inactivity or did the disparity in world view develop after the inactivity?

155. Ibid., 86-87.

156. Ibid., 87.

Doctrinal Disparity

Doctrinal disparity also occurs between active and inactive members. The use of instrumental music in worship revealed great differences between active and inactive members, active members largely opposed to such a practice and the inactive members largely supporting such a practice.[157] When asked whether the Bible was inspired and infallible, active members greatly supported the statement while inactive members showed some ambiguity.[158] In a study of the Christian Reformed Church, a conservative Calvinist denomination, members left because they found the church "confining, too demanding and intolerant."[159]

Supportive Relationships

In his study, Roberts found the absence of supportive relationships to be the most significant factor related to leaving the church.[160] Inactive members were much more likely to have no close friends who were members of the congregation under study as were active members; only 7 percent of inactive members had most or all of their closest friends as members of the congregation but 55 percent of active members had most or all of their closest friends as members of the congregation. Gill also found friendship impacted the number who remained faithful versus the number who left the church; the

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157. Ibid., 89-90.
158. Ibid., 90.
159. Gary D. Bouma, "Keeping the Faithful: Patterns of Membership Retention in the Christian Reformed Church," *Sociological Analysis* 41 (1980): 262. Specifically, "former members complained about an intolerance of differences of opinion, of the burden of the requirement that they send their children to private Christian schools, and of the CRC's restrictive stand on worldly amusements (card playing, theatre attendance and dancing)."
160. Roberts, "Closing the Back Door," 92.

drop-outs were far below the expected frequency of having more than fifty friends in the congregation, while faithful members were well above the same expected frequency.[161]

Marriage

Marriage impacts whether individuals remain in the church or leave. Three researchers framed the argument this way:

> If religion is an important factor in human affairs, then we should expect a strain toward similarity in religious affiliation in that most intimate of human relationships, the married pair in the nuclear family.[162]

In a study of denominational mobility, the researcher discovered that a good plurality of those who switched denominations left the denomination of their birth for the denomination of their spouse.[163] Forty-one percent of the female married switchers changed to their husband's denomination, while thirty-nine percent of the male married switchers departed for their wife's denomination. In another study, 84 percent of subjects achieved homogeneity in the family's religious practices.[164] In yet another study, thirty-three percent of those who switched denominations said the most important reason for doing so was their spouse's influence.[165]

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161. Gill, "A Study of Church Dropouts," 65-66.

162. Nicholas Babchuk, Harry J. Crockett, Jr., and John A. Ballweg, "Change in Religious Affiliation and Family Stability," *Social Forces* 45 (1967): 552.

163. Frank Newport, "The Religious Switcher in the United States," *American Sociological Review* 44 (1979): 547.

164. Babchuk, Crockett, and Ballweg, "Change in Religious Affiliation," 553.

165. Dean R. Hoge and Thomas P. O'Conner, "Denominational Identity from Age Sixteen to Age Thirty-Eight," *Sociology of Religion* 65 (2004): 81.

Change in Perception

Differences in the way converts perceived the church prior to their conversion and what they learned of the church following their conversion impacts whether they remain active or whether they leave. Individuals may believe a church can meet their perceived needs but learn shortly after joining the church the congregation cannot meet such needs.[166] Individuals may also agree verbally with a church's doctrine while not fully understanding the doctrinal peculiarities of the group; once learning those doctrinal peculiarities individuals may drop out.[167]

Returning to Church

Because the present study concerns how elders can lead inactive members back to active service in the church, this section of the literature review explores research on religious returnees. Many disaffiliate from religious bodies only to return later. "A common pattern in middle-class America is for youth to drop out during their teens or early twenties and for a majority of them to return some time later."[168]

Above the candidate explored reasons individuals left active participation in the church, but what factors cause them to reidentify with a religious body? What can modern ecclesiastical leaders learn from such research? As mentioned above, a close relationship with parents lessens the likelihood one will leave the church once he or she no longer lives at home. However, research also indicates that if those having a close

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166. John F. Seggar and Reed H. Blake, "Post-Joining Nonparticipation: An Exploratory Study of Convert Inactivity," *Review of Religious Research* 11 (1970): 205.

167. Ibid.

168. Dean R. Hoge, "Why Catholics Drop Out," *Falling from Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 96.

parental relationship do leave the church, they likely will return in later life.[169] Research

also shows that the more contact children have with their parents the more likely they

will return to the body of Christ if they leave at some point.[170] What can elders learn

about such research? First, from a preventive standpoint, they can educate parents about

the need for a close, loving relationship with their children. Second, elders wishing to

begin an outreach program to encourage inactive members could begin such an effort

with those who had close relationships with their parents while still at home.

Once dropouts leave their parents' nest and begin families of their own, they will

also be more likely to rejoin an ecclesiastical fellowship. Those who marry between the

ages of eighteen and twenty-five leave the church far less frequently than those who do

not, but also return to the church far more frequently than those who do not marry within

those years.[171] Also, those who have children by the time they reach twenty-six drop

from active participation in the church less frequently than childless young adults but also

return at greater levels than childless young adults.[172] These research findings suggest

elders wishing to reach inactive young adults have prime opportunities both when the

youth marry and have children.

In Hoge's study of Catholics, he found two factors necessary in parishes where

Catholics returned to active service.[173] First, returnees return to churches in suburban

parishes where the neighborhood population averaged between twenty-five to forty and

where residents possessed a good education. Second, returnees join parishes where "the

leadership and program relate effectively to them."[174] Obviously, elders can do little

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169. John Wilson and Daren E. Sherkat, "Returning to the Fold," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994): 155.

170. Ibid.

171. Ibid.

172. Ibid.

173. Hoge, *Converts Dropouts Returnees*, 130.

174. Ibid.

concerning the placement of the congregation they shepherd; they cannot transport their

congregation to a suburban area with younger, educated individuals. However, elders

can seek to relate effectively to those they serve, and they can seek to develop programs

that relate effectively to the formerly active member.

In his research, Hoge additionally identified four types of returnees to the

Catholic Church. Spouses, fiancés, or fiancées influenced the first type of returnee,

Marriage Life Returnees, to return to active participation in the Catholic Church.[175]

Probably because someone else urged these Catholics to return to the church, these

returned Catholics attend Mass far less frequently than other returnees and they do not

see religion playing an important role in their lives.[176] The second type of returnees,

Family Life Returnees, returned to active church participation out of concern for their

children's religious training.[177] Family Life Returnees reported that others such as

children, spouses, priests, or friends, in that order, played some influential role in their

decision to return to the church.[178] Guilt-Feeling Returnees, the third type of returnee,

"experienced a sense of need or void in their feelings about life."[179] The majority had

experienced the death of a loved one, marital crisis, or a personal illness or crisis shortly

before their return to the church.[180] Friends, priests, children, or relatives, in that order,

had influenced them to return to the church.[181] Seeker returnees, the final returnee type

in Hoge's study, often had adjustments recently that caused them to fill a void in their

lives.[182] Many had recently divorced or lost a spouse, suggesting that "the return to Mass

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175. Ibid., 139.
176. Ibid., 141.
177. Ibid., 144.
178. Ibid., 145.
179. Ibid., 151.
180. Ibid.
181. Ibid.
182. Ibid., 159.

attendance was probably part of the readjustments" to life.[183] Eighty percent of this

group reported that their return to the church came about because "they had recently felt a

sense of need or void about life."[184] Interestingly, this group tells "of the importance of

priests in their decisions to change."[185]

Practical Restoration

Elders must grasp the practical aspect of restoration. Once they have understood

their responsibilities, the demographics of the drop-outs in their congregations, and the

causes for inactivity, they need to understand how to work with those inactive members.

Theory provides the basis upon which to build their reclamation ministry, but unless they

understand clearly the practical aspects of restoration, the theory will prove fruitless.

Therefore, this section of the chapter explores steps elders can make to seek the

wandering sheep.

Making Initial Contact with the Inactive Member

Ivan Stewart, a leader in personal work among churches of Christ, has suggested

not having an appointment should not deter one from visiting the inactive member. He

wrote, "Sometimes it is possible to make an appointment with the delinquent Christian.

When an appointment is not given, this does not remove the responsibility to these

delinquent Christians but rather the workers should proceed and visit the home

unannounced."[186] Stewart wrote more than a quarter century ago, and changes since that

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183. Ibid.
184. Ibid.
185. Ibid., 158.
186. Ivan Stewart, *Go Ye Means Go Me* (Oklahoma City, OK: privately printed, 1988), 293.

time necessitate that restorers make calls prior to meeting with inactive Christians. As

Bradley stated, "Today's society will not stand for 'cold turkey.'"[187] Granted, "a phone

call might eliminate the opportunity of a caring confrontation with an inactive church

member;"[188] however, those who refuse a meeting when called would not likely receive

unannounced visitors well anyway.[189]

Bradley discussed in a seminar at the church of Christ in Guntersville, Alabama

how to make the phone call. When calling the inactive member, restorers first need to

introduce themselves and gain permission to continue the conversation lest they leave the

wrong impression by calling at the wrong moment.[190] Callers then make clear that they

desire to visit with the inactive member because he or she has been absent from church

activity.[191] In calling, restorers give the name of the individual who will be

accompanying him or her.[192] To deal with resistance, restorers give the inactive Christian

a choice as to which day would work best for him or her.[193] Restorers then want to

gather information about the household so that they will know who will be at the home

when they arrive.[194] Finally, restorers want to set a specific time to meet with the

inactive Christian and repeat the time back to him or her.[195]

187. Bradley, "Restoring Inactive Members of Churches of Christ," 180 (see chapt. 1, n. 2).
188. Jeff Moore, "An Inreach Ministry to the Inactive Members of the Regency Park Baptist Church in Moore, Oklahoma" (D. Min. diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995), 48.
189. Ibid.
190. Bradley, "Restoring Inactive Members of Churches of Christ.", 180.
191. Ibid.
192. Ibid.
193. Ibid, 181.
194. Ibid.
195. Ibid.

Making the Visit

When workers arrive at the home of inactive members, listening skills become greatly important. Because members who leave the church due to apathy place blame outwardly, "the first barrier to get past is to make that person aware that there are people in the congregation who truly do care."[196] Bored members, on the other hand, place blame inwardly and therefore need much confirmation and affirmation.[197] Listening to an inactive member's concern goes a long way in demonstrating that the church cares. David Augsburger, professor of pastoral care and counseling at Fuller Theological Seminary, frames the argument this way: "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable."[198]

In order to hear the inactive Christian appropriately, good restorers commit themselves to listening carefully to the inactive member. That commitment includes a willingness to give the inactive Christian one's undivided attention.[199] The commitment also calls for hearers to open themselves to perceiving the other's views and values, seeking to understand where the speaker is at the moment.[200] In order to understand where the speaker is, the listener suspends judgment or evaluation as he listens.[201] Good speakers additionally commit themselves to listen patiently to the speaker as he or she expresses his or her own thoughts and feelings.[202]

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196. Olson, "Understanding and Ministering to the Inactive Member," 54.
197. Ibid., 55.
198. David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), 11.
199. Moore, "An Inreach Ministry," 53.
200. Ibid.
201. Ibid.
202. Ibid., 54.

Hearing the inactive Christians also means restorers allow for emotion.[203] Christians may not always feel completely comfortable hearing individuals express strong emotions, especially when speakers direct such emotions at God. However, Paul Eric Jones, in completing his dissertation at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, aptly wrote, "Just as the psalmist David expressed negative feelings in Ps. 22:1-2, others can as well. God does not need a bodyguard."[204]

When visiting inactive Christians, restorers shall hear numerous stories, and they will find in these stories deeper truths.[205] Savage describes four levels of storytelling. He refers to the first level as "data back then."[206] This level generally begins with statements such as "When I was a kid, I . . . ." or "Back when I was in . . . ."[207] These stories seek to reduce one's exposure and put one's life in distant context.[208] The second level, "feelings back then," brings about more exposure and begins to discuss emotions one felt at a previous time.[209] When telling stories at the third level, "feelings now," speakers become more direct and their language loses much abstraction.[210] The fourth level, "self-disclosure" brings "to conscious awareness the meaning" of one's life story.[211]

Not only will restorers hear stories at different levels, but they will hear different stories, all of which play an important role in learning about the inactive Christian. The first story type, the reinvestment story, informs the hearer that the inactive Christian has reinvested his or her time, energy, and money away from the church to some other group

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203. Paul Eric Jones, "A Program to Equip the Laity to Minister to Inactive Church Members of First Baptist Church, Red Springs, North Carolina," (D. Min. diss, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 19.

204. Ibid.

205. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

206. Ibid., 79.

207. Ibid.

208. Ibid, 80.

209. Ibid.

210. Ibid., 80-81.

211. Ibid., 81.

or activity.[212] For example, drop-outs may discuss with their visitors how they now

actively camp on the week-ends or have joined a sewing group. The second story type,

the rehearsal story, informs the hearer of events from the past, but the themes in the story

currently impact the speaker.[213] Savage provides an excellent illustration.

> I overheard a marvelous rehearsal story from a pastor who was
> chatting with other church leaders while we were standing in a hallway on
> a break. The pastor mentioned that he had just visited a parishioner and
> was told a significant rehearsal story. The church member was in the
> hospital, seriously ill with cancer. The patient asked the pastor if he had
> any large trees in his backyard.
> The pastor responded that he did, but then did an important thing.
> He turned the story back to the storyteller. The pastor did not get hooked
> into telling his own story, but listened to the other person instead.
> He asked, "Do you have large trees in your backyard?" The
> parishioner responded that he did, and then told this brief story. "As a
> matter of fact, I have one that is a beautiful old tree, but it is rotting out on
> the inside, and I think it is going to die, so I guess I had better cut it
> down."
> The pastor heard the deeper story by picking out the metaphor and
> used it as part of the feedback for the story check. His response was, "I'm
> wondering if, when you find yourself in the hospital, you don't feel like a
> tree that is rotting out inside, and if maybe you feel that life is cutting you
> down. Any chance that this is what you are seeing happen to yourself?"[214]

The third story type, the "I Know Someone Who" story, allows speakers to project

something about themselves upon someone else; these stories typically begin with

phrases such as "I have this friend who. . . ." or "I have this neighbor who. . . ."[215] When

using the fourth story type, the anniversary story, speakers recount narratives with themes

that happened in the past but around the same time of year the speaker tells the

narrative.[216] The final story type, the transition story, informs carefully listeners about

transitions taking place in the speaker's life.[217]

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212. Ibid., 82.
213. Ibid., 84.
214. Ibid., 85.
215. Ibid., 89-90.
216. Ibid., 92.
217. Ibid., 94.

Conclusion

Elders possess a pastoral responsibility toward those who have fallen away for a variety of reasons, and research has established solid methods for pastorally reaching out to those inactive members. However, do elders recognize their pastoral responsibilities toward inactive Christians? How qualified do elders see themselves for working with inactive Christians? Do elders believe they possess the communicative skills required for such ministry? Do elders fear the anger inactive Christians may express toward them or the church? Do elders fear possible legal consequences resulting from work with inactive Christians? How willing are elders to learn to work with inactive Christians more effectively? The next chapter provides the research methodology the student undertook to answer those questions.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter three describes in detail the procedure of the study. This involves relating the research methodology, restating the purpose statement and research questions, describing the participants, recounting the instruments, defining the study's population and sample, providing steps for data collection, and detailing procedures used in analyzing the results of the research data.

Research Methodology

For this study, the candidate undertook a phenomological study. A phenomological study seeks understanding "the subjects' experiences and how they make sense of those experiences."[1] Therefore, the researcher sought the most effective way to understand his subjects' experiences and how those subjects understood those experiences. The remainder of this chapter explains the methodology the student carried out.

Statement of Purpose

The researcher commenced this project-dissertation for the following purposes:

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1. Rubin and Babbie, *Research Methods*, 389 (see chap. 1, no. 39).

1. To assess the attitudes of elders in churches of Christ in Kanawha and Lincoln Counties of West Virginia regarding inactive Christians

2. To assess elders' views of their ability to work with inactive Christians

3. To assess elders' willingness to learn how to deal with inactive Christians more effectively

Research Questions

The researcher posed the following research questions regarding his study:

1. How do elders in the churches of Christ in Kanawha and Lincoln Counties of West Virginia view inactive Christians?

2. What encounters with inactive Christians have elders in the churches of Christ in Kanawha and Lincoln Counties of West Virginia experienced?

3. What have the elders learned from those encounters?

4. How do the selected elders view their role as a shepherd regarding inactive Christians?

5. How willing would the selected elders be to enroll in a seminar to learn skills to work with inactive Christians?

Participants

The researcher contacted all mainstream churches of Christ in Kanawha or Lincoln County, West Virginia and invited the elders in those congregations to participate in the study. Eighteen mainstream churches of Christ operate in the two

counties under consideration.[2] Because the student has preached repeatedly about restoring inactive Christians in the Alum Creek Church of Christ, he excluded the two elders serving that congregation. Six of the remaining seventeen congregations do not have elders; therefore, eleven congregations remained for study.

The researcher mailed a letter to each of the remaining congregations explaining the project and seeking the elders' participation.[3] One week following the letter's mailing, the candidate called each elder requesting a face-to-face meeting during which the candidate explained the research project.[4] Through the face-to-face meetings the researcher indicated both the importance of the elders' participation and the importance of his research; the meetings also provided the researcher with first-hand knowledge of the participants' surroundings. At the face-to-face meetings, the student introduced the informed consent form.[5]

The investigator included all willing elders in Lincoln and Kanawha Counties of West Virginia in the study. The candidate telephoned sixteen elders whose names and phone numbers he collected from various sources. The researcher personally knew six of the elders prior to the study. Six other names were collected from websites of congregations listing contact information for the elders. The four additional names were collected from ministers or members of the congregation the student knew.

Of the sixteen elders telephoned, six refused participation in the study. One additional elder agreed to participate, but he relocated before an interview could be conducted. Nine elders participated in the study, for a participation percentage of 56.25.

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2. Mac Lynn, *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2000 ed. (Nashville, TN: 21st Century Christian, 2000).

3. The letter the researcher sent is located in Appendix A.

4. See Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1998), 40-41.

5. See Appendix B for a copy of the informed consent.

The student broke demographic data into the following categories to make comparisons between the participants easier: age, length of time as an elder, size of the congregation served, and religious background. The table below provides the demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Subject	Age	Time as Elder	Size of Congregation	Religious Background
Subject #1	82	4 years	60	Churches of Christ
Subject #2	78	40 years	65	Baptist
Subject #3	87	25 years	65	Churches of Christ
Subject #4	51	5 years	65	Churches of Christ
Subject #5	57	10 years	90	Churches of Christ
Subject #6	76	21 years	90	Churches of Christ
Subject #7	55	5 years	60	Churches of Christ
Subject #8	61	15 years	60	Churches of Christ
Subject #9	74	15 years	60	Churches of Christ

Instrument

The researcher served as the primary instrument for this study. Two writers said:

> Qualitative researchers believe that the researcher's ability to interpret and make sense of what he or she sees is critical for understanding any social phenomenon. In this sense, *the researcher is an instrument* in much the same way that a sociogram, rating scale, or intelligence test is an instrument.[6]

Although, in many respects, the researcher served as the instrument for this study, he needed direction in gathering usable data; therefore, he developed an interview guide.[7]

In conducting the interviews, the candidate did not utilize an established guide, for such a measurement does not exist. Instead, the researcher developed an interview guide for use in his interviews. The interview guide allowed the candidate to make his interviews "more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored."[8] Additionally, using an interview guide allowed the candidate to compare more easily the data obtained from the different participants.

Including all sub-questions, the interview guide contained forty-nine questions. The first set of questions allowed the researcher to explore with the participants their current situation in light of the research problem; the questions allowed the elders to reflect on their past and see how that past might impact the way they currently work with inactive Christians. The second set of questions explored the elders' current situation with inactive Christians. The final set of questions examined what the elders would like to change about the way they work with inactive Christians.

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6. Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2005),133.

7. Please see Appendix C for a copy of the interview guide.

8. Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

The candidate used his interview guide for standardized open-ended interviews.[9] In using standardized open-ended interviews, the researcher made certain each participant was asked the same questions in the same order as all the others. Utilizing the interview guide in a standardized manner provided the student with several benefits.[10] Variation among the interviews was kept to a minimum, allowing the researcher to categorize data more easily. The standardized open-ended interviews also allowed the candidate to keep the interview highly focused which provided for efficient use of time.

<center>Trustworthiness</center>

In quantitative studies, an instrument's validity matters, for validity allows researchers to know "the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the *real meaning* of the concept under consideration."[11] Therefore, without validity, researchers would never know with certainty whether their instruments actually measured what they purported to record.

However, because of divergent methodological suppositions, research standards differ significantly in qualitative from quantitative studies. Two writers argued, "Advocates of the antirealist position argue that qualitative research represents a distinctive paradigm and as such it cannot and should not be judged by conventional measures of validity, generalisability, and reliability."[12] The term "trustworthiness" better describes the present study. In summarizing the research of others, another author wrote, "At the extreme, some qualitative researchers have suggested that the traditional

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9. Ibid., 344-347.
10. Ibid., 346.
11. Rubin and Babbie, *Research Methods*, 193.
12. Nicholas Mays and Catherine Pope, "Qualitative Research in Health Care: Assessing Quality in Qualitative Research," *British Medical Journal* 320 (2000): 50.

quantitative criteria of reliability and validity are not relevant to qualitative research."[13]

At the same time, scientific research must meet the rigors of the discipline in which it

takes place. Thorleif Lund, professor of Special Needs Education at the University of

Oslo, wrote the following:

> If ''something'' is to be counted as knowledge, it has to attain a
> satisfactory level of certainty or validity. Hence, validity issues are
> fundamental ones in knowledge construction, and such issues are focused
> upon in methodological and substantive research.[14]

Therefore, the present study required conformity to the standards of qualitative research.

Yet, in qualitative research, a debate rages as to which terminology should be

applied to the whole issue of validity.[15] The candidate chose to use the terminology of

"trustworthiness," for trustworthiness asks the question, "How can an inquirer persuade

his or her audience (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying

attention to, worth taking account of?"[16] Therefore, the researcher's obstacle is to

establish the merits of the study. The study has much trustworthiness or merit.

The researcher sought interpretative trustworthiness, "the degree to which the

research participants'" viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and experiences are

accurately understood."[17] The candidate utilized two techniques to obtain such

trustworthiness. First, the student used a method commonly called "member checking."

Member checking serves to ensure "the themes or categories make sense, whether they

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13. R. Burke Johnson, "Examining the Validity Structure of Qualitative Research," *Education* 118 (1997): 282.

14. Thorleif Lund, "The Qualitative-Quantitative Distinction: Some Comments," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 49 (2005): 120.

15. E.g., see Jeffrey P. Aguinaldo, "Rethinking Validity in Qualitative Research from a Social Constructionist Perspective: From 'Is This valid research?' to 'What is this research valid for?'" *The Qualitative Report* 9 (2004): 127-136; Nahid Golafshani, "Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 8 (2003): 597-607; and Glyn Winter, "A Comparative Discussion of the Notion of 'Validity' in Qualitative and Quantitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 4, nos. 3 &4 (2000), http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR4-3/winter.html (accessed November 28, 2006).

16. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE , 1985), 290.

17. Johnson, "Examining the Validity Structure of Qualitative Research," 284.

are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate."[18] To carry out this procedure, the candidate provided all participants a copy of the data analysis and asked to make sure the student reached justifiable conclusions.

The second procedure the student used to infuse his report with interpretative trustworthiness involved "using many low inference descriptors" in presenting the data.[19] Using low inference descriptors involves utilizing many verbatim quotations throughout the report. Therefore, Chapter IV contains many verbatim quotes from the participants.

The researcher also sought honest answers from the participants.[20] Each elder contacted had the opportunity to refuse to participate, and six did refuse participation. The researcher gave the remaining nine elders ample time to read the informed consent and understand its promises—the right to withdraw from the study and the pledge of absolute confidentiality. The researcher has a high degree of certainty that the participants gave honest answers. Three elders revealed the names of inactive members with whom they were working, and two elders even told the candidate data they wished to remain out of the written report.

Another method the candidate used to enhance the trustworthiness of this report was to examine previous research findings.[21] While the researcher knows of no other phenemological study along the same lines as this study, the research outlined Chapter II discusses the responsibility of elders, causes of inactivity, and how churches can reclaim inactive members. Chapter V discusses the results of this study in light of previous researcher.

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18. John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller, "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," *Theory into Practice* 39 (2000): 127.

19. Johnson, "Examining the Validity Structure of Qualitative Research," 284.

20. Andrew K. Shelton, "Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects," *Education for Information* 22 (2004): 66-67.

21. Ibid., 69.

Procedure

Interviews

The researcher planned to employ a three-interview model proposed by Irving

Seidman, professor of qualitative research at the University of Massachusetts at

Amherst.[22] However, the researcher conducted only one interview with each participant,

for he was able to ask all the relevant questions while providing participants enough time

to supply usable data.

Because the candidate used one interview rather than the planned three, the

project does lack some of the credibility it would otherwise have had.[23] Had the student

interviewed each participant three times, he could easily have examined the data gleaned

from each elder for internal consistency. In other words, the researcher could have

explored whether or not what an elder told him in one interview matched what he told

him in another interview. The candidate sought to overcome that deficiency by the

"member checking" technique described above.

Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. "Given that the purpose of

this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experience, put it in the context

of their lives, and reflect on its meaning, anything shorter than ninety minutes for each

interview seems too short."[24] Employing a set time limit lessened the participants'

anxiety; the participants understood how much time was asked of them.[25] Interviewees

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22. Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*.
23. Ibid., 17.
24. Ibid., 14.
25. Ibid.

generally appreciate the ninety-minute period, for the time frame expresses an interest in what the participant has to say.[26]

The researcher divided each interview into three sections. The first section sought "to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time."[27] In the present study, the student attempted to understand the elders' past experiences with elders. The candidate focused on the following in the first section: previous experiences the participants had with church leaders, how they had witnessed other church leaders handle inactive Christians, and how they became elders.

The second section concentrated "on the concrete details of the participants' present experience" relating to shepherding inactive Christians.[28] The interview sought details of how the elders deal with inactive Christians in the congregations where they serve. The researcher directed attention on the following in the second section: the procedures of the congregations the elders serve in relation to inactive Christians and experiences they have encountered in dealing with inactive Christians.

The third section encouraged participants "to reflect on the meaning of their experience."[29] Reflecting on the meaning of working with inactive Christians required the elders to "look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation."[30] The researcher targeted the following: what participants would change about the way they have worked with inactive Christians and how the elders plan to work with inactive Christians in the future.

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26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 11.
28. Ibid., 12.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

Technique

"Listening is the most important skill in interviewing."[31] Therefore, the student's listening skills performed a vital role in the quality of the data he gathered. The student used the skills listed in the *Personal Evangelism Improvement Course* by Leon Estep, professor of ministerial leadership at Regions University. Estep encourages the following listening skills:[32]

1. Recognize with Socrates: "Speak in order that I may see you."

2. Prepare to listen, which requires: concentration—patience— comprehension—participation—honesty—eagerness—sharing— abandoning prejudices—openness—humility—acknowledging understanding or not understanding.

3. Be interested in speaker's topic.

4. Hear new ideas readily.

5. Accept speaker's personality.

6. Properly deal with emotionally laden words.

7. Wait to hear all speaker has to say.

8. Hear central idea—hear feelings instead of words—listen below the level of the dictionary definition of words or self-meanings.

9. Utilize notes—summarize.

10. Question self/speaker as: "What is speaker trying to say?" etc.

11. Listen "in between lines."

12. Expend energy.

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31. Ibid., 63.
32. Leon Estep, *Personal Evangelism Improvement Course* (Ozark, AL: privately printed, 1980), B-6 – B-7.

13. No-No: Do not take mental detours – Do not finish sentences for speaker – do not interrupt—do not dominate.

14. Use time variation between speaking speed and thought speed to better understand speaker.

Speaking Speed	Reading Speed	Listening Speed	Thinking Speed
100-125 WPM	200-400 WPM	400 WPM	800 WPM

Figure 1. Diagram of Communication

SENDER
Idea
Message Sent

RECEIVER
Message Received
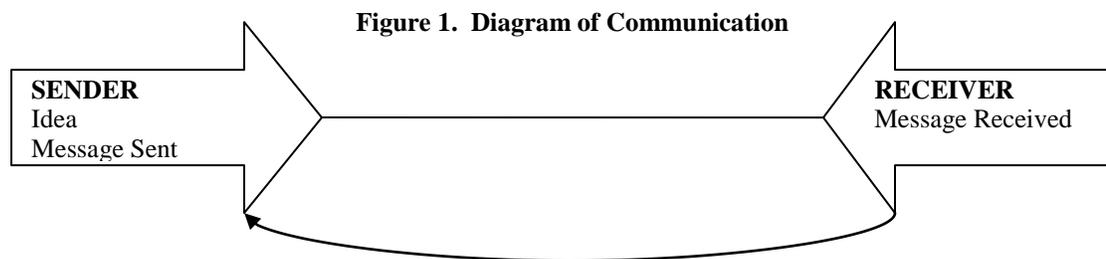
Feedback to make sure message is heard appropriately.[33]

The researcher used truly open-ended questions, for "qualitative inquiry—strategically, philosophically, and therefore, methodologically—aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data."[34] In order to ask truly open-ended questions, the candidate avoided phrasing questions as a dichotomy, where the respondent could answer "yes" or "no."[35]

In asking truly open-ended questions, the candidate needed several skills to elicit valuable data. The candidate inquired of participants when he failed to understand what an elder had said.[36] The researcher solicited more information when he feared the

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33. The concept of feedback added to the above illustration from Estep is adapted from the discussion of the transactional model of communication found in Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson, *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2000), 9-10. Hackman and Johnson write, "Effective communicators pay close attention to the messages being sent to them as they talk with others" (p. 10).

34. Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 353.

35. Ibid.

36. Seidman *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 66.

participants had not revealed the whole story or when they had simply given generalizations.[37] While the student did not interrupt the participants, he followed up on what participants said when doing so would not stop their current train of thought.[38] The candidate also avoided reinforcing the participants' answers with "uh-huh" or "O. K." or "yes," lest such responses might blur future answers.[39]

Data Collection

The researcher recorded each interview with the various participants, for the interview responses provided the raw data for the researcher's study.[40] If the candidate transposed his own wording for the participants' wording, he would have framed their experience from his own perspective, not their own;[41] tape recording the interviews allowed the student to possess all his raw data. To assure the quality of the recordings, the candidate used an electrical outlet, rather than batteries, for the outlet offered far more reliability; the candidate always took extra cassettes to the interview; the candidate employed an external microphone; and the candidate placed the recorder on a stable surface.[42]

Even though the candidate recorded the interviews, he took notes during the interactions. Taking notes provided several important benefits. First, note taking conveyed to the participants that what they said had value to the investigator.[43] Second, note taking aided the student in focusing on what the participants told him.[44] Third, note

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37. Ibid., 67-68.
38. Ibid., 70-71.
39. Ibid., 74.
40. Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 380.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 382.
43. Ibid., 383.
44. Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 64.

taking allowed the researcher to keep track of what material the participant has covered and enabled the researcher to return to this material at an appropriate time.[45] Fourth, note taking provided the researcher with an immediate "feed-back loop," that is, the candidate could write down his impression of what a participant had said and then check the accuracy of his impressions.

Once the candidate possessed the raw data, he transcribed the interviews himself. Although the candidate could have hired a transcriptionist, transcribing his own interviews provided the researcher an opportunity to become quite familiar with the interviews.[46] Some researchers choose to transcribe only those parts of interviews that they initially find interesting; however, valuable data can be lost in the process.[47] Therefore, the student copied the entire interview so that he could possess all data in the project's data analysis stage.

<div align="center">Data Analysis</div>

The candidate used four steps in organizing his data.[48] After transcribing the interviews, the candidate organized the data by cutting and pasting in Microsoft Word significant sections of the transcripts. Second, the researcher read through all transcripts several times to get a feel for the data as a whole. At this point, he began to make notes in the data for possible categories in which the data might fit. Third, the candidate identified the themes of the interviews and classified his data by those identified themes. Finally, the researcher organized the data as they occur in Chapter IV.

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45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 98.
47. Ibid.
48. These four steps are recommended in Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 150-151.

These tasks took place specifically through hermeneutics, "the theory and practice of interpretation,"[49] a vital task in analyzing verbal data. The candidate identified themes within the transcripts by utilizing factors of significance delineated by Joyce G. Love in her doctoral dissertation at Nova University.[50] First, the researcher examined the transcripts individually and together for repetition, themes mentioned by more than one participant or mentioned by a single participant more than once. The candidate also listened again to the actual recordings while reading the transcripts that he might be conscious of a change in tone or volume. At this point, the researcher also utilized notes taken during the interviews which described the participants' nonverbal communication. The student also took careful note of historical narratives which informed him of what had shaped the participants' current perceptions.

While reading the transcripts as a whole, the researcher began coding them in Microsoft Word.[51] Instead of using numbers, the candidate decided to code the data by colors around the hypotheses formulated before the study began. He used the following color scheme: red for hypothesis one, yellow for hypothesis two, blue for hypothesis three, bright green for hypothesis four, rose for hypothesis five, and orange for hypothesis six. The researcher then used cut and paste function in Microsoft Word to create documents around each of the six hypotheses.

The candidate followed a quite similar method for coding data for findings he did not expect to find and for findings in light of the literature search. To categorize and code these data, the researcher used the comment function in Microsoft Word to keep

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49. Margo Paterson and Joy Higgs, "Using Hermeneutics as a Qualitative Research Approach in Professional Practice," *The Qualitative Report* 10 (2005): 342.

50. Joyce G. Love, "The Hermeneutics of Transcript Analysis," *The Qualitative Report* 2, no. 1 (1994), http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/BackIssues/QR2-1/love.html (accessed November 28, 2006).

51. For another approach to coding in a word processor, see John H. Carney, Joseph F. Joiner, and Helen Tragou, "Categorizing, Coding, and Manipulating Qualitative Data Using the WordPerfect®± Word Processor," *The Qualitative Report* 3, no. 1 (1997), http:/www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-1/carney.html (accessed November 28, 2006).

track of data as he stumbled across them. Those data were then placed in single

documents arranged by subject headings using the cut and paste feature of Microsoft

Word.

The next chapter presents the data in light of the hypotheses formed in the first

chapter.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF DATA

The researcher undertook this study to assess how the experiences of elders in Lincoln and Kanawha Counties of West Virginia impact how they currently work with inactive Christians. To arrive at such an understanding, the candidate conducted nine interviews with elders serving churches of Christ in Lincoln and Kanawha Counties of West Virginia. The researcher divided the interviews into three sections to assess phenomenologically the elders' dealings with inactive Christians. The candidate will first provide case studies of each participant and then will organize the data according to the structure of the interviews.

Case Studies

James McCann

James McCann,[1] an eighty-two year-old gentleman, serves the Lincoln Church of Christ as an elder, a position he has held for the past four years. The Lincoln congregation, located in Cross Lanes, West Virginia, averages fifty to sixty at Sunday morning worship. McCann served the Lincoln congregation as the minister for several years before his age required the congregation to look for a younger preacher.

1. All names of individuals, congregations, and communities have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of the study's participants. Additional details may also be changed to mask the participants' identities.

Experience as an Inactive Christian

McCann was baptized at the age of twelve because of his mother's influence, yet he became inactive while serving in the military. When the participant mentioned he did not like the restoration process at times, the researcher asked specifically what he disliked about the process; he replied:

> Well I just resented it sometimes—the elder chewing me out. This one elder I'm talking about could get a pretty rough at times. He'd get on me, you know. And I just resented it to a certain extent . . . . He just chewed me out. He told me how I needed to straighten out and live right.

Because he did not like the way the elder spoke to him while he was inactive, McCann attempts to work with inactive Christians in a totally different manner. He told about the most recent encounter he had had with an inactive member.

> I was talking to one of them yesterday. I didn't chew her out, but I said, "We need to see you at church." I talked to her like that. She hadn't been coming—oh, once in a while. But I go about something like that in a round about way, like I say, I said, "We need to see you at church." I don't say, "You ought not be doing what you're doing." They know what I mean.

McCann described why he "didn't chew her out."

> Well like I said, I don't believe getting them and chewing them out like that elder did me. I just try to be persuasive with them and try to do it in a nice way. Like I said, that one elder really chewed me out one side and down the other. I don't, because I resented it to a certain extent, but I knew he was right.

Because McCann had such a negative experience with an elder, the participant seeks to work with inactive members in a manner that does not cause them to have a negative experience.

Becoming an Elder

Although he had a negative experience with an elder, McCann became an elder at the urging of the congregation he now serves. When the participant was serving as the congregation's minister, the church realized they needed more elders.

> They had elders, but one had a stroke. They realized they needed more. There weren't any elders. I had never thought much about it. They asked me if I would. And, I was preaching there at the time. Somebody said, "What if we want to get a new preacher?" I said, "Well, anytime there's going to be confusion over me being a preacher or elder either one"—I told them I'd be the first one to resign—and pick somebody else, 'cause I really hate division in the church. I hate it. I hate it with a passion.

Lack of Growth

McCann hates division with a passion, but he also laments the lack of growth the Lincoln congregation has experienced in the past couple of years.

> We've got a full-time preacher. But, we haven't grown numerically— financially side of it we've grown—we're supporting a preacher alright. But, I'd rather see it the other way and grow numerically, and we're not.

Not only has the Lincoln congregation not grown recently, but they have actually experienced decline. About worship attendance, McCann said:

> It's getting bad right now. Right now it's getting bad. People are not attending like they should. Like I said, there were only fifty there yesterday morning, and I'd say a year or two ago, we'd had seventy. We're losing our young people. We're losing them.

When asked why the church was losing so many young people, McCann answered:

> Sometimes they say, "I don't like what you're doing down here." Sometimes it's the attraction of the world. Sometimes they're just too lazy. Sometimes they'd rather go fishing or whatever—They don't put enough emphasis on attending worship, not forsaking the assembly.

Interestingly, McCann said that the attraction of the world caused him to become unfaithful during his military service. For McCann, the attraction of the world can prove more powerful than the attraction of the church and her Lord.

Walter Runyan

Walter Runyan is seventy-four and serves as an elder for the Coal River Church of Christ in Hamlin, West Virginia. The participant preached for the church three years when the church was financially unable to support a full-time minister, and he has served as an elder for the past fifteen years. His father also served the church as a preacher more than fifty years ago, and his grandfather served as an elder.

Early Recollections of Elders

Runyan remembers the elders from his youth quite fondly, for "they were very concerned about the church, they worked hard to keep things in line and things going well." In their concern for the church, those elders were willing to exercise corrective discipline.

> There were times when they actually withdrew fellowship—actually I can only think of one time when there was—I was either in school or in the military when it happened so uh…I don't remember the details of it, but I think adultery was involved, and they withdrew, you know, in a public way.

The participant recalls that the entire congregation, not only the elders, demonstrated concern when a member fell away: "There were obviously members who were very concerned and would call them or send them letters or cards or whatever."

Defining Inactive Members

In his current role as an elder at the Coal River Church of Christ, Runyan finds the definition of "active member" quite difficult. When asked to describe the activity of the "typical" member, the participant replied:

> That's a difficult question. LAUGHTER. Uh, because basically you know what you see. We have extremely good attendance on Sunday night and Wednesday night. There have been occasions recently where we had more on Sunday night than we had on Sunday morning and times when we had more on Wednesday night than we had on Sunday. So far, as you can judge their involvement by their attendance—of course, I know you can't always judge people's involvement by that, because I know there are a lot of things that go on outside the assembly that we're not always aware of. We have women who, you know, go every week just about to visit shut-ins and to help clean house for somebody that's sick, take food to 'em, you know, so there are a lot of women who are really kinda quiet, but they go do these things.

Concern for Inactive Members

While he may have difficulty describing the typical member's activity, Runyan has great concern for those growing lax in their worship attendance. In talking with the other two elders at Coal River, the researcher learned that Runyan developed a system to gauge worship attendance and contact those who were not frequent in their attendance. One of the other participants described the system Runyan developed:

> We have three elders, and we each have a list of names, and if somebody doesn't attend in, I mean it's really up to the elder, but we say like try to make it a week. If somebody misses all three services in the week, then we put forth some kinda effort to contact them – whether it be phone, card, visit, and see if we can, you know, generate interest. We, you know, we have our business meetings every month and one of the other elders, Walter Runyan, came up with this, we had been kinda in a way doing it, but we didn't have any set procedure. I mean we knew members who were not coming and we missed 'em, and we would always tell them whenever we'd see 'em, "We miss ya, we're glad you're here. Is everything okay?" But, that was about the extent of it, and we finally

decided that, you know, we have some problems, and if we don't address them, we're losing souls. So, how can we address it and take a more active part in, you know, giving those people more attention than what they're getting just when they show up or, you know, we would call some, and we would either call them or make sure they were called or got cards, but we just didn't do it efficiently, you know, we didn't have anyway of saying, "Well, we know for sure this person was not here these times. But now we keep a list.

The researcher wanted to understand Runyan's rationale for beginning such a system, and he asked the participant, "I understand from talking to the other two elders that you developed a system to kinda keep track of who was coming and make sure members weren't becoming inactive. What made you decide to do that?" The subject replied:

Well, there was some folks that we knew were not showing up very often. So, we wanted some type of plan where the elders would, uh, well, I don't know how much they told ya, but, you know, we divided the congregation into three groups and each one of us is responsible for a third of the congregation. Uh, we felt rather than the whole group trying to be responsible for everybody that it was simpler for one man to kinda watch out for these others and then you can.

Runyan decided such a program was needed, because "We were concerned about the people who weren't attending."

Runyan's concern for those not attending also caused him to desire to know whether members did not attend because of spiritual problems or whether they were absent from the assembly for some other reason.

We sent out a letter a year or so ago encouraging our members to let the elders know when they were going to be out of town. Now, we emphasized we're not trying to be nosy, we don't care particularly where you're going, but we would like to know that you are planning to be out-of-town or that you're sick. We like for them to call us when they're sick. 'Cause it's easier for one person to be responsible for his action than for me to be responsible for about seventy people. So, we've encouraged them to call us when they're going to be away, and we have a lot of people who did that and some of them are a little drifting away from that plan, but you know, you just have to remind them every now and then that we'd like for you to do this. But most of them, we know where they are.

Thus, the participant attempts to keep a solid pulse on the congregation he serves so that

he can deal with spiritual problems as they arise.

Understanding Why People Become Inactive

Although he seeks to deal with spiritual problems promptly, Runyan fails to grasp

why spiritual problems occur. When asked why individuals became inactive, he said:

> They somehow have lost their zeal. We've had people that became
> Christians, and they were here for every service and then, I don't know, in
> some cases, we have people who drive for pretty good distances, in some
> cases, and that may be a discouragement to some of them. Uh, I think
> people just loose their zeal for some reason.

While the participant saw a loss of zeal as the reason of inactivity, he could not identify

the root cause of losing zeal.

Prompt Action

He may not understand the loss of zeal, but Runyan, like the research from the

literature review, recognized he needed to act promptly when members began to fall

away. When asked what he had learned from his experience, the participant responded:

> Probably the sooner you get them back the better chance you have of
> restoring them. The longer you wait the less likelihood they are, well, you
> know, a lot of them will come back when they get old, they realize finally,
> and the tragic thing about it is too many times their children have already
> gone away, then they come back, they don't realize the influence that they
> have lost with their children by staying away.

The participant recognized his pastoral duties toward inactive Christians, and he sought

to fulfill those responsibilities by keeping watch over the Coal River congregation and

acting promptly when he noticed a problem.

Allen Snodgrass

Allen Snodgrass, a fifty-one year-old participant, has served as an elder at the

Midway Church of Christ in Belle, West Virginia for the past five years. His father and

grandfather served various churches of Christ as elders for a number of years. He

attended Freed-Hardeman University and preached for churches of Christ in Missouri,

Arkansas, and Mississippi before returning to his home. Snodgrass left full-time ministry

after his doctors advised a different line of work following a near-fatal heart attack.

Recollections of Earlier Elders

Snodgrass appreciated the elders he witnessed in his formative years, but he has

come to have grave doubts about their ability to serve. He said of his earlier elders:

> They were good men. They were good men. They were of good
> character. I don't think they had a lot of Bible knowledge. I think that
> they were just good ole boys that—they believed in God. As far as having
> technical Bible knowledge, they didn't have that. They were a product of
> what they were taught. Jesus said when the student is fully trained he will
> become like the teacher—that's what they were, they were products of
> their teaching, so if their teaching was limited, then their understanding
> was limited.

In the elders' limited understanding, they did little to retain members of the congregation.

When asked what they did to retain members, Snodgrass quickly replied that the church

"had a preacher."

The elders' limited understanding caused them to do little more than hire a

preacher. for Snodgrass reported that only occasionally would they visit inactive

members.

> Sometimes they'd go see 'em—sometimes. Sometimes they wouldn't. I
> think it depended on the situation. I think that if it was just someone who
> just lost interest, I don't think they did much, but if it was a sin, they'd go

see 'em, because they didn't want that associated with them. You see what I'm saying? They didn't want—people knew that they were a member of that church and they didn't want that associated with—because their whole concept was that it would bring reproach on the church, so I think they would go see 'em. I don't know.   I don't remember a lot of people that were ever disfellowshiped or withdrew from or whatever terminology, you know what I'm talking about.

Those elders, in Snodgrass' recollection, cared more about the church's perception than about souls which might wander from the truth.

Causes for Inactivity

Snodgrass believes people become inactive, then and now because of a misplaced emphasis upon the church instead of her Lord.

I think our emphasis was the wrong thing. That our emphasis is, has been, you know, faithful to the church as opposed to being faithful to God. I think the church became, in my lifetime, I think the church was the central focus rather than Jesus being the central focus, and the faithfulness was attributed to the church as opposed to faithfulness being attributed to Jesus in the church. I think that has been one real reason, from my perspective, that we didn't go after. We didn't. We weren't militant. People saw the church as people and they saw their inconsistencies as opposed to them seeing their faithfulness to God, they didn't care if their faithfulness was to this group of inconsistent people and the thing about hypocrites, you know, I don't want to be a part of people who are hypocritical and they say one thing while they're at church and one thing while they're out here and one way that you really remedy that is that you help the church as a group to know that we're sinners saved by the grace of God, that we're not perfect people. We are—we're weak and we're all struggling and if people—the perception is that these folks here in the church think they have it together and people who are actually being honest know they don't have it together and they say, "I can't fit in to that." And they don't want to be a part of that, so in getting them back into the church rather than seeing their focus toward God they saw their focus as not being able to be a part of this group who thinks that they're, they've got it all together when I know that I don't. And that was one of the reasons that I think we have lost a lot of people from the church fellowship. They think that what the church is is a bunch of saints coming together to adjust their halos on Sunday morning. Rather than being a hospital for sinners that come together and say, "I'm struggling with this" without somebody saying, "Well, I can't believe you're struggling with that. I don't struggle with

that"—lying through their teeth. It's all been about the church of Christ rather than the Christ of the church. And that they have equated their salvation with church membership as opposed to having a relationship with the Savior.

Snodgrass believes, then, the answer to inactivity lies in a change of emphasis,

emphasizing the church's Lord, rather than the Lord's church.

Role of an Elder

Snodgrass sees his role in changing the emphasis among Christians in terms of a

pastoral role rather than an administrative one.

Being a shepherd is more the deal, I think. And I tell you something else I started doing, when I was in school, Philip Keller wrote some books about the 23rd Psalm and the good shepherd. *A Shepherd*—that's what it was— *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm.* And I'll never forget in the 23rd Psalm about the part "he restoreth my soul." What restoring was for a shepherd was if you had a sheep that went out away from the fold, you'd go get him and bring him back. And if he kept wandering off what he would do—he would get that sheep and he'd take his foreleg in his hand and he'd take his staff and break his leg. And he'd bind it up and he'd have to carry it with him everywhere the flock went. And then whenever the leg healed the sheep never left the flock again. "He restoreth my soul." So, that is discipline, to restore the sheep back to the fold. And that is something that I have been trying—well, let me just tell you this. To give you the idea—when I was in Mississippi we had some folks that needed discipline. And this was right after the deal out in—was it Texas or Oklahoma—Oklahoma, yeah, whenever the lady sued the elders of the church and all that stuff, and I said, "We need, you know, we need"— we were having an elders' meeting—"We need to do something about this. We need to withdraw, we need to go see 'em and we need to go through the steps of, you know, Matthew 18, go see 'em and if they won't hear, then take a couple and go and then talk to the church and withdraw our fellowship from them to show them—I said, "It's not to prove to us or to the world that they're not a part of us." I said, "It's to show them that they're lost." It's the whole idea about church discipline from 1 Corinthians 5 so that they know that they're not in a right relationship with God beyond a shadow of a doubt. He said, "I ain't doing nothing like that." He said, "I've worked too hard for the things that the Lord's give me." He said, "I'll not be a part of that." So, anyway that has kinda been the—I think since that thing out there in Oklahoma—I think church

discipline dropped off from whatever it was to below the radar. I think that's had a big impact on people.

Snodgrass sees the lack of discipline among churches of Christ as a major obstacle in appropriately shepherding the local church. He told of some members at Midway who had caused a multitude of problems, and he added, "I think one of the reasons that that has been a problem is because we are not involved in church discipline."

Charles Davis

Charles Davis at eighty-seven has served the Midway Church of Christ for well over thirty years as an elder. His father became a member of the churches of Christ while living in Richmond, Virginia, before he moved the family, including five-year-old Charles, to rural West Virginia in search of more promising work.

Early Recollections of Church Work

Because Davis' father settled the family in rural Lincoln County, West Virginia, the family only attended church services sporadically, for churches of Christ were few and far between.

> When I was growing up we never went to church very much, because the only time we had a church was when we have a meeting in a schoolhouse somewhere. And sometimes we would meet a little while but then there wasn't very many. It would kinda quit. And then there would be some preacher come through and we'd have another meeting. We had a lot of people like that. They didn't live here and they would come and hold meetings. Then they would move on. Sometimes we would quit meeting. Somebody else would come along and start it up again.

In 1929, Davis' father and his wife's father began efforts to erect a meeting place for the

church, the building where the Midway church meets today. Davis still vividly recalls

that building's construction and the impact the Great Depression had upon the

congregation.

> When they first built the church building down there—nineteen twenty-
> nine is when they built the building, and we had great attendance and then
> the Depression come along and there were a lot of people who worked in
> the oil fields here that lost their jobs and went to Michigan and of course
> for a while it really hurt because you know, so many went and didn't come
> back. Went up there and got jobs and stayed that were going to church
> there. I don't remember how many families—there was several of course.

Davis reports that the church suffered in those days more from Depression-era relocating

than from the inactivity of the members.

Working with Inactive Members

Davis was quite unsure of how to deal with members who became inactive.

When asked how he, as an elder, had dealt with such individuals, he succinctly replied,

"We did the best we could. We never did write anybody off, I don't think. We always

had hope." Although he remains uncertain of how to deal with inactive members, Davis

believes elders have great responsibility toward them. He summarized what he believes

that pastoral role entails: "Go see them, talk to them, encourage them, be with them

some, before they get too far away."

Joseph Craig

Joseph Craig, a fifty-five year old supervisor at Verizon, serves as an elder at the

Coal River Church of Christ. He was baptized at the congregation in 1995 on account of

his wife's influence. He regularly attended another congregation of the churches of

Christ from the age of five, but he delayed his baptism until his wife decided to obey the

Gospel. She was baptized at the Coal River congregation one Sunday along with their

teenage son, and Craig was baptized the following Sunday. While the congregation in

which he was reared had elders, Craig mentioned that he could recall neither how many

elders the congregation had nor the names of specific elders. Craig is confident that

members of that congregation became inactive occasionally, but he does not recollect any

instances of inactivity.

Becoming an Elder

Two years following his baptism, the elders of the congregation approached Craig

about serving as the deacon in charge of benevolence. He accepted that responsibility

and became an elder three years later. When approached by the elders concerning

becoming an elder himself, Craig was quite reluctant.

> One of the main reasons I had never thought about it [becoming an elder]
> was because of what I considered maturity. And, I mean, I had been at the
> congregation for well, five maybe six—five years probably—five years
> we'll say. And that's how long I had been a Christian. And, I wasn't real
> sure about the maturity part, but after we studied and considered and, you
> know, we decided that well, you know, I had, in a sense, grown up in the
> church and had been around and knew what was going on and so they
> decided that I was—I would meet the qualifications to be an elder, so I
> didn't know of any other reason not to.

Once he overcame his concerns about maturity, Craig threw himself into his work as an

elder at the Coal River congregation.

Working with Inactive Members

Part of throwing himself into his work as an elder includes Craig's regular calls to

members moving toward inactivity. He recounted for the researcher efforts he has taken

to work with one inactive member.

> I've got one person that I call and she says, "Well, I've been in Florida."
> Well, I think, well that's a good excuse. Uh, she'll say, "I've been in
> Florida and, you know, I'm gonna be back next Sunday. I just got back
> this week." And never see her, so we'll call her again. "Well, I've been
> sick. Haven't been feeling good; I'm just wore out all the time. I know I
> should come; I'm planning on it." And then last time I call her she didn't
> even give me that much hope. But see now the way we kinda look at it is
> once something like that happens, the next thing we need to do is go visit
> her.

The participant seeks to wait no more than two weeks after someone misses a service to

contact that member: "I try to do it every week if they've been gone for a week, but no

more than two weeks."

Defining Inactive Members

Although Craig seeks to work with inactive Christians on a regular basis, he has

difficulty defining exactly what constitutes an inactive member. The researcher asked

how many inactive members the Midway congregation had, and the participant replied,

"How many inactive members? Okay, you've got to a good question, because how do

you define 'inactive'?" Because he sought to understand Craig's own definition, the

candidate promised to provide a definition for the participant only after he had answered

the question on his own, and the definition he provided quite closely parallels the

definition used throughout this study.

> One definition would be a person has been a member and you haven't
> seen 'em for years. Another person that I would consider inactive is a

person who shows up once a month. Now, there may be another term for that person, but to me if you only show up once a month you're almost inactive—so, slack.

Use of Church Discipline

Craig has difficulty with the way the Coal River Church of Christ handles inactive members. He appreciates the efforts the elders have made in the past year in regularly calling those who have become or are on the verge of becoming inactive, but he wishes he and his fellow elders would take a more firm stand.

> There are certain cases that, you know, defies all logic as to why you wouldn't withdraw. I do, really, in my mind I fell like that if a person reaches a stage where they show no interest and you cannot get 'em to, you know, and in a lost of cases they will just flat out tell you, "I'm not coming, and I don't care anymore." Or you'll have somebody tell you, "I'm gonna be there" and not show up. And I actually think we are doing ourselves a disservice by not gettin' more serious, because I think that you've lost 'em, you've lost this person if they don't show up and if you can through love show 'em that they need to be coming, they need to take it serious and they will return and you've accomplished a great task. And everybody's afraid that you're going to turn them away. Well, you're not going to turn them away any worse that what they already are. So, I kinda look at it like only good can happen from it. Plus, if you have people who are still considered to be Christians by the congregation but don't show up, what kind of example are you showing to your younger Christians or to people who are non-Christians. People who are non-Christians can come to church and they might come every week, but why become a Christian if this person's a Christian and they never come. I mean, you've got negative examples and negative influence. But, I guess the problem that I see is and well the greatest fear would if they just don't respond, but you really haven't heard anything. Now the person knows they're withdrawn from, now it may sink in one of these days, and they may get serious and come back. If they don't get serious and don't come back then, we . . . . It's not like that the congregation has doomed them, 'cause they've done it to themselves. So, I don't . . . I really feel like it's something that either we need to take it more serious. It, it's just hard to do.

Craig firmly believes that if the Coal River church became more serious and began to withdraw fellowship from nominally active or inactive Christians, the church as a whole would greatly benefit.

Pastoral Responsibility

Craig's concern for inactive Christians demonstrated by either calling them or wishing the church would do more stems from how he views his pastoral responsibilities.

> I think an elder should be very concerned about inactive Christians. I think that's what of the major roles of an elder is, to be concerned about inactive Christians, but I also think that it's a job of every Christian to do whatever they can, but I think that if that's part of the flock then, you know, then you've got responsibility to do the best that you can, whether it be preaching to them, calling them, sending them cards, not forgetting them and letting them know that they're not forgotten. I mean I think people—the longer they get away with something like that without any contact, the more apt they are to stay that way, but I think that if they know that there is, there are people concerned about them, and that if you can let them know that their soul is in jeopardy, that God does care, and if you ever believed, and if you ever was a Christian truly and believed in God and the destination of your soul and eternity, then sooner or later that thought's going to come back, unless something really weird goes on in your mind, and I think that we have to do the best we can, and I think it is an elder's responsibility.

Craig's concern means he has great dedication in working with inactive Christians. In fact, he is so dedicated he wishes he had more time to devote to working with wayward members: "I'd like to, the only thing I'd like to do, personally, is just to be able to do more of it. Um, I mean, I'd like to be able to take, if I had every spare moment, but it's a problem of finding spare moments, or, you know, how do you allocate your time?

Peter Faulkner

Recollections of Earlier Elders

Peter Faulkner is currently sixty-one and has been an elder at the Coal River

Church of Christ for fifteen years. The participant has quite fond memories of the elders

serving his home congregation.

> They were good men. Good men, very good men, and good teachers,
> good teachers of the Bible, good examples to the community, they would
> help in any way they possibly could to help ya. One of our elders, though,
> however, his wife had crippling arthritis, and I can remember so vividly he
> would actually on Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings, on Sunday
> mornings he would get her up and he would comb her hair, he'd fix her
> breakfast, 'cause she couldn't do any—her hands were so crooked and she
> was in a wheelchair all the time, but he would actually get her up and get
> her ready and have her hair so pretty and get her ready to come to church.

The leaders' goodness and willingness to help became evident when Faulkner's father

began becoming inactive.

> My dad one time, he kinda got disappointed, I guess, with the way things
> might have been going or may not have even been that, but he was
> working on his house, building his house and he wasn't going to church as
> regularly as he should have and one of the elders come and talk to him and
> that made a big difference in my dad.

While Faulkner was not present when the elder spoke with his father, he remembers the

impact the conversation had on both his parents. "I do remember them coming and

talking to Mom and Dad. I remember them talking, but that was really encouraging to

them. That helped them to get going back regularly to church."

Concern for Inactive Members

Probably because that elder showed such concern to his parents when Faulkner
was young, the participant cares deeply when he sees parents of young children move
toward inactivity: "We try to encourage them, especially those with families that their
family needs to be in the church, because they know what's coming, they understand
what's coming. We've tried to tell them that." Yet, Faulkner does not concern himself
with only those inactive Christians who have young children, but he cares deeply about
all inactive members of the Coal River congregation. When describing his work with
inactive members, the participant said, "It bothers me when people know what's right and
what is good for their soul and then let it go—just like they don't care. It hurts, it hurts."
The participant's concern came through quite clearly as he shed tears as he spoke of
individuals at the Coal River Church of Christ who have become inactive.

Kenneth Welch

Kenneth Welch, a fifty-seven year-old Christian, has served the MacCorkle
Avenue Church of Christ as an elder for the past ten years. He went to the MacCorkle
Avenue church to serve as the minister about twenty-three years ago. Welch appreciated
the elders at the Midway Church of Christ where he was raised, and when asked what he
disliked about those elders, he replied, "There wasn't anything that I did not like—
anything that I can say I didn't like about them. You know, as always, you had, you
know, different strengths and weaknesses. But, they were good people."

Recalling Inactive Christians

Welch had difficulty recalling specific examples of individuals' leaving the

church in his youth, yet in the example he did recall, Welch knew the elders made efforts

to win back the individual.

> I don't recall too many examples, you know, during my growing up period
> and even after, say college, college years and so forth, there were some.
> And I can remember the elders' being concerned about it – I think they
> were concerned about it whenever it happened, and the last—that's when I
> went away to college, and I know at that point, I can remember in
> particular a man right down the hill here who was a very fine man I
> thought, someone I really looked up to, was unfaith—became unfaithful
> during that time, and I know the elders did make efforts to try to talk with
> him and try get him to come back to church. So, I know they had an
> interest, you know, to some degree at least, in folks who strayed away.

Just as the participant had difficulty recalling experiences from his youth where

individuals fell away from the church, he also had difficulty identifying inactive members

at the MacCorkle Road Church of Christ. When the researcher asked Welch how many

members at MacCorkle Road he would classify as inactive, he named two individuals,

asked the other elder at MacCorkle Road who was present, and said, "Not very many,

frankly."

Welch's difficulty in identifying inactive members could result from a couple of

factors. His inability to name inactive Christians could result from inattention, perhaps

the same reason he could not recall many examples of inactivity from his early youth and

college years. That explanation, however, does not best fit the other data gathered from

Mr. Welch. As the interview progressed, the participant named two other individuals

who had left active service at the MacCorkle Road congregation. Welch also spoke of

the high responsibility he believes elders have toward inactive Christians: "I certainly

believe that there's a great obligation there as far as an elder. An elder ought to have a lot

of interest in every member, you know, but certainly toward those who are inactive." An inattentive elder would not name additional inactive members as they came to mind, nor would he see a high responsibility toward inactive Christians.

Make up of the MacCorkle Avenue Church of Christ

Welch's difficulty in naming many inactive Christians more likely results from the nature of the MacCorkle Road church. The congregation largely consists of older people who cannot participate in many activities. About the activity level in the congregation, Welch said:

> We're not a real active congregation as far as a lot of activity going on all the time for people to be involved in. We, you know, we have a Bible school, we try to do, have Gospel Meetings, we, from time to time, set up other activities and things that we try to get people involved with. We don't really have a good nucleus of people to depend upon to do things.

Not only does the congregation not have a large level of activity, but Welch also reported that the congregation has suffered from a downturn in the industrial chemical industry, a major employer in Lincoln and Kanawha Counties of West Virginia. The participant said "We have lost more folks in terms of just moving away."

Approaching Inactive Christians

Even though Welch does not have many inactive Christians in the congregation he serves, he does not mind at all to approach them. When asked what fears he had in working with inactive Christians, the subject said:

> I'm not afraid to approach them. Sometimes you feel like they don't want you to. More than anything else, that's probably the greatest thing. In fact, you know sometimes, particularly if you've talked the same person two or three or four times, you get the feeling that they don't really want

me to talk to them. I mean, I'm not afraid, I don't think either one of us [Welch and his fellow elder] is afraid.

Welch does not even fear the possibility of legal action. When the researcher asked the

participant about lawsuits, he replied:

> I don't think so. We, I recall one young lady that we talked to Lois who was coming to church, kinda coming, supposed to be a member and was living with a man and wanting us to help her, and we both went to her and said, "You know, we can't help you in your current situation. You're not faithful to God. You're living in sin." She didn't like it very well, but I don't think either one of us hesitated to do it. In fact, she didn't come back anymore, but . . . .

Welch, then, will work with any inactive Christian he encounters.

Thomas Lane

Becoming an Elder

Thomas Lane, Kenneth Welch's fellow elder, is seventy-six and has been an elder

at the MacCorkle Road Church of Christ for the past twenty-three years. He became an

elder after a business meeting during which one of the men recommended Lane would

make a good elder.

> Well, over at MacCorkle Road the church was pretty big back when I became an elder—even bigger before I did, because shortly after the Korean War and everything, you know, there was lots of activity around the Valley, a lot of people moving in and working at the plants and a lot of stuff like that. And, they didn't have any elders when I moved there, when we moved there in '56 and we got some men that become very mature and sorta grew up in the position, I guess, where people thought we were qualified and we—somebody proposed that we ought to have elders and some of the men started looking around and said, "Well, here's four that we think maybe can be elders today," so we did. LAUGHTER. We went through a process, announcing it to the church, and considering elders and some interviews—there, there were some people who wanted to talk with us about, various ones of us about questions that they had and stuff like that. And it wasn't any big problem that I knew of anyway. Somebody asked me one time, "Did anybody get mad and leave when you

appointed elders?" I said, "No. Why? Are they supposed to?"
LAUGHTER.

While the other three elders appointed at the same time have either died or moved

elsewhere, Lane continues to serve the church faithfully.

Activity in the MacCorkle Road Church of Christ

Because he serves the church faithfully, Lane lamented the inactivity he witnesses

at MacCorkle Road. The researcher asked Lane about the activity in the congregation,

and he responded:

> How active is the typical member? Well, if a good number of them could
> get out of bed or out of the nursing homes, they might be pretty active.
> LAUGHTER. I don't know. We've—I would like to see them a lot more
> active. We do have a lot of old people that just aren't physically up to it,
> and, in this day and time, the young people, both the husband and wife
> works, almost exclusively, what younger couples we've got, and they are
> limited with time and I don't like those kinds of situations, but again, with
> them being almost forced into working now with the economy the way it
> is, I don't know what we can do about it. I would like to see a lot more
> active people, but our people are basically older and they just can't
> participate in a lot of things that I would like to see going on, 'cause they
> can't get out at night and stuff like that and can't do a lot of walking, a lot
> of them, so, and the younger people are bogged down with working,
> working overtime and one thing or another, so in my opinion, they're not
> as active as I would like to see them, yet I think there are reasons for that,
> some things that are holding them back some. And again, we've got some
> that pretty, a few that are pretty undependable sometimes with attendance
> and stuff like that is concerned.

When the researcher asked Lane his opinion of inactive Christians, the elder returned to

the theme of activity.

> Well, when I hear the phrase, "inactive Christian," I think of one who's
> drifted away and just not doing anything. However, I think there are other
> terms for people that go off and seek a bunch of entertainment and stuff
> like that, I don't know what the correct term for them is. To me, an
> inactive Christian is somebody whose just become do-less and not really
> pursuing anything religiously. Those other people are active, but they've
> been drawn into things they shouldn't be drawn into.

Lane, therefore, sees Christianity in terms of activity. "Inactive Christians" for Lane represent those who are truly inactive, doing nothing religiously, but those who are attracted to error are active, just actively doing what is wrong. This study would include both groups under the definition of "inactive Christian."

Obstacles Posed by Entertainment

Not only does Lane see those attracted to religious entertainment as actively doing wrong, but he believes the lure of such entertainment represents a major obstacle as the church seeks to keep her members, for he returned to that theme when asked why he believes individuals leave the church.

> I think there are a lot of reasons, depends on the individuals. Some of the reasons are that, in my opinion, in the times in which we live, the church is just not "exciting" enough for them. They're looking for a lot of exciting things, a lot of mysticism and entertainment. They want to be religious, but they don't want to—they just want to be religious enough that their next door neighbors recognize them as being religious, doesn't make any difference where they go to church, just so they go, they're considered religious by their peers, and I think there is just a host of reasons why people are like that. And the pressure that the things they see churches, even churches of Christ, so-called churches of Christ anyway, doing nowadays, big exciting things that denominations do that capture the imagination and they just don't see that happening in the church and after all, you know, I think, to me, singing, praying, teaching, giving, and communing are exciting aspects of New Testament Christianity. But, I don't think a lot of people see it that way. [I] mean, what can you do with those things? It captures the imagination and gets their blood all running fast and stuff like that. To me, doing those things are scripturally correct and proper are exciting and interesting and they hold my attention and my focus, but a lot of people are not like that in my opinion.

The participant sees himself as powerless to stem the tide away from entertainment, but he firmly believes such draws people from truth to error.

Working with Inactive Members

Lane, like Kenneth Welch, the other elder at MacCorkle Road, has not worked

with an inactive member in quite some time.

> I don't really recall. We don't really have right now, in our community,
> people who are not coming, who have just completely quit coming. We
> have some that don't—I think miss more than they should with other
> things—but let's say somebody whose not coming or the way I define an
> inactive member and talk to them, it's been a pretty good while.

The other data gathered from Lane support his statement that he has not visited with

inactive members recently simply because the MacCorkle Road congregation does not

have many. He believes an elder has a grave responsibility in working with such

members.

> You know, I guess I feel about the same way about the responsibility
> toward all members, but there's a little bit of special responsibility to try to
> steer those who have erred from the way, I guess, back to where they
> belong. I think we're all concerned about people who drift away like that.
> They need to be somehow or other approached so that they can be
> persuaded to get back in the service. There's certainly an obligation there
> to do that.

Also supporting the researcher's assertion that Lane is more than willing to work

with inactive Christians is Lane's statement that he does not fear legal action in working

with inactive members.

> I'm not much afraid of a lawsuit—just talking to somebody that's
> unfaithful. They know they're unfaithful, most of them, in the first place,
> and they know why you're talking to them. I'm not much afraid of that.
> Now if it came to the point where we'd be involved in some withdraw
> procedures, I wouldn't say don't do what you have to do scripturally, but I
> would say you need to proceed very cautiously and slowly and not do
> anything irrational where they could come back to you and come up with a
> lawsuit. You know, if, well, you know how the lawyers are nowadays,
> they'll sue you for anything, but you would have to be very cautious in
> how you proceeded with that, but just go to somebody that's just used to
> come to church and all of a sudden got mad or whatever reason they drift
> away, I'm not much afraid of a lawsuit in a case like that.

The participant, more than likely in response to Marian Guinn's lawsuit against the Church of Christ in Collinsville, Oklahoma, holds that churches must exercise prudence in withdrawing fellowship from members. Yet even when withdrawal of fellowship is necessary, Lane deems that churches must do what Scripture requires

Owen Johnson

Becoming a Christian

At seventy-eight years of age, Owen Johnson has served the Midway Church of Christ for forty years as an elder. Unlike the other participants in this study, Johnson had no previous connection with the churches of Christ prior to his marriage; his family regularly attended Baptist churches in his formative years. His marriage to a "girl who was a member" of the churches of Christ brought Johnson into contact with the theology of the group, and, for Johnson, "it was just black and white" after he began studying the theology prevalent among churches of Christ.

Becoming an Elder

Johnson has served two congregations of the churches of Christ as an elder. The first time he became an elder, the two elders then serving the congregation approached the participant about serving.

> The one time was down at the Kanawha River meeting house. I was very active, and they offered me an opportunity to work with two older elders, which was Brother Wilson and Brother Lee. And, neither one of them was really what I consider to be a leader, you know, they were old at the time, and so I just more or less become their mouthpiece. And they wanted me to become an elder and I said, "Well you talk about a novice, I think I would be a novice." But finally I agreed to it.

A few years after becoming an elder at the Kanawha River congregation, Johnson began preaching for a congregation in Putnam County, West Virginia. He resigned his position as an elder at Kanawha River, but after a few years of preaching, he returned to the Midway congregation. The elders there approached him about serving: "Then I came back into Midway in the '60s. And then they got down to the point that they needed an elder in order to have a plurality of elders, so they asked me if I would serve and I said, 'If the congregation wants, yes.'"

The congregation wanted Johnson as an elder, and he began to serve. Although both the Kanawha River and the Midway congregations wanted Johnson to serve, he has mixed views of his qualifications to hold the position: "Well, I had all the biblical qualifications to be an elder then at Midway, but I didn't really have them at Kanawha River." The candidate ponders why Johnson felt unqualified to serve as an elder at Kanawha River, but he felt qualified to serve at Midway. Three factors could easily contribute to his newfound fitness when he returned to Midway. Johnson's service as an elder at Kanawha River could have boosted his confidence and have led to his great assurance that he fit the qualifications for an elder. Johnson's preaching ministry could have provided him more experience, knowledge, and maturity by the time he returned to Midway. The fact that Johnson was ten years older by the time he began pastoring the Midway congregation could have contributed to more maturity. Likely, all three factors together caused Johnson to see himself fit to be an elder at Midway.

Working with New Converts

In shepherding the Midway Church of Christ, Johnson would like to establish a

mentoring program for new converts.

> I personally got carried away with one thing a few years ago, and I still
> think it's a great way to do it, but I got out voted somewhere along the
> line. They said it wasn't scriptural, but I still like the idea of a brother's
> keeper type thing myself. When we baptize someone, I would like to
> assign somebody to them to be their friend, their buddy, and if nothing
> else take them fishing or take them to a ball game or something of this
> nature, and really get to know them and bring them along in the church
> without them realizing they're being led. But sorry to say that didn't get
> going too well. I still think it's the way to go.

 While many within mainstream churches of Christ would likely see Johnson's

suggestion as coming dangerously close to the International Churches of Christ,

Johnson's desire testifies to his concern that new members be incorporated into the

congregational fellowship.

Activeness at the Midway Church of Christ

Johnson's desire to do something to bring new members "along in the church"

likely stems from the lack of activity he sees at the Midway congregation and the

desperation he feels over the inertia he witnesses.

> The typical member out of the whole congregation—I would say we have
> about ten that are really active, as I would like to see them. As I would
> like to see all of them be, but you've got – you've always got some who
> were going to be active in this particular thing the rest of them couldn't
> care less. It's just something that you can't inspire in them you can't get
> them to do it, so I don't know I'd say probably ten that's really active.

For Johnson many members do not participate appropriately in the church's work, and he

is at a loss for what to do, for "it's just something that you can't inspire in" others.

Working with Inactive Members

While he cannot inspire activity in others, Johnson seeks to return inactive

members to active service in the church.

> Right now I'm having it with two—a man and his wife. They promise and
> they promise and they promise, "I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming,"
> but they just don't come. So, I've spent more time with him and his wife
> than any other in trying to convert them, because he had all the potential in
> the world to be really a go getter so far as contacting people that's not
> members of the church. He was just a bubbly, enthusiastic type fella, and
> he just got a long great with everybody, but I really don't know what his
> problem is. I'm trying to get to the bottom of it, but I can't grasp it yet.
> But, they offer you excuses and I get to the point that [I say], "You were
> just making them lie to you." So, all you can do it is just pray for them in
> cases like that, and just hope that they do turn. But when they left the
> church that cost us four additional members and two children at the same
> time, because their children left and he was real active in the church, and I
> just don't know how you cope with something like that. You try every
> way you can to reach them, but—be friends with them and during that
> flood . . . this boy worked with me day and night. We'd be hauling
> appliances and taking them to people's homes and setting them up, and he
> was just—I didn't have to say a word. I mean he jumped right in there
> and was really—he had all the potential of being a great servant of Christ.
> But, I think it's her. I don't think it's him, but I dunno how to—she's
> quite a bit older than he is. I'm about ready to throw up my hands and
> turn it over to somebody else. But I thought I could do it better than them,
> because we had worked together so much.

The couple with whom Johnson is currently working provides numerous excuses as to

why they cannot regularly attend the assembly, but they often tell the participant that they

cannot attend because they overslept. The subject has become somewhat inventive in

encouraging the couple to attend: "And I've tried to get to the telephone and make phone

calls and hang up before they answered. I know that they didn't oversleep."

Causes for Inactivity

While Johnson uses modern technology to assist him in working with inactive Christians, he believes modern technology has also made remaining a faithful Christian more difficult. When asked why he believed so many fell away from Christianity, the participant said, "TVs, newspapers, radios, things of that nature. They just have more interest in them than they do than in serving God and saving their soul." Modern media have such a hold on nominal Christians, for they do not "realize really the severity of God." Modern Christians have been taught about God's love "altogether and not much about the severe side of him."

Johnson attempts to bring inactive Christians face to face with God's severity by being direct and to the point: "I used to soft soap it a lot, but now I just go head on. I walk in like a bull in a china shop and say, 'We want to know what the problem is and what can I do to help.' And try to get the bottom of it, rather than just skirting the issue."

Use of Church Discipline

Once Johnson has gotten to "the bottom of it," he wishes to see the church withdraw from individuals who are unfaithful.

> I dunno if after you have talked with them and somebody else has talked with them if you went to them and had the backing of the church to say we're going to withdraw from you if you're not back making your confession at such and such a time—I just wonder if that would not cause them to think more than all the talking and the begging, pleading you could do. But you have to have the backing of the church in order to get that done. But we've got to find some way to get them back, but I don't know what it is. I've tried and tried and tried. But, we're getting very few of them back.

When the participant was asked what he would like to change about the way he had worked with inactive Christians in the past, he responded:

> I still think that the secret to getting them back is having the fear of being withdrawn from the whole congregation is the one thing that would help more than anything else. But it seems that this is something that when you get to thinking about it I'm sure you've seen the church get black eyes from people who left the church and how many times did you see the church actually withdraw from them? It's just something that the religious world does it, and I don't know why that we can't do it. It's a tough way to go. It's a tough love when you get to thinking about it.

Johnson believes such a program would greatly help the church. In describing why withdrawing fellowship would be effective, he spoke about how he would feel if he were withdrawn from: "I know myself that I wouldn't want to be an outcast to where friends wouldn't speak to me or anything else, if I was in that position."

Structure of Interviews

The candidate first sought to put the elders' "experience in context" by asking them "to tell as much as possible" about their life history in light of elders and inactive Christians.[2] The second part of the interviews centered on the concrete details of how these participants have recently dealt with inactive Christians.[3] The student finally asked the subjects to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.[4] Now that the reader has seen each participant individually, the writer will provide a holistic presentation of the data.

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2. Seidman, 11.
3. Ibid., 12.
4. Ibid.

Life Context

The researcher posed several questions to place the elders' experiences in context. He sought to understand their religious upbringing and the relationship they had with elders during their formative years. The candidate looked at how the subjects became elders and when they believed they met the qualifications to be elders.

Recollections of Earlier Elders

A major theme developed as the candidate explored with the participants their previous experiences with elders. The elders nearly unanimously recalled those elders quite fondly. One participant said, "I liked the men themselves. Of course, they were men I knew, and they were decent people, good people, you know." The fondness with which the elders recalled their earlier counterparts became apparent when the researcher asked the participants about what they disliked about the elders in their home churches. The following comment was typical: "Not that I can think of. Not that I can recall, because they always were around to help you and assist."

The more the candidate spoke with the elders, the more he realized they modeled themselves after the elderships they witnessed in their youths. In recounting his experience, one elder commented:

> One of our elders, though, however, his wife had crippling arthritis, and I can remember so vividly he would actually on Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings, on Sunday mornings he would get her up and he would comb her hair. He'd fix her breakfast, 'cause she couldn't do any—her hands were so crooked and she was in a wheelchair all the time, but he would actually get her up and get her ready and have her hair so pretty and get her ready to come to church.

While this elder does not have a wife who needs constant attention, he follows the example in caring for the members of the congregation he serves. The researcher had scheduled an interview for a Tuesday morning, but the elder called about an hour before the scheduled interview to say he needed to reschedule so that he could mow the lawns of several elderly ladies in the congregation.

Another participant's father had a great influence on his life. He has vivid recollections of catching his father, himself an elder, in prayer.

> I suppose that of all the people that I have known in my life in the church, Dad has been the most consistent in his life as an elder and as—I mean he has, you know, there's not many kids that walk in the living room and catch their dad down on his knees praying for the church, praying for people, praying for the Lord to bless people, you know, and being a young guy growing up, you know, I listened at the door and hear him pray for people and things that, you know, "Lord bless them and give 'em peace" and, you know, crying his eyes out while he prayed.

The theme of peace remerged later in the interview as the respondent discussed working with a lady who had recently become inactive. He reports the lady "was learning and going and coming to my class and feeling just a little bit of peace," but her father constantly discouraged her. She left the congregation as a result. As his father had desired peace for the sheep entrusted to him, this elder desired the inactive member he referenced to have peace.

One participant in the study reported that he had a negative experience with an elder in his younger years. He had become a member of a congregation but then he joined the military. While in the military, he became inactive and an elder confronted him about the inactivity.

> I resented it sometimes. The elder chewing me out. This one elder I'm talking about could get pretty rough at times. He'd get on me, you know. And I just resented it to a certain extent. He just chewed me out. He told me how I needed to straighten out and live right.

Because of his negative experience, this elder attempts to work with inactive members in a kind and caring manner.

> I don't believe in going to them and chewing them out like that elder did me. I just try to be persuasive with them and try to do it in a nice way. Like I said that one elder really chewed me out one side and down the other. I don't do that because I resented it to a certain extent.

Elders interviewed for this study appear to model the elders who guided them as youth. If the elders had a positive experience, they desire to pattern their pastoral leadership after the positive example. On the other hand, elders who had negative experiences in their youth attempt to learn from the experiences and not repeat the same errors in their pastoral duties.

Becoming Elders

The elders in this study became elders in two distinct ways. A couple of participants set their hearts "on being an overseer" (1 Tm 3:1). When asked how he became an elder, one participant replied:

> Well, I wanted to be, and I enjoy working with people . . . I've dealt with people all my life, even on my job which I was a supervisor where I worked in the latter, ten, twelve years. I worked with the state, and I like to work with people. I enjoy working with people and I got along well with people. I can talk to people. I can reason with people and listen, and that's important to listen to people's problems, and I just felt like I wanted to be an elder so I could help people.

This elder puts his desire to help people into action as he works with individuals who have become inactive. The participant recounted how he had talked with an inactive member the week before the interview, a process in which he regularly engages.

> If we haven't heard from them in a week or so, try to get in touch with them and see what their problem is, sometimes a phone call will work, but if it goes very long, we try to go see them.

Other elders came into a leadership position because the church requested they become elders. One participant, for example, recalled how the church asked him to consider the position of an elder in a men's business meeting.

> The church was pretty big back when I became an elder—even bigger before I did, because shortly after the Korean War and everything, you know, there was lots of activity around the Valley, a lot of people moving in and working at the plants and a lot of stuff like that. And, they didn't have any elders when I moved there when we moved there in '56 and we got some men that become very mature and sorta grew up in the position, I guess, where people thought we were qualified and we—somebody proposed that we ought to have elders and some of the men started looking around and said, "Well, here's four that we think maybe can be elders today," so we did. We went through the process, announcing it to the church, and considering elders and some interviews—there, there were some people who wanted to talk with us about, various ones of us about questions that they had and stuff like that.

Other elders reported that the church asked them to become elders when the church's current elders began to increase in age. One elder, who also serves as the congregation's preacher, reported:

> I was approached by the elders . . . after I had been there probably—I'm going to say seven or eight years—I had been preaching there at that time. It might have been a little bit more than that. And, they talked to me about whether I would also serve as an elder in the congregation. I had some reservations about it, because, you know, preacher/elder combination is not always the best. You know, sometimes it can lead to some problems, but I felt like that I needed to do it for the benefit of the congregation . . . The elder who has died in the meantime was beginning to get in somewhat poor health, and we had concerns about the fact that he was not really capable in providing the sort of direction, so that's basically how I did [become an elder].

The student detected only small differences in how elders dealt with inactive members based upon how they became elders. The elders who desired to become elders were slightly more likely to characterize working with inactive Christians as a joy than were elders asked to serve by the congregation. One participant who desired the position long before he became an elder said the following when queried about his feelings when

working with inactive members, "Oh, I feel good within my heart." The elders who were

asked by the congregation to serve did not speak of the work in terms of joy but of

obligation. One said:

> I think that's what one of the major roles of an elder is, to be concerned
> about inactive Christians . . . I think that if that's part of the flock, then,
> you know, then you've got responsibility to do the best you can, whether it
> be preaching to them, calling them, sending them cards, not forgetting
> them and letting them know that they're not forgotten.

The student expected more of a differentiation. As he looked through interview

transcripts, he anticipated seeing elders who desired the office to speak only in terms of

joy and elders who were asked to serve to speak only in terms of responsibility. While no

participant asked by the church to serve as an elder spoke of working with inactive

Christians as a joy, the elders who desired to serve did speak of the work as a

responsibility as well as a joy. The full context of the above quote where the elder

reported feeling good in working with inactive Christians is as follows: "Oh, I feel good

within my heart, because I've fulfilled my obligation from my standpoint."

These data may illustrate one of two points. The data indicate a slight difference

in the attitudes portrayed by elders working with inactive Christians depending upon

whether the elder sought the position or whether the elder was asked to take the position.

However, these data may illustrate simply that all elders in this study are cognizant of the

responsibilities inherent in their task, a responsibility the candidate demonstrated in

Chapter II.

Concrete Details

The researcher discussed with the elders he interviewed details of the

congregation where they serve so that he might ascertain the extent to which the problem

of inactive Christians had permeated the congregations being studied. Several themes

emerged from the data.

Activity in the Congregation

The elders had a uniform concern that the members in the churches they serve are

not as motivated in their service to Christ as the elders would like. One elderly

gentlemen reflected over his years as a preacher and elder and commented:

> We've got a full-time preacher. But, we haven't grown numerically—
> financially side of it we've grown—we're supporting a preacher all right.
> But, I'd rather see it the other way and grow numerically . . . . Well, it's
> getting bad right now. Right now it's getting bad. People are not
> attending like they should. Like I said, there were only fifty there
> yesterday morning, and I'd say a year or two ago, we'd had seventy.
> We're losing our young people. We're losing them.

Another, who has served as an elder for a number of years, said:

> How active is the typical member? Well, if a good number of them could
> get out of bed or out of the nursing homes, they might be pretty active. I
> don't know. We've—I would like to see them a lot more active. We do
> have a lot of old people that just aren't physically up to it, and in this day
> and time, the young people, both the husband wife works almost
> exclusively, what younger couples we've got, and they are limited with
> time and I don't like those kinds of situations, but again, with them being
> almost forced into working now with the economy the way it is, I don't
> know what we can do about it. I would like to see a lot more active
> people, but our people are basically older and they just can't participate in
> a lot of things that I would like to see going on, 'cause they can't get out at
> night and stuff like that and can't do a lot of walking, a lot of them, so, and
> the younger people are bogged down with working, working overtime and
> one thing or another, so in my opinion, they're not as active as I would
> like to see them, yet I think there are reasons for that, some things that are
> holding them back some. And again, we've got some that pretty, a few
> that are pretty undependable sometimes with attendance and stuff like that
> is concerned.

Although the elders recognize the situation in their congregations might be far

from what God would desire, they feel helpless to institute change. The one who

mentioned the recent hiring of a full-time minister had sought tirelessly to find just the right man to work with the congregation. He believes they have the right man, but the situation has not improved. The other elder recognizes the factors weighing down activity in his congregation are out of his control, namely, the age of many members and economic circumstances that require members to work more at their places of employment than at the church.

Dealing with Inactive Christians

When asked how they dealt with inactive members, the elders responded in two distinct ways. Three elders, who serve the same congregation, have a method for watching for inactivity. One of the three, the first interviewed by the researcher, described the method.

> Well, as of today, there's mainly one way that we deal with anybody in that category, even the slacker. We have three elders, and we each have a list of names, and if somebody doesn't attend in, I mean it's really up to the elder, but we say like try to make it a week. If somebody misses all three services in the week, then we put forth some kinda effort to contact them—whether it be phone, card, visit, and see if we can, you know, generate interest.

One of the elders developed the system, and the researcher asked him why he felt such a procedure was necessary. He answered:

> Well, there was some folks that we knew were not showing up very often. So, we wanted some type of plan where the elders would, uh, well, I don't know how much they [the other two elders] told ya, but, you know, we divided the congregation into three groups and each one of us is responsible for a third of the congregation. Uh, we felt rather than the whole group trying to be responsible for everybody that it was simpler for one man to kinda watch out for these others.

These three elders recognized a need to oversee the needs of the congregation, and they seek diligently to do so.

The other elders in the study did not report any systematic method in keeping watch "over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit" had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). However, all but two other participants had no difficulty in naming individuals who had become inactive and discussing the efforts he had made to reclaim them. As explained previously, the two elders who did have trouble naming inactive Christians serve a congregation with a lower number of inactive members than the other congregations examined in the study. One elder said:

> Well, right now I'm having it with two—a man and his wife. They promise and they promise and they promise, "I'm coming. I'm coming. I'm coming." But they just don't come. So, I've spent more time with him and his wife than any other in trying to convert them, because he had all the potential in the world to be really a go-getter so far as contacting people that's not members of the church. He was just a bubbly enthusiastic type fella, and he just got along great with everybody, but I really don't know what his problem is.

The elders in this study approach inactive Christians from two perspectives, therefore. One group makes systematic efforts to keep track of members who are moving closer and closer to inactivity. Others make no systematic efforts, but they are neither less concerned nor less involved in those who fall away. The size of the congregations the elders studied serve likely caused this finding. Only one congregation averages above sixty-five on Sunday morning. Had the student interviewed elders from larger congregations he suspects more participants would have reported systematic efforts to keep track of active and inactive members. The size of the congregations these elders serve allows the elders to know quite quickly on Sundays which members are present and which are missing.

Thoughts of Inactive Christians

The elders under consideration unanimously viewed inactive members with great concern, but some struggled with terminology. When asked what he thought of when he heard the phrase "inactive Christian," one gentleman replied:

> I didn't think of it necessarily as somebody who wasn't coming to church, but people who were attending who weren't doing anything. That's what I think of an "inactive Christian." 'Cause actually I don't consider one who isn't coming a Christian really. But they're members.

When the candidate asked another elder about that statement, he got the heart of the matter. He said, "Well, I think they're Christians. I think they're not faithful Christians, they've been Christians at least. I think they're not right with God. They're not doing what they ought to be doing." In a very real sense, what terminology the elders or the researcher place upon one who is "not right with God" does not matter. What matters is the state of his or her soul.

Another elder had difficulty grasping the terminology used in the study. When asked how many inactive members the congregation he serves currently has, he replied, "How many inactive members? Okay, you've got, you've got a good question, because how do you define 'inactive'?" The candidate promised to provide a definition but only after the elder did so first. He gave a definition quite close to the one used in this study when he said:

> One definition would be a person who has been a member and you haven't seen 'em for years. Another person that I would consider inactive is a person who shows up once a month. Now, there may be another term for that person, but to me, if you only show up once a month you're almost inactive.

These elders' responses may point to the need for some standardized definition of "inactive Christian" across the churches of Christ. Because congregations of the

churches of Christ are autonomous, no council or synod can provide a definition all congregations must follow. However, several writers and publications have influence across multiple congregations. Perhaps if these writers or publications provided a definition, congregations across the brotherhood would adopt the same definition.

Yet, the student has already argued that terminology is not terribly crucial. Whether elders call one an "inactive Christian" or "inactive member" or "erring Christian" or anything else does not matter as long as they engage in efforts to reclaim that individual.

Most Recent Encounter with Inactive Christians

The elders were asked to describe their most recent interaction with a member of the congregation they serve who had become inactive. Every elder discussed the frustration he felt in talking with the wayward member. As he began to cry, one elder said this about his last encounter with an inactive member:

> Oh, I feel good within my heart, because I've fulfilled my obligation from my standpoint, and . . . but, having hopes that she's going to be there and she's going to start coming to worship the Lord. But then when she didn't, I kinda get disappointed again. What did I do wrong, maybe? I feel—I'm a person who takes a lot to heart when I know people know to do good and don't. It bothers me. And I guess if it didn't, then I wouldn't be in the right frame of mind.

The elders in this study realized they needed to work with members who have lost interest in the church, and they desired to help restore such members. However, they easily became discouraged when they visited with inactive members and those Christians do not return to the active service of the church.

Role of Elders in Working with Inactive Christians

The elders in this study were quite cognizant of the responsibility of elders to work with wayward members. One participant said:

> It's a terrific responsibility. It looks to me that there's no glory in being an elder. It's just a terrific responsibility. And I don't think a person could really know what it is until they are an elder. It is a terrific responsibility. We'll be held responsible as to how we've handled that position.

Other participants echoed his sentiments as they spoke specifically about working with inactive members. One specifically said:

> An elder has a responsibility for every single member of the congregation—that's what elders are supposed to be doing to oversee and watching out for the welfare of the congregation, and obviously if a person is no longer faithful, coming to church, isn't participating in the worship and so forth, that person is putting his soul or her soul in jeopardy and they are lost in that situation, and that's the way I look at it. So, I certainly believe that there's a great obligation there as far as an elder. An elder ought to have a lot of interest in every member, you know, but certainly toward those who are inactive.

The elders in this study did not wish to wash their hands of inactive members or to pass the responsibility off to the preacher or other members. They realized that as shepherds of the flock they needed to take an active role in reaching those who wandered into inactive service.

Meaning of the Experience

To help the elders reflect on the meaning of their experiences with inactive Christians, the researcher asked them what they had learned from working with inactive Christians and what they would like to change about the way they had worked with inactive Christians in the past. The candidate did not receive nearly as much data at this

point as he did at the other points in the interviews. However, data received allow the

researcher to draw a few conclusions.

Learning from Working with Inactive Christians

The elders have gained two important insights in working with former members.

They have learned that the quicker they act when a member becomes inactive, the greater

likelihood exists for bringing the member back to the congregation, a finding confirmed

in the literature review of Chapter II. One elder said, "I guess probably the sooner that

you see that they're not a part of the assembly and you approach them, the better off it's

going to be." The elders have also learned that what may reach one inactive member

may not reach another. One participant added his thought:

> I always, as far as I'm personally concerned, I always feel like there are
> certain avenues and things you can go to with certain individuals that you
> can't go with others. And, you need to be careful. I myself have always
> tried to make it a practice to try to figure out just how I, in advance, just
> how I need to approach and deal with them.

Changes They Would Make

The elders made three different responses when asked what they would like to

change about their dealings with inactive Christians in the past. One elder lamented his

lack of time to help individuals return to the active service of the church:

> There's not really anything I would like to change . . . The only thing I'd
> like to do, personally, is just to be able to do more of it. Um, I mean, I'd
> like to be able to take, if I had every spare moment, but it's a problem of
> finding spare moments, or you know, how do you allocate your time?

Another elder wished he could answer the question fully so that he could work more

effectively in the future—"If I knew that answer, then I would work on that more. I

guess I really don't know the answer to that." Another elder regretted that at times he

waited too long before contacting wayward members.

> Probably one of the things that I regret at times in dealing with people that
> were in the process of drifting away is maybe not moving quickly enough
> because sometimes, you know, we kinda tend to hold back thinking, "Well
> things may turn around and they'll get things straightened out, you know,
> and if I say anything to them, it may push them the other direction." But
> I'm afraid sometimes we let people go, slip too far away before we get
> serious about it, before we take action toward . . . If they get to a certain
> point sometimes, they've lost interest.

These answers have the common theme of the elder's concern for their inactive

members. An elder would not lament that he did not have enough time to work with

inactive members unless he realized he needed to work with those members. A

participant would not wish to know what he could do differently unless he had genuine

concern for those drifting away. An elder would not regret he had not moved quickly

enough in the past unless he realized individuals' souls were in jeopardy.

<p style="text-align:center">Conclusion</p>

This chapter has provided data gleaned from the interviews conducted for this

study. The interviews asked the participants to place their story in their total life context,

their present experiences and what they hoped would be different in the future. The next

chapter will summarize the dissertation, draw conclusions from the data, and propose

future research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS

The candidate undertook this study to assess the attitudes of elders in churches of Christ in Kanawha and Lincoln Counties of West Virginia regarding inactive Christians, to examine how well they believed they could work with inactive Christians, and to explore how willing the elders would be to learn how to deal with inactive Christians more effectively. This chapter will summarize the study, will discuss the major findings from the study, and will make recommendations for further study.

Summary

In Chapter I, the candidate told how he first came to encounter elders who seemed less than willing to work with inactive members. He argued the study needed to be conducted because God cares deeply for the inactive Christian, elders have great responsibility toward inactive Christians, inactive Christians have placed their souls in jeopardy, and churches of Christ in West Virginia have experienced decline in the past several years.

In Chapter II, the researcher explored relevant studies concerning inactivity which preceded this one. He first exegeted several passages of Scripture which examine the pastoral role of elders. He then discussed the difficulty in elders' working with inactive Christians that Marian Guinn's suing the church in Collinsville, Oklahoma created. The

candidate also looked at relevant studies dealing with the causes of inactivity, returning to the church, and how the elders should work with inactive members.

The third chapter outlined the phenomological approach the researcher utilized to conduct his research. The candidate gathered the names of sixteen elders, nine of whom participated in the study. In the interviews, the researcher asked about the participants' life context, concrete details of how they were working with inactive Christians at present, and the meaning they made of their experiences.

The fourth chapter provided the results of the data. The first part of the chapter provided case studies from the nine participants. The chapter's second part utilized data gleaned from the participants outlined according to the three-part interview guide the researcher utilized. This final chapter will discuss the major findings in the study and propose further research.

<div align="center">Hypotheses</div>

In Chapter I, the candidate proposed six hypotheses, which the data either confirm or deny. This summary will first examine each hypothesis and whether the data confirm or deny it.

Hypothesis One: Elders are Aware of Their Responsibilities Toward Inactive Christians

The data confirm this hypothesis. All nine participants spoke of the high responsibility they have toward those who have wandered away. One elder simply said, "Being an elder is a big responsibility." His counterparts unanimously echoed his sentiments. One participant went beyond the previous quote and said:

> I think an elder should be very concerned about inactive Christians. I think that's what one of the major roles of an elder is, to be concerned about inactive Christians, but I also think that it's a job of every Christian to do whatever they can, but I think that if that's part of the flock then, you know, then you've got responsibility to do the best that you can, whether it be preaching to them, calling them, sending them cards, not forgetting them and letting them know that they're not forgotten. I mean I think people—the longer they get away with something like that without any contact, the more apt they are to stay that way, but I think that if they know that there is, there are people concerned about them, and that if you can let them know that their soul is in jeopardy, that God does care, and if you ever believed, and if you ever was a Christian truly and believed in God and the destination of your soul and eternity, then sooner or later that thought's going to come back, unless something really weird goes on in your mind, and I think that we have to do the best we can, and I think it is an elder's responsibility.

That participant, along with all the others, had a great desire to "be shepherds of God's flock" that is under their care (1 Pt 5:2).

The church has every reason to take heart in these results. Although churches of Christ in West Virginia have experienced recent decline, the elders in this study will not sit idly by and watch the church lose members. Rather, the elders in this study recognize they have a unique responsibility among the people of God to seek wandering sheep.

Hypothesis Two: Elders Do Not Feel Qualified to Work with Inactive Christians

The data do not confirm this hypothesis, but the participants in this study do feel qualified to work with inactive members. Instead of being paralyzed by fear in not knowing what to do, the elders in this study actively sought inactive Christians. One participant described the way he works with inactive members.

> Well, I used to soft soap it a lot. But now I just go head on. I walk in like a bull in a china shop and say, "We want to know what the problem is, and what can I do to help?" [We] try to get the bottom of it, rather than just skirting the issue. I dunno if after you have talked with them and somebody else has talked with them if you went to them and had the backing of the church to say we're going to withdraw from you—"If

you're not back making your confession at such and such a time"—I just wonder if that would not cause them to think more than all the talking and the begging, pleading you could do. But you have to have the backing of the church in order to get that done. But we've got to find some way to get them back but I don't know what it is. I've tried and tried and tried. But, we're getting very few of them back.

While this participant's "bull in a china shop" strategy may not fit with earlier research regarding reaching inactive Christians, he clearly feels qualified to work with fallen members.

No other participant related feelings of inadequacy for the task. In fact, the participants related how they had worked with inactive Christians in the past and continue to work with them at present. The student recounted in the previous chapter how one congregation systematically examines which members may be moving toward inactivity. In describing their methodology, one of the congregation's three elders told the researcher:

Well, as of today, there's mainly one way that we deal with anybody in that category, even the slacker. We have three elders, and we each have a list of names, and if somebody doesn't attend in, I mean it's really up to the elder, but we say like try to make it a week. If somebody misses all three services in the week, then we put forth some kinda of effort to contact them—whether it be phone, card, visit, and see if we can, you know, generate interest.

This elder felt qualified in working with inactive members, and he seeks to put forth efforts to reach inactive members.

Hypothesis Three: Elders Believe They Lack Communication Skills to Work with Inactive Christians

The data do not confirm this hypothesis; each participant believes had has the appropriate communication skills to work with inactive Christians. The researcher has already mentioned the participant who said that he goes to converse with inactive

Christians "like a bull in a china shop." Obviously, he sees himself as possessing appropriate communication skills in working with wayward members.

Other participants spoke of conversing with inactive Christians in a kind, caring manner. One elder said, "I don't believe getting them and chewing them . . . . I just try to be persuasive with them and try to do it in a nice way." Another participant spoke of the preparation he undertook before visiting with an inactive member: "I myself have always tried to make it a practice to try to figure out just how I . . . need to approach and deal with them." The subject believes he possesses the skills he needs for the task and considers carefully which specific skill he needs before approaching an inactive member. Another participant spoke of his frequent phone calls to a particular sporadic member.

> I've got one person that I call and she has, well, "I'm been in Florida." Well, I think, well that's a good excuse. Uh, she'll say, "I've been in Florida and, you know, I'm gonna be back next Sunday. I just got back this week." And never see her, so we'll call her again. "Well, I've been sick. Haven't been feeling good; I'm just wore out all the time. I know I should come; I'm planning on it." And then last time I call her she didn't even give me that much hope. But see now the way we kinda look at it is once something like that happens, the next thing we need to do is go visit her.

The subject believes he has appropriate communication skills, and he attempts to use those skills when he telephones or visits this inactive member.

Hypothesis Four: Elders Fear Anger Which Inactive Christians Often Express

The data do not confirm this hypothesis. The researcher has already mentioned the elder who said that he talked with inactive Christians "like a bull in a china shop." Obviously, if he feared anger on the part of inactive Christians, he would choose a different strategy. The same participant specifically mentions that, although he used to have concerns about anger being expressed, he no longer has such fears: "I don't know

that I have any fears anymore. I used to. You have fear of being rejected, of being

looked down on, this type thing. But any more that doesn't bother me."

Another participant specifically mentioned a case when an inactive member

became upset with him and his fellow elder.

> I recall one young lady . . . who was coming to church, kinda coming.
> [She was] supposed to be a member and was living with a man and
> wanting us to help her . . . . We both went to her and said, "You know, we
> can't help you in your current situation. You're not faithful to God.
> You're living in sin." She didn't like it very well, but I don't think either
> one of us hesitated to do it. In fact, she didn't come back anymore.

The participant's concern rested in doing the right thing, not in how the inactive Christian

perceived the situation. If he had concerns about anger she might have expressed, he

would not have so easily confronted her with her sin.

Only one participant mentioned anger in the interviews, but he did so in a

different context. The elder told the researcher that he was fearful "that their reason for

maybe leaving [is] that they're mad, maybe at me. And I wouldn't want that. That's the

reason I like to talk to them personally to find out what the problem is." Yes, he feared

individuals who had left the fellowship might be angry, even at him, but he went to them

to diffuse their anger. He did not avoid individuals because of potential anger.

Hypothesis Five: Elders Fear Working with Inactive Christians Places Them and the Congregations They Serve in Legal Jeopardy

The data do not confirm this hypothesis. On no other hypothesis did the

researcher find such strong feelings as on this one. Not only do the elders not fear legal

action, but several stated they would do what they believed was right regardless of

possible legal consequences. One participant recounted an elder's meeting in which he was involved shortly following the trial in Collinsville, Oklahoma.

> We had some folks that needed discipline. And this was right after the deal out in . . . Oklahoma . . . whenever the lady sued the elders of the church and all that stuff. And I said, "We need, you know, we need to do something about this. We need to withdraw. We need to go see 'em, and we need to go through the steps of, you know, Matthew 18: go see 'em and if they won't hear, then take a couple and go and then talk to the church and withdraw our fellowship from them to show them . . . . It's not to prove to us or to the world that they're not a part of us . . . . It's to show them that they're lost. It's the whole idea about church discipline from 1 Corinthians 5 so that they know that they're not in a right relationship with God beyond a shadow of a doubt." He [a fellow elder] said, "I ain't doing nothing like that." He said, "I've worked too hard for the things that the Lord's give me." He said, "I'll not be a part of that." So, anyway that has kinda been the—I think since that thing out there in Oklahoma—I think church discipline dropped off from whatever it was to below the radar. I think that's had a big impact on people.

Obviously the case did not have a big impact on that participant, for he desired to carry out discipline in spite of any legal repercussions.

Only one participant was unaware of the situation in Collinsville, Oklahoma, and that participant was not a member of the churches of Christ at the time. However, none of the eight participants aware of the case allowed the fear of legal action to prevent their carrying out their pastoral responsibilities. One elder succinctly stated, "I remember the case. I think it was in Oklahoma. I remember that – that is always on your mind, but you cannot let the world influence you."

Hypothesis Six: Elders Desire to Know How to Work with Inactive Christians More Effectively

The data confirm this hypothesis, for the elders often spoke of wanting more effective means to work with inactive Christians. One participant mentioned books on discipleship in his personal library which he used to help pastor his flock, including

inactive Christians. Another participant majored in Bible at a university affiliated with

the churches of Christ and spoke of continuing efforts he undertook to learn how better to

help God's people. One elder spoke of his frequent trips to the Tulsa Soul Winning

Workshop: "I used to go to Tulsa every year to the workshop for a long time. I'm kinda

past that now. It was a great trip. We had taken a lot of people."

One elder spoke of efforts he has undertaken to shepherd his flock more

effectively.

> We sent out a letter a year or so ago encouraging our members to let the
> elders when they were going to be out of town. Now, we emphasized
> we're not trying to be nosy, we don't care particularly where you're going,
> but we would like to know that you are planning to be out-of-town or that
> you're sick. We like for them to call us when they're sick. 'Cause it's
> easier for one person to be responsible for his action than for me to be
> responsible for about seventy people. So, we've encouraged them to call
> us when they're going to be away, and we have a lot of people who did
> that and some of them are a little drifting away from that plan, but, you
> know, you just have to remind them every now and then that we'd like for
> you to do this. But most of them, we know where they are.

In another context, the same participant told how he proposed the three elders evenly

divide the congregation to watch for members' becoming inactive.

> Well, there was some folks that we knew were not showing up very often.
> So, we wanted some type of plan where the elders would, uh, well, I don't
> know how much they told ya, but, you know, we divided the congregation
> into three groups and each one of us is responsible for a third of the
> congregation. Uh, we felt rather than the whole group trying to be
> responsible for everybody that it was simpler for one man to kinda watch
> out for these others and then you can.

The elder constantly kept looking for ways to reach more people and to do so with greater

effectiveness.

Other Findings

In addition to the hypotheses the candidate desired to confirm or deny, he discovered several pieces of information he did not expect to find. The candidate will now discuss those results.

Only one participant in the study had a religious heritage outside the churches of Christ. On the one hand, such a finding should not be terribly surprising, for elders "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [they] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Tit 1:9). Clearly those raised within the churches of Christ are better equipped to understand the theology prevalent among that group and oppose those who refute such theology. However, those converted to the churches of Christ as adults can mature to the point where they hold firmly to the message, teach sound doctrine, and refute error. No doubt, many elders in the first century church came from various religious backgrounds, from paganism to Judaism.

Because elders have such great responsibility in teaching sound doctrine, the student was surprised to find that no elder in this study mentioned using the Bible to converse with inactive Christians. Several participants spoke of calling individuals to see why they were not regular in worship attendance or talking with such individuals face-to-face. While the literature review found the importance of talking with inactive Christians and listening to their stories, the importance of Scripture in such conversations cannot be ignored. Scripture has the power to convict the inactive Christians of his error—"The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edge sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

The researcher was also somewhat surprised to discover that only one participant had ever been inactive himself. Again, because of the high qualifications for elders, this result should not be terribly surprising. However, the one participant who was inactive returned to the church several years before he ever became an elder. No doubt there are other elders among churches of Christ in the United States who were not active in the church during part of their lives.

The candidate believed that he could discover a different line of thought among elders who had been inactive and those who had not been. The researcher did learn that the one participant who had been inactive worked with inactive members in light of his own negative experience described above. However, were the candidate able to identify more elders who had been inactive in the past, a clearer distinction could have been made between elders who had never been inactive and those who had been inactive.

Another surprising finding was discovering an elder who participated in this study who became an elder after being a Christian only five years. The Scriptures require that an elder "not be a recent convert" (1 Tm 3:6). Granted, the New Testament does not specify what a "recent convert" is, and many of the elders in the apostolic church had likely been Christians a relatively short period of time. Yet, the student was quite surprised to find a congregation who had ordained an elder so quickly after his baptism.

Results in Light of Literature Review

The literature review demonstrated the pastoral responsibilities of elders toward inactive members. The study demonstrates that the elders in this study understood quite clearly the pastoral responsibilities they have. The elders with whom the candidate spent time knew they had responsibility toward inactive members of their congregation. One

participant even cried as he discussed inactive members and how his heart aches when he sees people who know what they should be doing and do not do the right thing.

There can be little doubt that when Marian Guinn sued the church of Christ in Collinsville, Oklahoma that churches of Christ were greatly impacted in their practice of church discipline. However, the case did not seem to impact the way the elders in this study viewed their responsibilities. Eight of the participants remembered the situation quite clearly, and none of the participants was concerned about the case impacting how they dealt with inactive members. One elder in the study said that the case should cause churches to proceed with discipline carefully, but he still believed churches needed to do what Scripture required of them. Two participants particularly mentioned that the case did not impact them, for they would work with inactive members even if they were threatened with legal action.

The experiences of the elders in this study confirm earlier research on the causes of inactivity. One participant specifically mentioned Jesus' Parable of the Sower, and several others mentioned "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things" (Mk 4:19). The following table provides quotes from the participants which fit the Parable.

Table 2. Quotes from the Participants About Causes of Inactivity Which Fit Mark 4:19

Quotes which Fit Mark 4:19
"Sometimes it's the attraction of the world. Sometimes they're just lazy. Sometimes they'd rather go fishing or whatever."
"TVs, newspapers, radios, things of that nature. They just have more interest in them than they do in serving God and saving their soul."
"Some of the reasons are that, in my opinion, in the times in which we live, the church is just not 'exciting' enough for them. They're looking for a lot of exciting things, a lot of mysticism, and entertainment."
"I think that's another factor, that people just get involved in so many things of the world that they just let those things pull them away. I've seen that happen more than one time."
"Worldly things. Sometimes it's family problems. Sometimes it's problems within the congregation itself. But, I think it's more worldly attractions, things to look at in the world that they want to do rather than work on their own soul."

The elders in this study understood clearly that worldly attractions caused individuals to leave faithful service, just as Jesus said. Other factors were mentioned only nominally for probably two reasons. Because the elders spend time teaching and interpreting Scripture to the congregations they serve, their understanding of the problem of inactivity is shaped by Scripture. Thus, when queried about the reasons for inactivity, the participants returned, either consciously or unconsciously, to what they knew best— the Scriptures. Additionally, the elders have not read the literature reviewed in the second chapter. Thus, they are unaware of the psychological and sociological causes of inactivity.

Two elders at least alluded to other causes referenced in the literature review. One participant mentioned that the congregation he serves as lost large numbers of young people. He said, "We're losing our young people. We're losing them." As mentioned in the literature review, a great percentage of members become inactive prior to reaching twenty. Another participant mentioned anger as a reason individuals might leave the church. When asked what fears he has about working with inactive members, he said,

"That their reason for maybe leaving is that they're mad, mad at me, and I wouldn't want that."

The literature review also discussed the need to disciple new converts as Jesus instructed in the Great Commission. Unfortunately, the elders whom the student interviewed did not have any system in place to disciple new converts. The candidate asked each participant how the congregation he serves goes about keeping members after their baptism. No participant told of any systematic method the congregation utilized. One congregation did have a new converts' class for a while, but they discontinued the program, for "that doesn't work the best in the world."

Only two participants seemed to recognize the need to disciple new converts. One elder did mention his desire to establish a "mentoring" program at the congregation he serves, a program quite similar to the discipling program in place in the International Churches of Christ. When asked how the congregation he serves seeks to keep new members from falling away, another participant said, "It's a continual work. It needs to have a lot of teaching, especially with the individual to help them in their troubles, because it seems like today little troubles is a deviation from the Lord, in falling away." However, the participant could not identify how the congregation seeks to help new converts with their troubles.

As discussed in the literature review, if churches wait longer than eight weeks after a member begins to become inactive to call upon the member, that member will likely not return to church. The elders in this study uniformly understood the importance of acting quickly to reach members moving toward inactivity. The following table provides quotes from the participants about how long they wait to contact inactive members.

Table 3. Length of Time Participants Wait to Visit Inactive Members

Length of Time Participants Wait
"About three weeks—maybe I shouldn't wait that long, but it usually is."
"The second time they miss."
"I wouldn't say there's any, you know, particular period of time. Usually a week or two."
"I try to do it [call inactive members] every week, if they've been gone for a week, but no more than two weeks."
"We try not to wait too long. Like, maybe, if we haven't heard from them in a week or so, try to get in touch with them and see what their problem is. Sometimes a phone call will work, but if it goes very long, we try to go see 'em."

Personal Reflections

The candidate greatly benefited personally from undertaking this particular project, benefits which will now be enumerated. First, the researcher grew immensely in his appreciation for elders in churches of Christ. When he first began conducting the research, the student fully expected to find elders with a laissez-faire attitude toward inactive Christians, probably as a result of his earlier experiences. Yet, the elders, by and large, took a much more proactive stance in working with inactive Christians. Nearly every elder could detail work he had undertaken within the last month to bring a wanderer home.

The candidate's deeper appreciation for elders also materialized through the hospitality the elders uniformly demonstrated. The researcher had not been in the home of a single participant in the study, and he had not met several of the participants. Such factors did not hamper the warmness with which the candidate was greeted at each home. All the elders in this study talked warmly before and after the interview, several had their wives prepare pies or cookies for the meeting, and many took the candidate through a tour of their homes and discussed the importance of several family heirlooms.

The research project also helped the candidate deal with his introverted nature. The student has always cringed when needing to telephone or to visit someone he did not know well. However, the present study required him to do just that. The researcher began the project with much apprehension, but he grew greatly more confident as the study progressed. This newfound confidence will aide the candidate as he works with inactive Christians himself.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

The present study did not contain as much data as the researcher had hoped. The candidate intended to interview at least ten elders for the present study, but only nine elders agreed to participate. Because of the low number of participants, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. If future research examined a larger sample, the church could learn more clearly how her elders worked with inactive Christians.

The current study needs to be replicated in larger churches. One congregation averages ninety on Sunday morning, and the other churches generally have somewhere between fifty and sixty present at their Sunday morning assemblies. Elders in larger congregations are naturally confronted with more pastoral challenges in seeking individuals who have wandered. Elders in larger congregations likely have far more experience in working with inactive Christians. Research dealing with how those elders understand and carry out their pastoral duties could advance understanding this problem far beyond what this study could do.

Additional studies should examine how closely elders model the examples from their youth. This investigation found that elders tend to follow the pattern of the leaders they witnessed as young men. Yet, the current research did not discover to what extent

such a relationship exists. Future inquiries examining this aspect could greatly help the church understand how elders function and how elders can better equip young men to serve in that capacity in the future.

This dissertation identified one participant who had been inactive in the past, and his work with erring members has been greatly impacted by that experience. Additional analysis could take place to discover to what extent elders work with inactive members in a manner similar to the way others leaders worked with them in the past. If future research examines that correlation, the church may understand more fully how elders seek to pastor wandering souls.

Future research could also greatly benefit by exploring the attitudes of elders concerning the disciplining of inactive members. The study briefly touched upon the subject, but did not explore the attitudes of elders regarding discipline in great detail. The participants in the present study believed the withdrawal of fellowship needs more practice among churches of Christ. When asked about the most effective means of working with wayward members, one elder stated:

> I still think that the secret to getting them back is having the fear of being withdrawn from the whole congregation is the one thing that would help more than anything else. But it seems that this is something that when you get to thinking about it I'm sure you've seen the church get black eyes from people who left the church and how many times did you see the church actually withdrawal from them? It's just something that the religious world does it, and I don't know why that we can't do it. It's a tough way to go. It's a tough love when you get to thinking about it.

The same participant fears that too many active Christians remain in close contact with their inactive brethren: "I really think that when somebody really turns their back on Christ, and you've done everything you can to try to restore them and get them back, I don't think we ought to be buddy, buddy with them until they change." Another participant also expressed his frustration that the congregation he serves has yet to

withdraw from wayward members: "I mean, there are certain cases that, you know, defies all logic as to why you wouldn't withdraw."

Other investigators would do well to look for a correlation between elders' attitudes toward inactive members and their attitudes toward the withdrawal of fellowship. This study seems to suggest that elders believe disfellowshiping wayward Christians may entice inactive members to return to the church, but the data show that no elder could positively correlate negative church discipline and the return to church by inactive Christians. Perhaps an examination of additional congregations would show a positive correlation and open new avenues to the church in dealing with inactive members.

The candidate truly hopes that other researchers will take this study and begin to examine carefully how elders shepherd inactive Christians. Concerned Christians could then take such research and develop curricula whereby elders could learn to shepherd wandering sheep more effectively.

Appendix A

JUSTIN IMEL

June 26, 2006

Dear Brethren:

During my time preaching for the church in Alum Creek, I have been attending doctoral classes at Southern Christian University, a brotherhood graduate school. I am currently writing a dissertation entitled *Shepherding Wandering Sheep: An Examination of Elders' Attitudes Regarding Inactive Christians*. The dissertation involves interviewing elders in Kanawha and Lincoln Counties concerning their view of inactive brethren. I hope this work leads to the development of seminars or a book to help elders work with inactive Christians.

I am writing to ask your help in this study. Specifically, I am asking that you consent to three ninety-minute interviews concerning inactive Christians. If you can help me, please complete the demographic questionnaire and the informed consent form and return them to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope. Any information you give me will remain strictly confidential and will be revealed to no one. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

I look forward to meeting with you.

In Christ,

Justin Imel

Appendix B

SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Doctoral Program

Informed Consent for participation in the Shepherding Wandering Sheep Study, a research project being conducted by Justin Imel.

Justin Imel is a doctoral student in Ministry at Southern Christian University in Montgomery, Alabama. The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes of elders in churches of Christ regarding inactive Christians. Participation is voluntary.

Your participation will consist of three ninety-minute interviews with the researcher. The interviews shall be taped and transcribed by the researcher himself. At the conclusion of the study, all tapes and transcripts shall be destroyed. Your cooperation in answering the interview questions will be a tremendous asset to the study.

All answers given in relation to questions will remain strictly confidential and will be disclosed to no one.   If you give your permission by signing this document, what is learned will be in a dissertation written by this researcher without your name attached.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with this researcher. Further, you may discontinue participation at any time. If you decide later to withdraw from the study, you may also withdraw any information that has been collected from you or about you.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Justin Imel at 389-9997 (cell), justin.imel@gmail.com, or PO Box 24, Alum Creek, WV 25003.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

_____   _____

Participant's signature   Date   Researcher's signature   Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide for First Part of Interview

1. Tell me a little bit about your religious background.
    a. In what group were you raised as a child?
    b. How often a week did you attend church services?
    c. What recollections do you have about the leaders in that group?
        -   What did you like about those leaders? What did you dislike about those leaders?
        -   What type of spiritual leadership did those leaders exhibit?
        -   What did those leaders do to retain members? What did those leaders do to recover lost members?
    d. How did that group react to members who fell away?

2. Tell me a little bit about how you became a member of the churches of Christ.
    a. Who influenced you to become a member?
    b. What do you recall about your baptism?
    c. How often did you attend services after becoming a member of the churches of Christ?

3. Tell me about a time you might have considered yourself an inactive member.
    a. Who from the church contacted you about your inactivity?
    b. When did you return to active service?
    c. What did you like about the recovery process? What did you not like about the recovery process?

4. Tell me a little bit about how you became an elder.
    a. When did you believe you fit the qualifications outlined in the New Testament?
    b. How did the congregation go about installing you as an elder?

Interview Guide for Second Part of Interview

1.   Tell me a little bit about the congregation where you currently serve.
        a.   How many members worship with the congregation?
        b.   How active is the typical member?
        c.   How many people do you typically baptize a year?
                -       How do you seek to incorporate those new members into the
                        congregation?
                -       How many of those members fall away shortly after their baptism?
        d.   How many inactive members would you estimate are members of the
                congregation where you serve?

2.   Tell me a little bit about how the congregation where you serve deals with
        inactive Christians.
        a.   Who visits with the inactive member?
        b.   How long does the congregation wait until you visit the inactive member?
        c.   What programs do you have in place to work with inactive Christians?

3.   When you hear the phrase "inactive Christian" what do you think of?
        a.   What do you believe causes many Christians to become inactive?
        b.   Why do you think many Christians seem to ignore their inactive brethren?

4.   Tell me a little bit about the last encounter you had with an inactive member.
        a.   How did that go?
        b.   How did the member react when you contacted him/her?
        c.   What did the member give as a reason for his/her inactivity?
        d.   How did you feel as you left the inactive member?

5.   What have you learned from working with inactive Christians?

6.   What do you think is the best way of going about working with inactive
        Christians?

7.   What fears do you have about working with inactive Christians?

8.   What role do you believe an elder should take in working with inactive
        Christians?

Interview Guide for Third Part of Interview

1.   We've talked a good deal about inactive Christians in the past few minutes. What have you learned by going through this process?

2.   What would you like to change about the way you've worked with inactive Christians in the past?

3.   How would you like to work with inactive Christians in the future?

4.   What else would you like to add?

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