

"Congregational Splits & Denominational Apostasy"

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There has been a recent flurry of press reports of congregations leaving their denominations over their national church's position on homosexuality. However, anecdotal historical evidence suggests that congregations have been splitting or leaving their denominations for hundreds of years and for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the prevalence of, the variety of reasons for, and the processes within congregations that lead to the creation of a new congregation, changing denominational affiliation, or becoming independent. Our examination uses data from the FACT 2005 national survey of congregations within the Protestant mainline and evangelical denominations that split, changed denominations or went "independent" of any denomination. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a sample of leaders of those congregations in spring 2007.

Individual and Congregational Apostasy

Apostates are individuals "who held a religious identity at one time, but now have rejected that identity." as defined by Hadaway and Roof (1988: 29). Apostates, by this definition, are distinct from those who have never identified with a denomination or religion. Congregations may also become "apostates" and, as do individuals, go through "disaffiliation" processes. In this paper, we are concentrating on congregational "apostates" defined particularly as those that have changed denominations or have left their denomination for independent status. Congregations that have "split" due to some conflict are also included, since the present faithful remnant likely views the group that has left to start a new church even within the same denominations as "apostates" from the congregation. .

Study Methodology and Empirical Distribution of Congregational Apostates

Survey data on which this paper is based is drawn from the FACT 2005 national survey of congregations, resulting in 884 usable questionnaires. The question series used from this FACT 2005 survey to delineate the various types of apostate congregations asked church leaders (typically the pastor) to indicate whether *in the last twenty years*, their congregation had:

- Split into two or more congregations (often within same denomination)
- Changed denominational affiliation
- Became an independent/unaffiliated congregation

These questions identified 83 congregations that split, 27 that changed denominational affiliation, and 23 that went independent. Although splitting, changing denominations, and becoming independent can be part of an extended process of congregational disengagement (starting with one of the three and ending with another) in most cases these apostasy congregational outcomes were not connected within a twenty-year time span.

The largest overlap category comprised four churches that both went independent and changed denominations.¹ Looking at these four congregations by dates when the change was made, it seems that two changed denominations first and then went

	IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, THIS CONGREGATION HAS		
	Split into 2 or more churches	Changed Denominational. Affiliation	Became Independent
Split into 2 +	(Total 83)	2	1
Changed Denomination	2	(Total 27)	4
Became Independent	1	4	(Total 23)

independent 5 or 10 years later, and for the other two changing denominations and becoming independent occurred more closely together in time.

The FACT 2005 sample of congregations, mainly Protestant (89%) and other than oldline (63%), are most heavily located in the South (40%) and Midwest (30%). These congregation, however, are fairly well distributed by rural-urban location. Three-fourths (75%) describe the majority outlook of their congregational majority as at least somewhat on the conservative side.

Most are *constant congregations* – in that they that did not split into two or more churches, change denominations, or go independent between 1985 and 2005. This results in the situation where both most of the constant congregations and the apostate congregations are located in the South and predominantly in *other* (non-oldline) Protestant denominational families. The constant congregations are somewhat more likely than the apostates to be located in more rural areas.² The majority in the sample are constant congregations, in that less than 10% of the total sample indicated that their congregation had undergone any one of these three changes or types of apostasy in the last twenty years. Although almost a fifth of the sample indicated their church had

2 Congregations that	REGION		PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS		LOCATION		
	West	South	Mainline	Other	rural, sml town	big town, sml city	in or near big city
Were Constant	78%	82%	96%	81%	90%	88%	80%
Split	17%	12%	3%	13%	7%	9%	13%
Changed Denominations	3%	3%	1%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Went Independent	2%	4%	1%	3%	2%	2%	3%

helped “plant or grow” a new congregation, this was not viewed as synonymous with “splitting” into two or more congregations in the numerical data or by clergy interviewed. In early 2007 seven in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with present clergy of congregations that went independent (5) or split (2) to explore why and how they become apostates. Only two congregations were from the same denomination, SBC.

Ways that Types of Apostasy and Constant Congregations Differ

1. Regional/Location differences.

In Hadaway and Roof’s study individual apostates were more likely to be found in the *less-churched* regions of the country, and in more urban areas. The West has long been considered the least churched in comparison to the South, which is the most churched. Based on several studies, Hadaway and Roof (1988:36) state the empirical generalization that among individuals “apostasy is more likely in the West, followed by the Northeast, the Midwest and the South.”

Apostate congregations in the FACT 2005 sample are, like constant congregations, mainly located in the South primarily because 2/5 of all in the sample are in this region. Theological liberal-conservative conflicts within denominations have amplified in the last decade, often led by southern congregations. It is also possible that the highly churched South provides a more conducive context than other regions for congregations to decide to internally split or leave their parent denomination. This may be an explanation for the regional finding depicted in Table One.

(TABLE ONE - see next page)

TABLE I

Key Differentiating Characteristics of
 Congregations that Over the Last 20 Years
Remained Constant, Split, Changed Denominations, or Went Independent

Note: Percentages add to 100% vertically: i.e. the types of congregations are the independent variables.

CHARACTERISTIC	CONSTANT*	CHURCH SPLIT		CHANGED DENOMINATIONS		WENT INDEPENDENT	
	Since 1985	1985-94	95-2005	1985-94	95-2005	1985-94	95-2005
<i>In year 2005</i>							
Region: <i>West</i>	12%	32%	19%	0%	30%	14%	7%
<i>South</i>	39%	38%	60%	27%	70%	42%	80%
Protestants: <i>Mainline</i>	28%	9%	8%	13%	10%	14%	0%
<i>Other</i>	60%	86%	88%	50%	90%	86%	100%
Location <i>Rural</i>	35%	34%	11%	40%	36%	29%	25%
<i>Big City</i>	35%	31%	64%	53%	54%	29%	56%
Under 150 adults	61%	80%	40% *	100%	100%*	100%	100%*
Col grads =20% & less	66%	74%	78%	47%	36% *	100%	67%
Age 60+ = 20% & less	52%	71%	81% *	64%	100% *	86%	93% *
White = 20% & less	10%	16%	6%	19%	9%	14%	40% *
a) Predom. conserv.	42%	57%	58% *	38%	73%	57%	100%*
b) Str.values=str.agr	72%	82%	96% *	93%	91%	86%	100%*
c) CloseKnit= str.agr	44%	49%	27% *	56%	27%	57%	93%*
Total N Possible	(759)	(35)	(48)	(16)	(11)	(7)	(15)

* = Statistically significant linear results compared to no change since 1985

Congregational characteristics

- a) How would you describe the theological outlook of the majority of your congregations regularly participants adults?
 (1) Predominantly conservative to (5) Predominantly liberal
- b) Our congregation holds strong beliefs and values.
 (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree
- c) Our congregation is like a close-knit family (1 –5 same categories as in b above.)

* "Constant" congregations = for these analyses are those that in the last twenty years have neither split, nor changed denominations, nor gone independent from a denomination.

Results for “Region,” the first “dependent variable” in Table I, depict the greater tendency within the last ten years for congregations in the South to split, change denominations, or become independent than those in the West. One explanation of this finding *may be* that congregations in the South, at least care more about theological differences within their denomination than do congregations located elsewhere.

2. Denominational/theological affiliation and values. Disproportionately, both constant and apostate congregations tend to be “other” Protestant and conservative, in large part because the congregational sample is predominantly “other” Protestant of more theologically conservative orientation. However, apostate congregations are particularly likely to belong to the theologically conservative “other” Protestant family, and this is even more characteristic of those congregations that changed denominations or went independent since 1995. Although three-fourths of the FACT congregations “strongly agree” that their church “holds strong beliefs and values,” apostate congregations are significantly more likely than constant congregations to say this is true of them.

3. Age, education, and race of the majority of members. Hadaway and Roof found that apostate individuals were particularly likely to be younger, and often better educated, than those who retained their denominational identity. Apostate congregations are also more apt than constant congregations to have younger members (far fewer over age 60). Although educated individuals may be more likely to be apostates, the proportion of college educated members had little relationship to congregation apostasy, with the

exception that congregations that switched denominations were composed of proportionately *fewer* college-educated members than constant congregations.

Since two-thirds majority of the congregations in the FACT sample are over 80% white in membership, this is not a highly differentiating characteristic between constant and apostate congregations, with one exception. Those congregations that went *independent* within the last decade have a higher proportion of racial/ethnic minority members than other congregations.

4. Size, Finances and Community:. A three-fifths majority of the FACT congregation are under 150 adult members, particularly those that changed denominations or went independent. Although this is true as well of congregations that *split* into two or more churches over a decade ago, congregations whose renegade group left to start another church more recently have seemingly fared much better. Although there may still be strains that could result in further divisions, present financial health does not distinguish constant and types of apostate congregations from one another.

What happens to the sense of community within these apostate churches that split, change denominations, or go independent? Thumma (2006) suggests that “freedom from” a denomination requires that a congregation create its own identity to retain a committed membership. Indeed, congregations in the FACT 2005 survey that left a denomination to be independent, especially within the last ten years, are particularly apt to “strongly agree” that their congregation is “like a close-knit family.”

The same cannot be said for those apostate congregations that split or changed denominations, particularly within the last decade or so. A decision made fifteen or

more years ago to split or switch is apparently viewed by their present leaders as having healed better than those of congregations which have gone through the process more recently.

The Process of Disengagement: Insights from Interviews

David Bromley (1988) points out that in studying individual religious apostasy, researchers typically look at one point in the process mainly through apostate individuals' recall, and miss those persons who began the process of church disengagement but never completed it. The same can be said for the process of disengagement of apostate congregations.

Helen Rose Ebaugh (1988) in examining the progression through which Catholic sisters become "ex-nuns," describes several interconnected stages in their disengagement from vowed life. She suggests that some of these basic stages might also apply to those who leave other roles that have been central to their identity. Her framework is used here to examine steps in the "exit process" of apostasy congregations.

First Doubts, Initial Cueing, Seeking Alternatives, and Turning Point Events

After first strong doubts the individual has about the religious group or denomination that emerge, according to Ebaugh there is typically a period which she terms "cueing" in which the future exiters talk about their concerns to friends, family and colleagues - possibly to help them think through decision and possibly to begin to garner support for exit. For a while, the individual considers various alternatives to leaving the religious role/organization. Then there may be a "turning point event" which in itself

may not be so egregious that it would cause exit, but is symbolic of issues the individual has with the religious body, and is used in part to explain and finally confirm that the individual will leave the religious role/organization.

In congregations, the pastor primarily and sometimes lay leaders, may express initial doubts about the denomination or congregational directions, and talk about possible alternative future paths for this church. There may well be a “turning point” event that the pastor or others wanting “exit” can use to mobilize the congregation. The following are foci of initial doubts and turning points interviewed pastors expressed.

Disgruntlement with the Denomination’s Policies and Treatment of the Congregation

In two southern congregations, one black and one white, growing disenchantment with denominational policies and politics led to “first doubts”, which became solidified when denominational officials appeared to denigrate the pastors and lay leaders.

One founding pastor of a COGIC congregation had risen to leadership positions within the COGIC local assemblies and associations. His criticism of the way that the COGIC regional jurisdiction monitored local assemblies was ignored, and he felt disesteemed by denominational officials. He and his supportive lay leaders became “disgruntled” with the denomination, and began to consider leaving, a decision which became more solidified as the treatment of the pastor by the denomination further deteriorated.

- I got disgruntled with the direction the Church was going...and I got disgruntled with the leadership. So I decided the best thing to do was to pull out... (We) miss the tradition of the Church, what it stood for, and what it does still stand for. The one that is there now -- is the hidden one you don't see on a regular basis. That is what now represents the Church. My members pretty much saw what was going on – me being the Shepherd and how I was being treated.

Another pastor, relatively new to the pulpit of a formerly Southern Congregational Methodist Church, similarly depicts the congregation's departure in 1995 as occasioned by their becoming:

- "...disgruntled with the denomination because some missionaries that came out of our church had been rejected by the denomination...I don't know if there were other reasons, but they pulled out We are completely independent now.

Disenchantment with Denominational Theological Directions/Policies

Two white pastors of formerly Southern Baptist congregations gave theological based reasons from nearly opposite directions for why they began the process of becoming independent churches.

- More fundamentalist pastor: I just did not agree with some of the things the Southern Baptists were doing... They wanted to do a new whole Bible, and they spent 12 million dollars of mission money to rewrite the New Testament alone. So I did not agree with that. So much stuff has been going on behind the scenes, and so much of what religion is today has very little salvation....
 - *(For him, a turning point event in his decision to leave was SBC stock acquisition)* I spend a lot of my time doing research on the SBC and different denominations. I think we need to know why we believe what we believe. I think we need to know why we support what we support. Like the Southern Baptist hold stock in Holiday Inn. Well, Holiday Inn owns stock in pornography, and in some of the alcohol distributors and distilleries. If their money is going for that, then God is displeased with us.... When I first found this out, I went to double check and did more research, and found more that became uncovered. The SBC and some of the other denominations have taken the blood out of songbooks... and a lot of other things real contrary to the Bible. I think that is why growth has stopped in them.
- More theologically moderate pastor In 1995 we began moving away from the Southern Baptist Convention, mostly because we disagreed with the fundamentalist angle. It is hard to be conservative enough for fundamentalists; they keep having to find an enemy to be against...I had to make the change intellectually from "yes" I can support the Southern Baptists to "no" I really cannot. So I had to work through that. I was fairly involved in the political part of it and we just had our butts kicked. We lost and lost big. There is a period of denial that you go through - "this couldn't have happened" "this can't happen" – and then you begin to realize "Oh no; this is for real; this is not a bad dream." Then you, the pastor, has to think, "Well, what am I

going to do?"...I felt I had a choice. I could say, "Well, I cannot stay here because I cannot support the SBC", and then go and find some place where I could serve. Or, I could stay here; and since the church was a moderate church (they just did not know that yet), I could help them define or discover who they were....

- (*For him and definitely the congregation, a turning point event was the congregation's decision to be allow women deacons*) The thing that finalized the choice was when the church decided to have women on the deacon ballot. Now in our church, deacons do not run it like they do in a lot of other Baptist churches. There is a church council that makes administrative decisions. Deacons are supposed to stay focused on ministry. Of course women were doing this (ministry), but not officially. Eighty percent of the congregation said, "Yes, that is what we want to do." That was when the fundamentalists finally threw their arms up, and said "We just have to leave." (The fundamentalists joined other SBC churches, leaving a more theologically cohesive community to support the pastor in moving this church to independent status.)

Another clergyman, senior pastor of a formerly Christian and Missionary Alliance congregation, had a period of spats over some years with denominational leaders. In several instances when he was senior pastor of different congregations, rather than split the church because of a popular younger assistant pastor's objections, he had helped the younger men form their own sort-of daughter churches within the denomination. However, this senior pastor's charismatic perspectives eventually led to irresolvable differences with denominational officials on the place of "gifts of the spirit" in worship. These leaders wanted him to leave the denomination and the congregation. In so doing, this time he did split the congregation by taking a substantial number of the members with him.

- Basically it was about gifts of the Spirit that caused us to leave the denomination. As a congregation we experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit in our lives; and as result, we began to develop a different worship and leadership style in the church. After about a 1-½ years in trying to work this out with the denomination...they felt that would not work real well, and asked us to please choose to leave. We did that and began a new church, a new ministry with large portion of our people, about 400 that we had from the other church. (*How many were left in your former church?*) About fifty.

Internally Generated Congregational Splits

Church splits occur which are more predominantly generated by conflicts internal to the congregations, having very little to do with denominational level pronouncements or policies. Interviews with pastors of “faithful remnant” congregations, those in the same location and denomination after the dissidents left, suggest that whatever the particular foci of the church fights, neither denominational policy nor actions of denominational officials played a significant role in the outcome.

In a LCMS congregation, the retiring pastor who had been its leader for nearly two decades, expressed great reservations to his family and friends about its election of new pastor from district lists, saying in effect: “*Oh, you are going to have trouble with this pastor!*” The new pastor began using a “kind of liturgical renewal style,” changes liked by some but which also began to crystallize “first doubts” spread by the former pastor into more sustained efforts of his kin and associates to remove this pastor. It did not work; the dissidents left, but so did the pastor who had to endure this split.

The current pastor has been engaged in healing this congregation of about 150 active members, over age 45. The dissidents (mainly younger) left to begin another church within the LCMS, but not too successfully.

- A number of these people, sons of the former pastor and their families and friends, left this church and founded another church. This was not a daughter church; it was schismatic group (*Did the break-off church stay with LCMS?*) Yes, but the District really did not want to recognize them as a congregation because that is not the way it is done. ...They were stubborn. Finally they were given congregational status, but they are having trouble getting and keeping pastors. ...They want to run things; they want to run the pastor, so pastors just won't come. . People and pastor work together in our LCMS tradition. The congregations are autonomous; it is a strange polity. It is congregational, but

the congregations are united with a common purpose; if you move outside of that common purposed, you are no longer a part

This suggests a possible scenario in which this break-off congregation, little appreciated by the LCMS district, may go independent.

In a UCC example of internally generated conflicts leading to splits, its present pastor of this innercity Midwest congregation related the following split scenario. In 1995 this “landlocked” church had had over 800 members and was “bursting at the seams.” A long-range planning board, led by the then new senior pastor, who had been called in part to lead the congregation in reaching consensus, suggested that the whole church move into a likely growing suburb where they could expand facilities and numbers, but keep ownership of the innercity building for mission outreach. This proposal appealed to about two-thirds of the members; however, but the remaining third, comprising the most active members, vehemently stated their intention to remain as congregation in this innercity church building.

“Seeing the writing on the wall” the senior pastor departed for another job. His two associates ministers left soon after. The church then called an interim pastor, who could not handle the escalating conflict, leading to the *turning point* where:

- Finally, the major leadership and financial backers of the church, said: “We have to build a new church. We cannot stay here. So we are going to do it, and anybody who wants to do it too can come with us. Those who want to stay – well, you can stay, and you will die.” That was the feeling of it. ... Half of the worshipping congregation left; and they were the *younger* people.

He goes on to explain more of the ex-role developments that firmed the split:

- UCC nationally and regionally celebrated (the new church) and gave it lots of help, support and a forming pastor, who did an excellent job of working with them to start it up. Nothing (from the denomination) was supportive of the folks who wanted to stay behind in the old place. There was a lot of bitterness built up in the denomination, without a clear understanding of what was going

on with the part of the leadership that stayed behind... whittled down to 100-140 members at worship, with many in their late 50's and a lot of 80 year olds.

But the new church did not grow as expected. They have struggled to continue, also with about 130-140 people on Sunday. One of the reasons is because they are liberal. They went out with same agenda that we had: *to be a social action, open and affirming just peace church*. They plopped themselves down on a piece of farmland in the middle of what was going to become a very growing area. They are now surrounded on all sides of their ten acres by McMansions... The denomination has basically said to them, "You have got to do something different. This is not working. It has been ten years." (So the new church is trying to move again – find land elsewhere).

The Process of Exit , Exit Role, and Reversibility

In making final decision to leave a key role, as Ebaugh described for individuals, their cueing becomes more pointed to mobilize support, the alternative finalized, and the "ex-role" defined for outside associates. The ex-role will be viable for a period of time until associates no longer think of the individual as an "ex."³

Clergy interviewed who have made the decision to leave the denomination, typically report they developed strategies as to how best to "educate" the majority of the congregation about the wisdom of exiting. Getting board members and other congregational supporters to do the *cueing* of other members, helps make this a congregational rather than just clergy decision. This process of exiting can extend over months or years, completed when the use of the denominational resources and contribution to the denominational coffers are terminated. In illustration, the pastor of one formerly SBC congregation describes the exit process:

Southern Baptists cultivate a loyalty exceeding any other denomination I can think of to their denominational structure. There were some folks who just could not believe anything was wrong with the S BC, regardless of all evidence to

³ Ebaugh (1988:114) explains: "To be an ex is different from being a nonmember of a group. "Non-members do not carry with them the 'hangover identity' of a previous role.

the contrary. ...I had to be patient, and let things percolate... I had to lead people; I could not dictate to them.... (*How long did this process take?*) Between the time that I made the decision in my mind that I had to do something and reaching that point with the congregation - took a long time, seven or eight years. I was very gentle about it; I did not draw a line in the sand because I did not want to have the church split over it; and (in fact) just lost a trickle.

There is only so much a pastor, I could do. I had to work through other people, educate them, let them go out and talk to their friends, and say, "This is a deal for me." We told individual classes (particularly of young adults), "You can choose what literature you want to use." They started moving away from the Southern Baptist stuff - which was very troubling to some people, but it was hard to argue against each class choosing for themselves. Baptists are typically a feisty autonomous group of people... When we started beginning the process of breaking away, we moved away from using their curriculum and other materials produced by the National Convention. That was a big step in (avoiding) the weekly indoctrination... Then the real issue comes down to how much do you give the SBC cooperative program... I gave people *permission* to decrease the amount of money we were giving nationally and internationally and (instead) fund some local ministries and initiatives.

This account of a relatively smooth exit process, results in a slower adoption of and now blurring of the *exit role*, as this congregation is happily ensconced in its independent status with ties to the Cooperative Baptists for mission work. Given this amount of consideration and time taken to leave the denomination, however, it is unlikely that the decision would be reversed in the future to rejoin the SBC.

In the case of congregational splits described, the exit process was faster and angrier. The exit roles of both remnant and renegade congregations are still sharp, making reversibility also unlikely, even if both congregations remain in the denomination. This may be because at least in the remnant congregation the story of the split is retold for some years, as in the case of the UCC church that split:

"Every new person who joins (we get fifteen or twenty new people a year), after they hear the story (of the split) *which we tell them*, they say: "Well, why don't you get back together?" The denomination would not mind that; say having a single church with a multi-site. But that is not likely to happen.

Reversibility of congregational splits and denominational defections is probably as unlikely among congregations as Ebaugh found for ex-nuns.

POSTSCRIPT

These data and interviews suggest that there are many reasons for congregations to split, change denominations, or go independent. Currently, newspaper accounts depict church divisions as a mainline problem, particularly for old-time members who object to ordaining homosexuals or their congregation being a welcoming church for gays and lesbians.

Our data, especially that for the 1995-2005 period, paints a starkly different picture. It shows apostate congregations with strong and conservative convictions *in conservative denominations* and with younger than average memberships, and predominantly in Southern cities. Both the younger membership (the “church as choice” generation) and the Southern location (“Baptist” culture) hint at an elevated sense of autonomy and distrust of large, scale bureaucratic authority. Notably strong convictions are arguably a necessary condition for those willing to pay the price of dislocation. Our data further suggest that analogies between the nature of individual apostates and congregational apostates are tenuous, at best, the major exception being the significant of “younger” in each instance.

The literature on the process of individual disengagement and switching, however, is helpful for framing and understanding the processes of congregational apostasy. The importance of a “turning point event” is one of those helpful ideas. Or perhaps in some instances, “final straw” better captures the essence of why simmering

disgruntlement or conflict breaks forth into apostasy. Indeed, the notion may help explain why our analysis contrasts with the “gay” focus of recent headline reports on schismatic religious inclinations.

In the scenario we are imagining, our analysis captures the more typical fluidity of American evangelicalism - think Baptist, Pentecostal or Bibby’s (1983) “circulation of the saints” in comparison to oldline Protestantism. However, the 2004 UCC Synod vote in favor of “marriage equality” and 2004 Episcopal ordination of an openly gay bishop served as “turning point events” that were only first being felt when our 2005 survey was in the field. If this is the case, then future congregational surveys that provide a window into organizational apostasy should show at least a blip, if not a surge, of oldline Protestant splits and changes of affiliation. But unlike Dean Kelley (1977) who couldn’t find any liberal churches that were strict, our data already shows that congregational apostasy is not a total monopoly of the right. Conservative congregations may have a stronger predisposition toward schism in today’s religious ethos. Yet, there are at least a few strong willed, liberal congregations that also are willing to pay the price of apostasy – when it’s the rational choice!

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