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Church Satisfaction among Rural Minnesota Protestant Lay Leaders

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Abstract This paper reports on general church satisfaction among a sample of rural Minnesota Protestant lay leaders. The author examined the relationship between the dependent variable general church satisfaction with eight independent variables divided into three dimensions of church life. Prominent findings indicate that the vitality of churches is associated with higher levels of church satisfaction among the lay leaders. Additionally, older lay leaders reported greater general satisfaction with their church than did younger lay leaders. However, church contentment is not significantly connected to the mere size of the congregation, type of denomination, gender of the lay leader, or status of the pastor. The author concludes that church satisfaction among the lay leaders in this study is closely contingent upon the internal and external robustness of the church.

INTRODUCTION

The demise of the rural church has been lamented for about as long as there has been the field of rural sociology. At the turn of the nineteenth century, G. T. Nesmith (1903) outlined difficulties besetting the rural community and the rural church. A little over a decade later, Anton Boisen (1916) identified prominent factors associated with the decline of the country church. Despite the gloomy forecasts of the past century, rural churches and rural communities continue. Indeed, Robert Wuthnow (2005) reported that over a three-decade period, a number of rural churches in Kansas actually remained relatively robust despite sharp general population decline.

Nevertheless, most scholars report that rural churches, like rural communities, face many challenges (Hassigner, Holik and Benson 1988; Lischer 2001). The demographic changes

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of the past fifty years have resulted in perplexing issues that test the vitality of churches serving rural congregations (Rathge 2005; Rathge and Goreham 1989). Compared to suburban churches, rural churches are congregated by the less affluent, greater numbers of the elderly, and shrinking numbers of young families (Tevis 1999). In fact, previous scholarly treatments of rural churches have tended to concentrate on these very themes. Namely, researchers have largely focused on the difficulty in church sustainability produced by declining rural populations, stressful economic conditions that threaten the viability of rural churches, and highly mobile and/or ill-prepared clergy who serve rural congregations (Goreham 2001; Huffman and Ferguson 2003; Osowski and Grant 2004; Rathhge and Goreham 1989; Rodehaver 1983).

Curiously, while a variety of structural and demographic factors impacting rural churches have been routinely examined, rarely is the nature of church satisfaction among rural parishioners considered (Francis and Littler 2003). In one of the few such studies, Mary Jo Neitz (2005) found a complex and dualistic church experience among rural churchgoers. Utilizing ethnographic research with six Missouri rural churches, Neitz discovered that while church lay leaders readily lamented the declining number of congregation members, they also were generally satisfied and even optimistic about their local church. That is, the participants were keenly aware of the pervasive structural, economic, and demographic challenges facing their churches. Yet, many remained insistent that their churches were viable as long as the "Faithful Remnant" remained true to their community and calling (Neitz 2005:244). Neitz eloquently concludes:

> The dominant image of the rural church in the media, and in most people's minds, is of the simple white building with a steeple, the heart of the community, the heart of vanishing America of two-parent families and family farms. Described thus as a declining institution, it is implicitly embedded in economic and demographic change, and it has a moral consequence, the loss of a sacred and a place-based way of life. In this mythic image, the declining rural church was the heart of what was good and true about the United States, and we may be losing it forever. The irony of course is that the nostalgic image of the rural

> country church past prevents us from seeing what are really there – both the challenges and possibilities. (2005:245)

This paper examines the nature of church satisfaction among a sample of rural Minnesota lay leaders. Using existing data collected through the *Rural Ministry Project*, this research explores the relationship between general church satisfaction and three dimensions of church life. Moreover, each of these dimensions includes specific independent variables. Specifically, these include: *Church Dynamics* (independent variables: type of denomination; size of church membership; and perceived church growth); *Church Lay Leaders* (independent variables: gender of lay leaders and age of lay leaders); *Church Operations* (independent variables: status of pastor, identification of lay leadership training; and church/community involvement through participation in a community food shelf).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There have been a number of important investigations on the nature of American church life in general. However, there is currently little in the existing literature on factors associated with church satisfaction among rural churchgoers (Neitz 2005). As such, a general understanding of church satisfaction must be extrapolated from the existing literature.

Church Dynamics: Type of Denomination, Church Size, and Church Growth

There is considerable discussion on the nature of theological orientation, the size of congregations, and the nature of church growth in American religious life. Most notable in this regard is the contrast between growing evangelical congregations and declining mainline congregations (Iannaconne 1994; Kelley 1977). Some have contended that more conservative, evangelical churches owe their growth to the strictness of their theological teachings (Kelley 1977). That is, in an age of social anomie, conservative churches provide an unambiguous

moral sense of direction. Resultantly, such churches draw people to their doors (Stark and Finke 2000).

However, recent research suggests that the mere strictness of a church's theological doctrine is too simplistic as an explanation of evangelical church growth (Perrin and Mauss 1993; Roozen 2002; Tamney 2005). For instance, in a series of qualitative studies on church life, Joseph Tamney (2002; 2005) has found that church growth is due more to the emotional intrinsic rewards they offer than providing overly doctrinaire teachings. Specifically, he observes:

> More generally, people go to ... conservative churches to be loved, to be accepted as they are, to get excited by the working of the Holy Spirit – in short to feel good. Church going means being with people who do not look down on you, who give you emotional support, and who can be expected to help out materially. The converts wanted to be in family-like groups, a kind of social environment not easily found in an urban environment (Tamney 2002:299).

Tamney's work establishes the centrality of personal happiness in church life. Simply put, people select specific churches to attend because they make them feel good. Moreover, presumably, there is a connection between the viability of a local church and the nature of the morale of its members. That is, reasonably one might expect that parishioners who are more content congregate robust churches (McGaw, 1979; Perrin, Kennedy, and Miller 1997). Thus, this investigation examined the relationship between church size, perceived church growth, and type of denomination (evangelical or mainline) with church satisfaction.

Church Lay Leaders: Gender of Lay Leaders and Age of Lay Leaders

American churches are more likely to be congregated by women as opposed to men and older individuals as opposed to younger individuals (Black 2008; Dart 2002). Further, not only do women have higher rates of church attendance than do men (Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt and Conger 1999; Smith 1998), but they also display much greater levels of personal religiosity

(Stark 2002). The explanations for the gender difference in religiosity range from the notion that women seek religious compensation for a socially subservient position (Christopher et al. 1971; Turner 1991) to the alleged tendency for men to engage in more risk taking behaviors and attitudes (Miller and Hoffmann 1995; Roth and Kroll 2007).

Whatever the reasons for the gender difference in religiosity, it is unclear whether this difference translates to greater church satisfaction among women. It seems logical enough that if women attend church in greater numbers and display higher levels of religiosity than men, then they should also receive greater emotional satisfaction and, thus, hold more favorable views of their churches.

Previous research has also found that church attendance is connected to improved physical and mental health among older individuals (Idler 1987; Musick 1996; Roff et al. 2006; Strawbridge et al. 2001). Additionally, greater levels of life satisfaction have been found to be associated with higher levels of religiosity among the elderly (Neill and Kahn 1999). Once again while little research exists on the relationship between age and church satisfaction, past scholarly efforts clearly demonstrate that older individuals gain much benefit from church attendance. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the elderly might be more content with their churches than younger churchgoers.

Church Operations: Status of Pastors, Lay Leadership Training, and Community Involvement

Pastors exert tremendous influence on the church experiences of their members (Carroll 2006). The leadership style, level of pastoral training, even the gender and age of pastors all impact the manner in which they serve their congregations (Christopher 1994; McDuff and Mueller 1999). For many rural churches, the status of their pastor's ministerial position is important. That is, pastors who occupy part-time versus full-time pastoral status or who are not ordained ministers at all but rather selected lay ministers appointed to serve congregations

impact church life (Lischer 2001; Rodehaver 1983). Thus, one of the objectives of this research effort was to explore the relationship between ordination status of the pastor with levels of church satisfaction.

Additionally, there is evidence to indicate that churches operating leadership training for their members may be related to church contentment among parishioners (Anderson 1986; McGavran and Arn 1977). Lummis (2004) reports that younger men in particular feel appreciated in their participation in church leadership. Interestingly, the leadership position held by the women in his study made no difference in their feeling of greater appreciation. Therefore, an objective of the author was to examine the relationship between an identification of lay leadership training and levels of church satisfaction.

Previous scholarly efforts have established that community involvement is related not only to levels of religiosity but also to a sense of purpose in one's life (Becker and Dhinga 2001). Specifically, volunteerism is thought to put action into one's faith (Wilson and Janoski 1995). For example, Park and Smith (2000) argue that participation in volunteer efforts among churchgoers enhances personal faith and values. From these findings, it is easy to presume that a church's involvement in community activities should be related to church satisfaction among lay leaders.

FOCUS OF ANALYSIS

Based on a review of the existing literature, this investigation examined four specific research questions:

Research Question #1

What factors are significantly associated with general church satisfaction among the lay leaders of this sample?

Research Question #2

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Dynamics and levels of general church satisfaction?

Research Question #3

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Lay Leaders and levels of general church satisfaction?

Research Question #4

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Operations and levels of general church satisfaction?

METHOD

The Association of Religion Data Archives housed at Pennsylvania State University provided the data for this investigation. Thus, this paper presents secondary analysis of previously collected data. Originally, Lance Barker and his associates gathered these data in 1990 as part of the *Rural Ministry Project* funded by the Lilly Foundation (Barker 1991). An objective of the *Rural Ministry Project* was to examine nature and needs of rural churches located throughout Minnesota.

The investigators randomly selected rural churches and their pastors from the directories provided by ten denominations: Assemblies of God, Baptist General Conference, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Free Church of America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. The *Rural Ministry Project* included two components. One component, referred to as the "Pastors' Survey," included a survey instrument provided to church pastors. This part of the *Rural Ministry Project* elicited information on the rural pastor's ministerial experience. The second component, referred to as the "Lay Leaders' Survey,"

involved a survey instrument provided to rural church lay leaders and gathered information on the views and experiences of rural church life among selected lay leaders.

The researchers supplied the pastors randomly selected in the sample with both the Pastors' Survey and the Lay Leaders' Survey. These pastors then provided the Lay Leaders' Survey to an individual they considered to be a significant lay leader in their church. Ultimately, 340 Lay Leaders' Survey instruments were distributed with 202 of those returned. Thus, the Lay Leaders Survey resulted in a 59 percent response rate. However, this analysis only utilizes the data provided by the Protestant lay leaders. As a result, the author constructed a data set consisting of 156 Protestant lay leaders out of the 202 lay leader cases found in the data set provided by the Association of Religion Data Archives.

There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages when doing secondary analysis with existing data. The convenience of having accessible data must be weighed against the restrictions imposed by what data were actually collected, the way those data were collected, and the manner in which they were coded. As such, researchers using secondary analysis face limitations in the way they can treat and analyze the data available to them. The researcher encountered some of those limitations with this analytical effort. For instance, some ratio level data were coded using interval or even nominal coding schemes. As a result, the author necessarily treated two such variables as dummy variables (i.e. age and size of church membership).

The researcher measured all the independent variables using a single item from the questionnaire. For instance, a survey item that identified whether or not the local church participated in a community food shelf served as an indicator of church involvement in the community. The dependent variable, *church satisfaction*, was created using a scale consisting of two questionnaire items.

The variables were operationalized and measured in the following manner:

Independent Variables

Church Dynamics (three independent variables)

Denomination (DEN) – the identification of the type of Protestant denomination identified by the respondent (coded: 1 = mainline denomination; 2 = evangelical denomination).[1]

Church Size (CSZ) – the self-reported size of the local church membership (1 = 49 or fewer; 2 = 50 to 99; 3 = 100 to 149; 4 = 150 to 199; 5 = 200 to 249; 6 = 250 to 299; 7 = 300 or more).

Church Growth (GRO) – Perception of church growth in the past five years (1 = decline; 2 = same; 3 = increase).

Church Lay Leaders (two independent variables)

Gender (GEN) – the gender identification offered by the respondent (coded: 1 = male, 2 = female).

Age (AGE) – the self-reported age indicated by the respondent (coded: 1 = 25 to 34 years; 2 = 35 to 44 years; 3 = 45 to 54 years; 4 = 55 to 64 years; 5 = 65 to 74 years; 6 = 75 years or older).

Church Operations (three independent variables)

Status of the Pastor (SOP) – Identification of the ordination status of the local pastor (1 = lay pastor or ordained, part-time pastor; 2 = ordained, full-time pastor).

Leadership Training for the Laity (LTL) – Identification of leadership training for the laity in the local church (1 = no; 2 = yes).

Community Involvement (CMI) – Identification of the participant of the local church in a community food shelf (1 = no; 2 = yes).

Dependent Variable

General Church Satisfaction (GST) – the score on a scale created by combining two questionnaire items (see Table 1).

Table 1 General church satisfaction scale and reliability coefficient

General Church Satisfaction Scale (Reliability = .758)

1) How satisfied are you in being a part of your congregation?
- 1 = very unsatisfied
- 2 = unsatisfied
- 3 = somewhat unsatisfied
- 4 = neutral
- 5 = somewhat satisfied
- 6 = satisfied
- 7 = very satisfied

2) Which of the following best represents your congregation's sense of satisfaction?
- 1 = very unsatisfied
- 2 = unsatisfied
- 3 = somewhat unsatisfied
- 4 = neutral
- 5 = somewhat satisfied
- 6 = satisfied
- 7 = very satisfied

The researcher created the dependent variable *General church satisfaction (GCS)* by combing two questionnaire items from the Lay Leaders Survey (personal church satisfaction and perception of the congregation's level of satisfaction). This scale performed well under the test of reliability evidencing a Cronbach's reliability coefficient of .758.

Statistical Procedures

Statistical analysis of the data consisted of Pearson correlation, regression analysis, *t*–tests, and analysis of variance. Specifically, the researcher employed Pearson correlation and

regression to examine Research Question #1. These procedures allowed the researcher to determine the nature of the strength of relationships between the various independent variables and general church satisfaction. Similarly, the researcher utilized either *t*–tests or analysis of variance to determine any statistically significant differences between the categories of the independent variables and general church satisfaction.

FINDINGS

Research Question #1

What factors are significantly associated with general church satisfaction among the lay leaders of this sample?

The zero-order correlations and regression analysis reveal identical findings. The independent variables church growth (GRO), lay leaders age (AGE), leadership training for the laity (LTL), and church involvement in the community (CMI) all are significantly related to higher levels of general church satisfaction (GST) (Tables 2 and 3). Specifically, general church satisfaction is significantly correlated with the identification of a growing church (.179, $p<.05$); age of lay leaders (.239, $p<.01$); leadership training for the laity (.211, $p<.01$); and church involvement in the community (.186, $p<.05$). Additionally, the regression analysis confirms the strength of these associations. These same four independent variables significantly predict the level of general church satisfaction (GRO, 193, $p<.01$; AGE, .254, $p<.01$; LTL, .250, $p<.01$; and CMI, .198, $p<.01$).

Thus, the findings reveal that four of the independent variables are significantly associated with general church satisfaction among the rural lay leaders included in this sample. Just as importantly, the findings also demonstrate that four of the independent variables are not significantly associated with general church satisfaction. Type of denomination (DEN), church size (CSZ), gender of lay leaders (GEN), and status of the pastor (SOP) all were not

Table 2 Zero-order correlations

Variables	GST	DEN	CSZ	GRO	GEN	AGE	SOP	LTL	CMI
GST	1.00								
Church Dynamics									
DEN	-.012	1.00							
CSZ	.055	-.472**	1.00						
GRO	.179*	.082	.100	1.00					
Church Lay Leaders									
GEN	.091	-.111	-.045	-.028	1.00				
AGE	.239**	-.088	.009	-.056	.219**	1.00			
Church Operations									
SOP	-.032	-.116	.277**	.043	-.009	.032	1.00		
LTL	.211**	.036	.109	.050	.053	-.092	.078	1.00	
CMI	.186*	-.263**	.223*	-.091	.030	.175*	.104	-.011	1.00

*p<.05, **p<.01

GST = General Church Satisfaction
DEN = Type of Denomination
CSZ = Church Size
GRO = Church Growth
GEN = Gender of Lay Leader
AGE = Age of Lay Leader
SOP = Ordination Status of the Pastor
LTL = Leadership Training for the Laity
CMI = Community Involvement

significantly correlated or evidenced significant predictive ability with the dependent variable.

These are noteworthy findings given that the existing literature suggests otherwise.

Table 3 Regression analysis

Variable	Unstandardized Beta	Standardized Beta
Church Dynamics		
DEN	.501	.089
CSZ	.070	.068
GRO	.855	.193**
Church Lay Leaders		
GEN	.304	.071
AGE	.461	.254**
Church Operations		
SOP	-.671	-.104
LTL	1.115	.250**
CMI	.862	.198**

R	R^2	R^2 *Adjusted*
.465	.217	.169

*p<.05, **p<.01

DEN = Type of Denomination
CSZ = Church Size
GRO = Church Growth
GEN = Gender of Lay Leader
AGE = Age of Lay Leader
SOP = Status of the Pastor
LTL = Leadership Training for the Laity
CMI = Community Involvement

Research Question #2

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Dynamics and levels of general church satisfaction?

One of the three independent variables included in the dimension *Church Dynamics* evidences a significant difference in levels of general church satisfaction (Tables 4 and 5). Only

Table 4 *t*-test - Independent variables and general church satisfaction

	Type of Denomination *DEN*	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***N***	
	Mainline	11.55	2.15	128	
General Church Satisfaction *GST*					*t* = .143, n.s.
	Evangelical	11.48	2.02	25	
	Gender of Lay Leader *GEN*	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***N***	
	Male	11.35	2.38	78	
General Church Satisfaction *GST*					*t* = -1.13, n.s.
	Female	11.73	1.83	75	
	Lay Leaders Training *LTL*	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***N***	
	No	10.98	2.50	60	
General Church Satisfaction *GST*					*t* = -2.65, *p*<.01
	Yes	11.90	1.78	92	
	Status of Pastor *SOP*	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***N***	
	LayPastor/Part-Time	11.72	1.78	18	
General Church Satisfaction *GST*					*t* = .394, n.s.
	Full-Time	11.51	2.17	135	
	Community Involvement *CMI*	***Mean***	***S.D.***	***N***	
	No	11.08	2.08	65	
General Church Satisfaction *GST*					*t* = -2.33, *p*<.05
	Yes	11.88	2.11	88	

in the perception on church growth (GRO) is there significantly different levels of satisfaction among the lay leaders of this study. A test of analysis of variance reveals that those lay leaders who indicated that their church experienced growth displayed higher levels of general church satisfaction compared to those who viewed their church growth as stable or declining ($F = 2.94$, $p<.05$). However, levels of satisfaction among the lay leaders did not significantly differ among

Table 5 Analysis of variance - Independent variables and general church satisfaction

	N	*Mean*	*S.D.*		*Sum of Squares*	*Df*	*Mean Square*	*F*
Size of Church *CSZ*								
49 or fewer	13	11.62	1.98	Between Groups	27.19	6	4.53	.994, n.s.
50 to 99	21	11.10	2.47					
100 to 149	25	11.00	2.31	Within Groups	652.29	143	4.56	
150 to 199	18	12.39	1.65					
200 to 248	17	11.65	2.23					
250 to 299	8	11.00	3.85					
300 or more	48	11.62	1.63					
Total	150	11.51	2.14	Total	679.48	150		
Church Growth *GRO*								
Decline	21	11.00	1.97	Between Groups	26.15	2	13.08	2.94, $p<.05$
Same	115	11.45	2.19					
Increase	14	12.71	1.44	Within Groups	653.34	147	4.45	
Total	150	11.51	2.14	Total	679.49	149		
Age of Lay Leader *AGE*								
35 to 44	5	10.20	2.59	Between Groups	46.44	4	1.35	2.01, $p<.05$
45 to 54	36	11.00	2.26					
55 to 64	35	11.46	2.19	Within Groups	622.06	141	.67	
65 to 74	35	11.37	2.26					
75 and over	35	12.40	1.54					
Total	146	11.51	2.15	Total	668.50	145		

the type of denomination of the church (DEN) (t = .143, n.s.) or by the size of the church (CSZ) (F = .994, n.s.).

Research Question #3

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Lay Leaders and levels of general church satisfaction?

There does appear to be an age but not a gender difference in levels of church satisfaction among these rural lay leaders (Table 4). In fact, the male and female lay leaders displayed remarkably similar levels of church satisfaction. The mean average on general church satisfaction was 11.35 among the male lay leaders and the mean average for female lay leaders was 11.73. The t-test analysis confirmed no significant difference in the level of church satisfaction along gender lines (t = -1.13, n.s.).

However, there is a significant difference in church satisfaction among the age groupings (Table 5). Specifically, lay leaders 75 years and older displayed much higher levels of church satisfaction than lay leaders 35 to 44 years old. The difference in mean scores is itself revealing. The mean average on church satisfaction was 12.40 for lay leaders 75 and older while the mean average was only 10.20 for lay leaders 35 to 44 years old (F = 2.01, p<.05). This is an important finding as the literature does not speak directly to such an age difference in levels of church satisfaction but does indicate that such a pattern might exist. This research provides empirical evidence for an age difference in general church satisfaction among the rural lay leaders included in this analysis.

Research Question #4

Is there a difference in the variables related to Church Operations and levels of general church satisfaction?

Two of the independent variables related to *Church Operation* are associated with significantly different levels of general church satisfaction (Tables 4 and 5). Only on the variable status of pastor (SOP) is there no significant difference in church satisfaction (t = .394, n.s.).

However, there is a significant difference in levels of church satisfaction among the lay leaders and an identification of lay leadership training (t = -2.65, p<.01). Not surprisingly perhaps, the lay leaders in churches with lay leadership training programs were more satisfied with their churches than those lay leaders in churches without such training efforts. Likewise, there is a significant difference in church satisfaction and whether or not the church is actively involved in the community (t = -2.33, p<.05). The lay leaders in churches that participate in a community food shelf were more satisfied with their churches than those who attended churches that were not involved in these community activities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this analysis consistently indicate that four independent variables are associated with levels of church satisfaction among this sample of rural lay leaders. Namely, higher levels of church satisfaction is connected to being a member of a congregation that is identified as growing, a church that operates lay leadership training while also being actively involved in the community, and being an older lay leader. In every statistical procedure employed by the researcher, these factors were significantly related to higher levels of church satisfaction.

Taken together these findings form a profile of rural church satisfaction among lay leaders. In many respects attending a robust church as measured by a growing congregation, active leadership development and community outreach all are important in fostering contentment. Conversely, type of church denomination, size of the congregation, or even status of the pastor do not appear to not make as much of a difference to lay leader satisfaction.

The implications for rural congregations are obvious. In essence, as least as far as lay leaders are concerned, happy churches are engaged churches. In fact, the size of the congregation is not as important as what the church is doing both internally and externally. However, as most observers note, as the stressors facing rural communities persist, greater demands on rural churches will also mount. Remaining an energetic church in rural communities will present both challenges and opportunities for rural pastors, lay leaders, and the congregations they serve.

[1]The author treated five denominations as mainline churches – Episcopal Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Presbyterian Church; U.S.A.; United Church as Christ; and United Methodist Church. Four denominations were treated as evangelical churches – Assemblies of God; Baptist General Conference; Christian and Missionary Alliance; and Evangelical Free Church of America.

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