

## **Trends in Church Hopping / Church Shopping in America: A Case Study in Upstate New York**

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Church shopping and church hopping are two different, yet related activities that have received research interest. As a member of many congregations and churches as a result of personal relocations across Canada and the United States, I have become interested in this growing phenomenon that occurs across the country and among the general public. There are reasons other than relocation that must explain this behaviour. Indeed, church shopping is a behaviour that tends to happen in the fall, as residents return to their regular activities, begin school, and have relocated to a new area. The tendency of shopping for a church may also occur at other times, especially among people who cannot find a church they remain happy with; this in turn can become church hopping. This refers to the behaviour where people attend several churches at the same time without the desire to remain loyal to one congregation. According to Amanda Phifer, “Numbers from the Barna Research Group support that theory: Each year fourteen, or one out of every seven, adults changes churches. And seventeen per cent, or one out of every six, adults attends a carefully chosen handful of churches on a rotating basis.”<sup>1</sup> This paper looks at this process in two congregations in upstate New York – the New Paltz Church of the Nazarene and Grace Community Free Evangelical Free Church of Lake Katrine – and reports on the findings of this survey.

***Methodology***

With the aid of an online survey instrument – zoomerang.com – I was able to establish an online questionnaire with a total of seventeen multiple choice and open-ended questions, aimed at finding out how common church shopping/church hopping is in some Upstate New York congregations. I initially contacted the pastors of five churches – the New Paltz Church of the Nazarene, Grace Community Evangelical Free Church in Lake Katrine, St. Peter’s Catholic Church in Rosendale, as well as Catholic churches in Albany, NY and Rochester, NY. Two evangelical congregations allowed participation after church elders and pastors met to discuss the project. It may also have helped to have rapport with the pastors as a result of personal association with both churches. Unfortunately, all three Catholic churches declined to participate. A response from the St. Peter’s Catholic Church simply stated that “We do not keep that information [e-mail addresses]. Even if we did, I would not give that information out without their [parishioners] permission.”<sup>2</sup>

After obtaining church membership lists and contacting each available e-mail address, I asked members of the congregation to visit an online questionnaire and complete the survey. The survey was begun 17 March and was completed or closed on 20 April 2005. During the five-week period, a total of 28 members of the Church of the Nazarene were contacted, which resulted in ten responses for a 36 per cent response rate. A total of 100 contacts were made with members of Grace Community Church, from which a total of 24 individuals participated for a response rate of 22 per cent. An earlier pilot questionnaire, which involved only twelve questions was also sent to members of Grace Community Church between 8 February and 8 March 2005 and received a higher response rate with a total of 42 completed questionnaires representing a 38 per cent return rate. However, for comparison, I will only analyze briefly the findings obtained from the longer questionnaire that received responses from the two evangelical churches. Before analyzing the findings, it is important to understand a little about the location and history of these two congregations.

***The Church of the Nazarene (CN)***

New Paltz, NY was founded in 1677 by French Huguenots who sought refuge in America. The town of New Paltz is well known for its

Dutch history, and many of the seventeenth-century stone buildings still stand today and have been designated as National Historical landmarks. Many of the historic Dutch homes are still inhabited by descendants of the early Dutch settlers.<sup>3</sup> New Paltz is located along the Wallkill River that flows northward parallel to the Hudson River, some ninety miles north of New York City, roughly between New York City and Albany.

The Church of the Nazarene takes its name from Jesus who was known as “the Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23). Nazarenes hold to the orthodox Christian beliefs expressed in the Apostles' Creed. Nazarenes also value the Protestant expression of the Christian faith, especially as formulated and preached by John Wesley. The Church of the Nazarene is an evangelical denomination of over 13,000 churches and over one million members with churches and missions in 146 world areas.<sup>4</sup>

The New Paltz Church of the Nazarene was organized and dedicated in 1963. During the tenure of Pastor David Trauffer, who has led the congregation since 1972, the congregation has fluctuated in size. Today, the congregation is diverse ethnically, educationally and economically. Significant ministries of the church today include: a mission to renew the Church of the Nazarene in Kingston, NY; a ladies fellowship; a prison ministry; a nursing home ministry; a nursery school ministry; and a food ministry. During the past thirty-three years, there have been several major building projects that have enlarged the sanctuary and fellowship hall, provided office space, developed handicapped accessible facilities, and expanded church parking.<sup>5</sup> The New Paltz Church of the Nazarene is composed of about 60 families, and average Sunday attendance involves some ninety people.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Grace Community Evangelical Free Church (GCC)***

Lake Katrine is actually a neighborhood that was founded as a result of the 1879 establishment of the Town of Ulster.<sup>7</sup> Lake Katrine borders the first state capital of Kingston, NY to the south, and is located 105 miles north of New York City along the Esopus Creek.

Grace Community Church was founded in 1958 when a total of twenty-eight members initially gathered as a Sunday school meeting and later incorporated themselves as a church. In 1978, the church became affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America, which was formed in 1950 by the merger of two church bodies: the Swedish Evangelical Free Church and the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Free Church Association.

Both groups had been birthed in the revival movements of the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

According to the church's website, "Grace Community Church has always held firmly to the evangelical faith, as expressed in its Statement of Faith. We remain thoroughly committed to the authority of the inspired Word of God, as found in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. We believe that salvation from sin and death is found only through personal faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup> The congregation has more adherents than official members. There are approximately 500 active attendees, 130 active members, and a Sunday morning worship attendance of about 350 in three services. This places the church in an extreme minority of churches, as 75 per cent of America's churches have fewer than seventy-five attendees on a given Sunday. In fact, 95 per cent of churches in America average 200 attendees or less each week. Only 5 per cent of churches in America have over 200 attendees, and less than 1 per cent have more than 1000.<sup>10</sup> According to Pastor Sam Rodenhizer, the church has the largest attendance in the Kingston area.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the growing numbers, the church is constructing a new sanctuary near the present site to accommodate the large congregation.

**Table 1: Respondent Age**

Age	Nazarene #	Nazarene %	Grace CC #	Grace CC %
<b>18-30</b>	0	0	1	4
<b>31-40</b>	0	0	4	17
<b>41-50</b>	4	40	15	63
<b>51-60</b>	2	20	2	8
<b>61-70</b>	2	20	2	8
<b>71-80</b>	2	20	0	0
<b>Over 80</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	10	100%	24	100%

### ***Findings***

In comparing the demographics of the responses of the two congregations, responses by women dominated the questionnaires. Women made up 60 per cent of the CN respondents and 63 per cent of the GCC respondents, while men made up 40 per cent of the CN and 38 per cent of the GCC respondents. In terms of age, 63 per cent of the respondents in the Grace Community Church were between the ages 41-50, while 40 per

cent of the respondents in the CN were in the same age category. More elderly respondents are found in the Church of the Nazarene (Table 1). Every respondent in both congregations was Caucasian. The dominant ethnic ancestry in both congregations involves European roots. Nazarene respondents drew from English (4), German (3), Dutch (2), Irish, Hungarian, Swedish, Austrian, French, Lithuanian, Swiss, and American Indian roots. Grace Community Church included Irish (9), German (6), Dutch (5), English (4), Italian (3), Scottish (2), Austrian, Scots-Irish, Welsh, Russian, French Canadian, Lithuanian, and Seneca ancestry.

In terms of education, a total of 40 per cent of the Nazarene respondents had achieved post-graduate education, while 33 per cent of those who attended Grace Community Church had achieved a similar educational standard (Table 2). The occupational background provides some interesting results. In the Church of the Nazarene, four respondents were retired (40 per cent), two were involved in education as a university professor and a teacher, another two were employed in the health care services, and two were in managerial positions. A total of five teachers were encountered in Grace Community Church, representing 21 per cent of all responses. The presence of teachers in the congregation is indeed striking. I can say this as a result of personal observation and knowledge of the congregants. Of the several other occupations noted, respondents listed themselves as homemakers (4), engineers (3), clerks and sales (3), nurses (2), computer programmers (2), along with an attorney, entrepreneur, secretary, and graphic artist.

**Table 2: What is the highest level of education you have achieved?**

<b>Education level</b>	<b>Nazarene #</b>	<b>Nazarene %</b>	<b>Grace CC #</b>	<b>Grace CC %</b>
<b>High School</b>	3	30	3	13
<b>College</b>	1	10	7	29
<b>University</b>	2	20	8	33
<b>Post-grad studies</b>	4	40	6	25
<b>TOTAL</b>	10	100%	24	100%

With the required demographic and descriptive analysis out of the way, I begin to look at church attendance and loyalty. Respondents in both congregations report high numbers with 50 per cent of respondents being loyal members who have attended the “present” church home for over ten

years. Within the Church of the Nazarene, one respondent has attended less than one year and two respondents have attended between one and five years at the New Paltz location. At Grace Community Church, one member has attended less than one year, while eight have attended between one and five years. The data suggests that attendance in the Grace Community Church involves a good proportion of congregants who joined the church fairly recently (Table 3).

**Table 3: How long have you attended your present “church home”?**

<b>Attended for:</b>	Nazarene #	Nazarene %	Grace CC #	Grace CC %
<b>Less than 1 year</b>	1	10	1	4
<b>Between 1-5 yrs</b>	2	20	8	33
<b>Between 5-10 yrs</b>	2	20	3	13
<b>More than 10 yrs</b>	5	50	12	50
<b>TOTAL</b>	10	100%	24	100%

In terms of travel to the current church and the distance respondents are willing to commute, the Church of the Nazarene shows that 60 per cent of the respondents live between one and five miles from the church, while twenty per cent travel from distances between five and ten miles. The Grace Community Church draws people from further afield. A total of thirteen per cent of all respondents live within one mile of the church, 25 per cent live between one and five miles away, 46 per cent live between five and ten miles away, and thirteen per cent travel from distances between ten and fifteen miles away from the church. While not reported in the survey, perhaps the furthest distance of all for attendance at the Grace Community Church is by a member from a distance of thirty-five miles, which takes some 45-50 minutes to travel!

In asking what church the respondent attended prior to the current “church home,” only nine responses were received. Three respondents in the Church of the Nazarene had attended another Nazarene church. In this case, the source was the Nazarene Church in Kingston, NY which had closed but is being reopened with the guidance and leadership of Pastor Trauffer. Other respondents arrived from a Mennonite church (2), while

others came from a Christian Missionary Alliance church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a Roman Catholic church. Finally, one respondent did not attend any other church prior to joining the Church of the Nazarene in New Paltz.

With the Grace Community Church, only nineteen individuals out of the sample of twenty-four respondents responded to the question of prior church attendance. The churches represented included "community" churches across the county (5), Baptist (4), Reformed churches (3), Methodist (2), Roman Catholic, Congregationalist, and the Salvation Army. Two respondents simply stated "none."

It appears that both congregations seem to attract people from other evangelical churches as well as from some of the mainline Protestant churches. Churches that are part of this mainline category include the United Church of Christ (historically known as the Congregationalists), the American Baptist Church (northern Baptists), the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Disciples of Christ. These mainline Protestant denominations are characterized by a generally progressive theology and openness both to other churches and, at times, even other religions. They have concerned themselves with not simply their own religious beliefs, but also American society as a whole. In recent decades their membership has dwindled, apparently due to their lack of attention to fundamental and doctrinal matters. In their place, fundamentalist churches have sprung up and become very popular.<sup>12</sup>

It is also possible, that some members of these mainline Protestant churches have also found evangelical congregations appealing as well. In a study comparing evangelical and mainline denominations, the following denominations were defined as evangelical: Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Independent Baptists, Black Protestants, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Church of Christ, Churches of God in Christ, Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, National Baptist Church, National Progressive Baptist Church, Pentecostal, and the Presbyterian Church in America.<sup>13</sup> Many theologians would include the conservative members of such mainline denominations as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Methodist Church.<sup>14</sup>

Questions can also be raised about the loss of Catholic parishioners who have joined evangelical churches. Traditionally Catholics hold to their own parishioners very well and loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church is generally high with few who leave. Why some leave this

traditionally strong church is a question that begs an answer. Does dissatisfaction with the Church cause departure? Is this another example of church shopping or church hopping? Geographic regionalism is also a key consideration, as stronger Catholic regions retain or lose their memberships. An example of this might involve the francophones of Quebec. Catholicism would thus remain strongest in the hearth areas where the Church has maintained a strong influence. Nevertheless, the movement of Catholics away from their faith should also be studied and needs to be understood.

One of the more relevant questions to examine church shopping/hopping is the number of churches the respondents may have attended regularly in the last ten years. For the Church of the Nazarene, it was noted that 80 per cent of the respondents had attended the current church, with only two respondents attending two churches. For the respondents in Grace Community Church, 50 per cent of the respondents have attended the current church regularly. Thirty-three per cent of the respondents had attended two churches, and 13 per cent had attended three churches. Only one respondent (4 per cent) had attended more than five churches in the past ten years. The result suggests that the membership of the Church of the Nazarene has remained loyal for a longer period of time, in comparison to the respondents of the Grace Community Church. To understand these patterns, a cross-tabulation with church attendance and years of residence provides some insights (Tables 4 and 5). In the case of the Nazarene Church, it is seen that the respondents who have attended two churches have also lived in more than one city. One respondent has lived in a total of two cities while the second respondent has lived in three cities over the past ten years (Table 4). Relocation for these individuals may thus be the prime reason for changing churches.

The experience of Grace Community Church indicates that while 50 per cent of respondents have attended the current church, eleven have lived in the same city (Table 5). One respondent indicated that s/he lived in more than five cities but has attended only one church regularly – perhaps a new member of the current church who had never attended a church before? It is also noted that three (13 per cent) of all respondents have lived in the same city but have attended two churches regularly, while two (8 per cent) of respondents have attended three churches while living in the same city. These individuals may fit the pattern of a church hopper, as defined earlier in the paper. Five (21 per cent) of all respondents have lived in two cities and have attended two churches, which



indicates stability and loyalty between residence and church affiliation. Still, there is one respondent who has lived in two cities and during the past ten years attended three churches. Finally, only one respondent indicated that s/he lived in more than five cities and attended more than five churches.

**Table 4: Church loyalty and residence over past 10 years (CN)**

In past 10 years: number of cities lived in	In the past 10 years, how many different churches have you attended regularly?						
	1	2	3	4	5	More than 5	Total
1	8	0	0	0	0	0	8
2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
3	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
More than 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	8	2	0	0	0	0	10

**Table 5: Church loyalty and residence over past 10 years (GCC)**

In past 10 years: number of cities lived in	In the past 10 years, how many different churches have you attended regularly?						
	1	2	3	4	5	More than 5	Total
1	11	3	2	0	0	0	24
2	0	5	1	0	0	0	16
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
More than 5	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	12	8	3	0	0	1	24

Another question that relates to “church hopping” asked whether the respondent had ever attended more than one church at the same time. Responses from the Church of the Nazarene indicated that only one (10 per cent) had ever attended more than one church at the same time. At

Grace Community Church, a total of eight (35 per cent) respondents had attended more than one church at the same time. Some of the reasons given for this included discontent in one church and no evening service; worship style; “Grace has no evening service so we often attend elsewhere then”; “Music more engaging in one than the other”; “My husband preferred his home church. I needed to be spiritual fed with more of a bible based contemporary worship style”; and “I was not pleased with the Pastors [sic] character and teaching of the church at that time but still was committed to my serving at my home church.” These statistics seem to support the data noted at the beginning of this paper and presented by the Barna Research Group regarding changing churches.

In trying to identify the factors that cause respondents to leave a church, it is not surprising to find that preaching and the lack of friendship shown by congregants were noted as the highest reasons for members leaving a congregation. Within the Church of the Nazarene, the top three reasons that respondents left included dissatisfaction due to the lack of friendship among members of the congregation (67 per cent), dissatisfaction with preaching (33 per cent), and dissatisfaction with their own spiritual growth (33 per cent). Within the Church of the Nazarene, the most dominant reason attracting respondents to a “church home” included preaching (90 per cent), friendship shown by congregants (90 per cent), and a desire for own spiritual growth (80 per cent). With Grace Community Church, similar reasons are encountered. Dissatisfaction with preaching dominated explanations for departing a church (61 per cent), and was followed by dissatisfaction with one’s own spiritual growth (39 per cent), and dissatisfaction with the lack of friendship among members of the congregation (35 per cent). The dominant reason that attracted the GCC respondent to a “home church” included preaching (92 per cent), a desire for one’s own spiritual growth (83 per cent), and the friendship shown by members of the congregation (71 per cent) (Tables 6 and 7). With the larger sample of forty-two respondents that was administered to GCC earlier in the Spring, similar results were found. From this earlier questionnaire, dissatisfaction with preaching dominated (60 per cent), followed by “other reasons” – such as lack of spiritual growth within the church itself, preference of “not shopping (remaining loyal to your church)” (43 per cent), and dissatisfaction with youth programming (35 per cent).

The final question asked about the loyalty to the current church home directly. The question “Do you see yourself moving away from your

current ‘church home’ in the future” received a fairly solid “no.” Eight (80 per cent) of the respondents at the Church of the Nazarene will remain loyal, with only one indicating that s/he will be moving on, and one respondent who declined to answer the question. With Grace Community Church, nineteen (70 per cent) respondents indicated that they will not move, while five (25 per cent) did not know. With a larger sample, the basic results may only be slightly different. This was seen in the earlier version of the questionnaire that was sent to GCC members and was responded to by a total of forty-two individuals.

**Table 6: What reasons push you away from a “church home”?**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>NC #</b>	<b>NC %</b>	<b>GCC #</b>	<b>GCC %</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Dissatisfied with preaching</b>	3	33	14	61	17 - 50%
<b>Dissatisfied with music programming</b>	2	22	5	22	7 - 21%
<b>Dissatisfied with youth programming</b>	1	11	7	30	8 - 24%
<b>Dissatisfied with Sunday School</b>	1	11	5	22	6 - 18%
<b>Dissatisfied with Adult ministries</b>	1	11	7	30	8 - 24%
<b>Dissatisfied with out-reach ministries</b>	1	11	4	17	5 - 15%
<b>Dissatisfied with recreational programs</b>	1	11	1	4	2 - 6%
<b>Dissatisfied with lack of friendship</b>	6	67	8	35	14 - 41%
<b>Dissatisfied with size of the church</b>	2	22	5	22	7 - 21%
<b>Dissatisfied with own spiritual growth</b>	3	33	9	39	12 - 35%
<b>Personal reasons</b>	2	22	6	26	8 - 24%
<b>Other</b>	3	33	5	22	8 - 24%

The responses in this earlier questionnaire indicated that 71 per cent would remain loyal, with two (5 per cent) who would definitely move away, and

nine (21 per cent) who did not know and one who declined to answer the question.

**Table 7: What reasons pull you towards a “church home”?**

Reason	NC #	NC %	GCC #	GCC %	Total
<b>Preaching</b>	9	90	22	92	31 - 91%
<b>Music programming</b>	6	60	15	63	21 - 62%
<b>Youth programming</b>	2	20	16	67	18 - 53%
<b>Sunday School</b>	3	30	14	58	17 - 50%
<b>Adult ministries</b>	2	20	13	54	15 - 44%
<b>Outreach ministries</b>	2	20	13	54	15 - 44%
<b>Recreational programs</b>	0	0	4	17	4 - 12%
<b>Friendship shown</b>	9	90	17	71	26 - 76%
<b>Size of the church</b>	3	30	5	21	8 - 24%
<b>Desire for own spiritual growth</b>	8	80	20	83	28 - 82%
<b>Personal reasons</b>	1	10	4	17	5 - 15%
<b>Other</b>	3	30	3	13	6 - 18%

### *Critique*

There are several drawbacks to this study that must be addressed here. Firstly, the size of the samples could be better. Participation by members of the Grace Community Church may be statistically quite good, but the number of respondents from the Church of the Nazarene is very small. If additional congregations from the same denominations were included in this study, there would be more statistical significance to these findings. Secondly, as the questionnaire was anonymous, there was no way to contact individuals, especially the few that have attended several churches at the same time, or have attended several churches over the years for qualitative material. It is extremely important to gather information from personal interviews to fully understand the behaviour of church shopping and church hopping. Thirdly, the questionnaire could be improved and made much more detailed. However, this may affect the participation rate, and was the reason why the current survey asked only seventeen questions. Indeed, the original pilot questionnaire contained only twelve questions. Fourthly, not every church member has an e-mail address or a computer. This can obviously skew the results and show bias

against many respondents who might otherwise have been interested in participating in this survey. However, the aim was to contact congregants quickly and easily. With this in mind, the online questionnaire proved successful. Still, more needs to be done. Contact with other mainline Protestant churches, as well as the Catholic Church would present interesting comparative material that may show trends not available for examination at this time.

### ***Conclusion***

This is a very brief empirical study of certain behaviour patterns among members of two evangelical churches. The fact that some studies indicate a distinct trend in the behaviour of church-goers is something that needs further study. The commodification of religion into a product that can be “shopped for,” is a trend that is a modern age phenomenon. Loyalty to churches used to be more common, and it is not surprising that the older members of both churches under study have remained more loyal to their home churches when compared to many of the younger members. In fact, of the seven over sixty-year olds in the two congregations, five (71 per cent) have attended only the current church regularly during the past ten years. Among the ten respondents who were under the age of forty, a total of seven (70 per cent) have attended more than one church over the past ten years. With more time and with more detailed analysis – both qualitative and quantitative – I hope to continue this work and bring more statistical detail to the findings.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Amanda Phifer, “Church hopping: Why choosing a church is so hard – and increasingly rare”; Faithworks Archives available from [http://www.faithworks.com/archives/church\\_hopping.htm](http://www.faithworks.com/archives/church_hopping.htm); accessed 10 May 2005.
2. Father Andrew Florez to Mika Roinila, 24 February 2005.
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5. David Trauffer, Pastor of New Paltz Church of the Nazarene. Correspondence, 29 July 2005. New Paltz, NY.
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