

5-2018

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Church Health: A Comparison of the Clergy and Laity Perspectives on the Church's
Discipleship, Spiritual Formation, and Outreach

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Bryn Stonehouse

May 2018

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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Abstract

The modern-day church is currently facing a multitude of problems, one being the clergy-laity gap. The clergy is comprised of any individual who is placed in an official ministerial position within the church. On the other hand, the laity represents anyone who is directly receiving ministry from the clergy. With these distinctions, differing perspectives have driven a divide between these two populations. This divide has been coined the clergy-laity gap. This research examines this gap through the examination of a church health assessment developed by Dr. Suzie Macaluso and Dr. Carley Dodd, alongside the Siburt Institute of Church Ministry at Abilene Christian University. This data set consists of ten congregations in Texas, Oklahoma, and Canada who are from the Church of Christ background. One component of this survey examines the church's discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach. Utilizing this data, the means of both the clergy, or elders, and the laity, or members, of the church were compared to examine if there were observed differences in their perceptions. Results showed that the means of the eldership were higher across the board when compared to the members. Moreover, the independent samples t-test resulted in five significant ($p < 0.05$ or $P < 0.01$) outcomes. Through these results, there is an observed difference in perceptions between the elders of the church and the church's members in the context of their discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach.

Introduction

The church is an influential component in the United States. Estimates show that there are nearly 350,000 religious organizations associated with the Christian faith residing in the country (Hartford Institute for Religious Research, 2006). Within these congregations, approximately 35.7% of the United States' population attend on a weekly basis (Pew Research Center, 2015). Each of these congregations and individuals are led by designated ministerial staff. Nevertheless, the modern-day church is currently facing a multitude of problems, one being the clergy-laity gap (Maddix, 2009). The clergy is comprised of any individual who is placed in an official ministerial position within the church. On the other hand, the laity represents anyone who is directly receiving ministry from the clergy. With these distinctions, differing perspectives have driven a divide between the two populations. This divide has been coined the clergy-laity gap. However, this divide has not always been present in the history of the church. The following literature review aims to explore the historical, Biblical and church, and political background that has led to this divide within congregations.

Literature Review

Historical Background

Clergy and laity distinctions in the Protestant church historically began with Martin Luther and his Treatises of 1520 (Maddix, 2009). In his examination of the Papacy in Rome, Luther (1995) describes all Christians as priests. In his eyes, all believers had the authority to carry out ministerial duties, like the teaching of the Word or praying over one another. Despite the radical theology Luther presented, the Reformation movement continued to “face a new threat, the breakdown of order and discipline in the

church” (Maddix, 2009, p. 220). As a result, Luther established the office of ministry as a component of the church. This meant that the church needed to elect an individual into the role of a minister who had authority over the teaching of the Word and the performance of the church’s sacraments. This began the clergy and laity distinctions within the church.

Biblical and Church Background

Despite Martin Luther’s efforts during the Reformation, the ministerial organization of the Roman Catholic church still remained. Fee (1989) explains this best when he states, “Historically the church seems to have fallen into a model that eventually developed a sharp distinction between the people themselves (laity) and the professional ministry (clergy), reaching its sharpest expression in the Roman Catholic communion, but finding its way into almost every form of Protestantism as well” (p. 3). Ultimately, as the modern-day church has evolved, the ministerial staff has become and “remained the linchpin of the church” (Bosch, 1991, p. 470). Research even notes that in some ways, leadership of Christian congregations has become a place of hierarchical status and power in which the laity are often not invited to participate (Fee, 1989).

However, the Biblical background of the church does not support this form of hierarchical organization. In the New Testament depiction of the church, all were considered to be the people of God. 1 Peter 2: 9 (English Standard Version) is one illustration of this Biblical identity, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” This was not only echoed in New Testament writing, but also in the Old Testament. Exodus 19:5 is a calling for the distinction of God’s people, “[Y]ou shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples.” Other translations word this as a

“chosen people.” As exemplified in these passages, there were no distinctions between the leaders and the people of the church. Therefore, no hierarchical distinctions within the church.

The clergy-laity terminology was not first observed until the post-Constantinian period (Kung, 1968). In a time when there was great tension between the church and the rest of society, there was also great tension within the church. In this time period, the clergies were promoted to a higher status due to their education, dress, and ceremonial tasks. As a result, they became a distinguished faction of the church that were viewed as much higher than their lay counterparts.

Political Background

Theological divisions between the clergy and laity were once highlighted by differing political motivations (Hadden, 1969). During the Civil Rights Movement era, clergy became heavily involved in the political movement. By doing this, they often lead their churches in a new direction with which the laity did not always agree with. In addition, clergy began questioning traditional beliefs which distanced themselves from the more conservative laity. Finally, in turn, the laity began to question the authority and leadership of their clergy. The laity saw the clergy as acting on their own accord, instead of the church body as a whole. During this politically charged era, clergy were finding themselves trying to reconcile their theological beliefs with the rapidly changing social context around them. On the other hand, laity appeared to be comfortable with the traditional beliefs they held.

Hadden (1969) was able to note the possible responses of the clergy once they recognized this tension with their laity through participant observations, as well as

denominational and national surveys. His results showed that there were four common responses to this tension: the clergy would pull back from the political and social activism, the clergy and laity holding more traditional beliefs would take authority over the church, the clergy and laity who were socially active would take over the church, or the clergy would leave the church to follow their political and social pursuits of justice. Of these, Hadden believed that the most likely response was for the clergy to leave the church.

Spiritual Formation in the Church

Literature on growth within the church tends to focus on denomination size and loyalty, the retention of members, and generational differences in priorities for the church. Very little research was found that focused on the spiritual growth of individual's. However, Gallagher and Newton (2009) conducted a study on spiritual growth within four different denominations to see its relationship with community and connectedness. Their results first indicated that there is variability across the denominations on the definition of spiritual formation. Each of the denominations included in this study presented spiritual formation in a way that was consistent with their own denominational backgrounds and cultures. Despite these deferring definitions, they all contained one key theme; spiritual formation was believed to be the process of growth from a place of perceived lesser to a place of perceived greater. The difference in this came in what each denomination believed was to be the measure of greater. For example, some of the congregations noted greater participation in prayer or church attendance as a priority for spiritual formation. Despite the differences among the denominations, their results indicated that the strength to which their sample could agree on certain core

aspects, the more a congregation felt that the environment promoted spiritual formation, community and spiritual capital, and religious identity.

Summary

The literature included in this research highlighted historical, Biblical, church, and political perspectives on the clergy-laity gap. Each of these four components provides unique perspectives into this division. In addition to this, spiritual formation within the church is also addressed by the literature. The literature review presents the idea that the understanding of spiritual formation is unique to each denomination. The more a congregation agreed on core aspects of this understanding, the more likely the congregation felt that the environment promoted spiritual formation, community, and identity. This literature review informed this research study as it seeks to examine the idea of the clergy-laity gap within the Church of Christ denomination in the specific areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach.

Theory

The relationship between the clergy and the laity exhibits ideals promoted by Karl Marx in his Conflict Theory (Emerson, Mirola, & Monohan, 2011). The Conflict Theory proposes that society is in a state of constant competition for limited resources. While there is constant tension, Marx believes it is necessary to maintain the social order. This tension can also be viewed in the church. Within the church, is a power struggle between the leadership of the church and its members. According to Marx, this power struggle is necessary in order to maintain the social order within the church. However, this competition may also lead to a disconnect between these two population. In turn, this may also result in differing perspectives on the health of the church.

Methodology

This study utilized anonymous data that was collected for a non-research purpose in order to answer the question, *are there differences in the perceived health of the church in the areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach between the elders and the members?* Quantitative secondary data from ten congregations from a Church of Christ background located in Texas, Oklahoma, and Canada was analyzed. The sample consisted of churches who have voluntarily paid to use this church health assessment service. Members of these churches then consented to participate in the research to examine the health of their individual church. There was a total of 58 elders who responded and 1,082 members. This totaled 1,140 respondents.

Dr. Suzie Macaluso and Dr. Carley Dodd, alongside the Siburt Institute of Church Ministry at Abilene Christian University, developed the Church Health Assessment. The assessment is used by churches to identify their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the results facilitate discussions about direction of the church and areas in need of improvement. For the purpose of this research, the survey responses and church identifiers are anonymous to the researcher in order to maintain confidentiality.

Using the data from the respondents of these ten churches, similarities and differences in the perceptions of the clergy (church leadership) and the laity (church members) on the health of their church was compared. The data utilized for this study specifically looked at the responses to the questions addressing the church's discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach from the congregations surveyed. This specific section of the survey is a series of nine statements, that target the three areas listed above, rated on a Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (see Appendix A for the

specific questions). An example of a statement from the survey is, “The congregation encourages engagement of the Scriptures.” Higher scores indicate higher perceived church health. After comparing the scores between the elders and members, descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests were ran through SPSS to analyze the responses. It was hypothesized that the eldership would perceive the health of the church in the three areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach in a more positive light than the membership.

Results

Demographic Findings

The Church Health Assessment asked respondents several demographic measurements. As seen in Table 1, the eldership of the churches included in this study are primarily older (52 respondents identified as 55 years old or older). On the other hand, the membership of the churches had a more equal distribution of ages. Despite this, the frequency of individuals who are older in age is still higher (620 respondents identified as 55 years old or older).

Table 1: Age Frequency (N=1109)							
	34 years old or younger	35 to 44 years old	45 to 54 years old	55 to 64 years old	65 to 74 years old	75 years old or older	Total
Elder/Shepherd	0	3	3	19	23	10	58
Member	106	126	199	256	218	146	1051
Total	106	129	202	275	241	156	1109

Moreover, as seen in Table 2, the eldership of the churches is predominately comprised of individuals who identify as male (56 respondents). However, for the members of these churches, respondents were predominantly female (607 respondents).

	Female	Male	Prefer Not to Say	Total
Elder/Shepherd	2	56	0	58
Member	607	395	48	1050
Total	609	451	48	1108

As illustrated in Table 3, both the eldership (56 respondents) and the membership (950 respondents) of the churches included in this study predominately identified as white.

	Non-Hispanic White	Hispanic or Latino	Black or African American	Native American or American Indian	Asian or Pacific Islander	Other	Total
Elder/Shepherd	56	0	0	0	1	1	58
Member	950	25	15	15	8	35	1048
Total	1006	25	15	15	9	36	1106

Furthermore, the marital status frequency of the eldership (54 respondents), as shown in Table 4, is predominately identified as married. This is also the predominant identified marital status for the members of the churches (796 respondents).

	Single, Never Married	Married	Re-married After Divorce	Re-married After the Death of a Spouse	Sep- arated	Di- vorced	Wi- dowed	To- tal
Elder/ Shep- herd	0	54	1	0	0	0	3	58
Member	63	796	65	9	7	38	71	1049
Total	63	850	66	9	7	38	74	1107

Finally, as illustrated in Table 5, both the elders and members reported higher frequencies of individuals who have obtained higher levels of education. There was a total of 49 elder respondents and 691 member respondents who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher level of education.

Table 5: Highest Level of Education Frequency (N=1104)								
	Less than High School, No Diploma	High School Graduate, Diploma, or GED	Some College Credit, No Degree	Associate/Junior College Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree	Total
Elder/Shepherd	0	1	7	1	22	18	9	58
Member	13	86	176	80	373	231	87	1046
Total	13	87	183	81	395	249	96	1104

Study Findings

Table 6 illustrates the mean responses for the questions addressing the church's discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach and the respondent's role within the church. Higher means revealed that respondents were higher in agreement with the statements. While there were differences among the nine questions pertaining to the topic, t-test analyses indicated that five were significantly different. In each of these specific questions, the eldership had higher mean values than the membership of the church.

Table 6 also lays out the results of the independent samples t-test. This procedure resulted in five significant outcomes ($p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$). The first of these outcomes is the belief that the congregation promotes seeking God's will and serving Him. The t-test resulted in a highly significant ($p < 0.01$) p-value of 0.001. The elders had a mean response of 87.93 and the members had a mean response of 81.80 to this statement. The t-test also

resulted in a highly significant ($p < 0.01$) p-value, at 0.000, for the belief that members of the congregation pray for one another. In regards to this statement, the elders had a mean response of 91.03 and members had a mean response of 84.01. In addition, the independent samples t-test resulted in a significant ($p < 0.05$) p-value for the reported belief that the congregation seeks to bless the community by being the Good News. This question resulted in a p-value of 0.038. The elders had a mean response of 78.62 and the members had a mean response of 73.39. Moreover, the resulting p-value for the belief that the congregation deals with sin in appropriate ways was significant ($p < 0.05$) at 0.015. When examining the beliefs on this statement, the elders had a mean response of 71.38 and the members had a mean response of 65.42. Finally, the belief that everyone is treated equally despite differing backgrounds in social class had a significant ($p < 0.05$) p-value of 0.012. The elders had a mean response of 80.00 and the members had a mean response of 74.20 to this statement.

The four other statements addressing discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach did not result in statistically significant outcomes. The first statement examined the belief that the congregation encourages engagement of the Scriptures ($p = 0.380$). The elders had a mean response of 81.04, while the members had a mean response of 78.76. This difference in means between the members and elders is also seen in the responses to the statement that members of this congregation are engaged in serving and ministry ($p = 0.468$). The elders had a mean response of 76.55 and the members had a mean response of 74.93. Furthermore, in regards to the degree to which the respondents agreed that the congregation has a strong relationship with the community ($p = 0.608$), elders had a mean response of 72.76 and the members had a mean response of 71.36. Finally, in

regards to the statement of most members of the congregation appear to be growing spiritually ($p=0.288$), the elders had a mean response of 68.62 and the members had a mean response of 66.31.

Table 6: Independent Samples T-Test			
	Mean of Membership	Mean of Eldership	Sig. (2- tailed)
The congregation encourages engagement of the Scriptures.	78.76	81.04	0.380
This congregation promotes seeking God's will and serving Him.	81.80	87.93	0.001**
Members of this congregation are engaged in serving and ministry.	74.93	76.55	0.468
Members of this congregation pray for one another.	84.01	91.03	0.000**
This congregation has a strong relationship with the community.	71.36	72.76	0.608
This congregation seeks to bless the community by being the Good News.	73.39	78.62	0.038*
The congregation deals with sin in appropriate ways.	65.42	71.38	0.015*
Everyone is treated equally at this congregation despite coming from different social classes.	74.20	80.00	0.012*
Most members of the congregation appear to be growing spiritually.	66.31	68.62	0.288
*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$			

Discussion

The literature examines the clergy-laity gap from a historical, biblical, church, and political background. However, this literature is quite outdated, especially for the modern

day church. However, as noted in the literature, being identified as clergy or elders often promoted an individual to a higher position of power and authority (Kung, 1968). It is through this power deferential that disagreements began to surface and conflict arose. Through the context of conflict theory, one understands that constant competition and struggle maintains social order. Within the church, this is the social order of the eldership and the membership. The power struggle may maintain social order, but it results in a divide between the two. This research sought to examine this divide through their perspectives on the health of the church. Specifically focusing on the perspectives on the discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach of the church. It is through the literature that it was hypothesized that the eldership would perceive the health of the church in a more positive light than the membership of the church.

Through the analysis of the results, descriptive statistics illustrated that the mean responses of the eldership were higher than the perceptions of the members across all nine questions. This appears to show that the elders of the church had a healthier perception of their church than the members in these specific areas. Within each of the specific questions addressing discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach, the t-test found five results to be significant ($p < 0.05$ or $P < 0.01$). This analysis illustrates that there is a significant difference in the perceptions of the health of the church in the areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach, which can be attributed to the role of the respondent in the church. The role of the respondent in the church, whether that is an elder or a member, saw significant difference for the specific questions addressing the seeking of God's will and serving Him, prayer for one another, seeking to bless the

community by being the Good News, dealing with sin in appropriate ways, and treating others equally even if they are coming from a different social class.

Conclusion

Study Limitations

From the results of this research, it appears that the hypothesis that the elderships perceptions on the health of the church would be more positive than the membership is supported. However, there are limitations to this conclusion. The first major limitation is that the sample population size between the eldership and the membership was drastically different. The eldership consisted of 58 total respondents, while the membership had a total of 1,082 respondents. The difference in sample population sizes limits the ability to draw conclusions to the study that are generalizable. Moreover, generalizability is also limited due to the fact that each of the ten congregations have a Church of Christ background. Conclusions could, therefore, only be applied to other churches with a similar background.

Implications

This research study sought to examine the differences in the perceptions of the health of the church in the areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach between the eldership and membership of the churches included in this sample. From the results, it was found that there was statistically significant differences between the perceptions of these two populations on the health of the church in these areas. The conclusions of this research can be utilized by churches and their leaders, especially those that have identified potential conflict and disconnect between their elders and members. It is evident that in the areas of discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach that the

elders and members did not perceive the health of the church at the same level.

Promoting conversation between these two groups to evaluate this disconnect could prove useful in the reduction of conflict. Ultimately hoping to reduce the gap between the elders and members.

It would be beneficial to have further research conducted on the clergy-laity gap, especially within the context of the modern day church. As the church has seen many shifts over the last few decades, the impact of the clergy-laity gap may have also changed. Furthermore, it would be useful to examine churches from different denominations to determine if the clergy-laity gap also impacts differing churches in similar ways. Finally, it would be beneficial to conduct future research on the clergy-laity gap in other aspects of the church other than discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

These following questions address the church's discipleship, spiritual formation, and outreach.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The congregation encourages engagement of the Scriptures.					
This congregation promotes seeking God's will and serving Him.					
Members of this congregation are engaged in serving and ministry.					
Members of this congregation pray for one another.					
This congregation has a strong relationship with the community.					
This congregation seeks to bless the community by being the Good News.					
The congregation					

deals with sin in appropriate ways.					
Everyone is treated equally at this congregation despite coming from different social classes.					
Most members of the congregation appear to be growing spiritually.					