

The Challenge of Nominalism

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In most countries of sub-Saharan Africa Christianity is reported to be the major religion. However, when we take a look at church attendance figures, we learn that there is a huge gap between Christian profession and practice. For example in a 1993 Ghanaian Church Survey it was found that sixty one percent of the population claimed to be 'Christian' but only twelve percent regularly attended a place of Christian worship. This meant forty nine percent of the population, while considering themselves to be Christian, did not regularly attend a church. Why is there such a the big gap between profession and practice? The gap may be attributed to a variety of reasons.



There is a huge gap between Christian profession and practice.

If the challenge of increasing 'nominalism' is to be dealt with we must first establish the major reasons and secondly take appropriate action. The following list of possible reasons for low attendance is given as a guide in assessing the problem. Use it as a check-list in your denomination or church situation. You might add to the list and prioritize from most important to those reasons you consider less relevant to your situation.

Check List for Non-Attendance in Your Denomination/Church

Changing Philosophical and Social Patterns

- ❖ Increasing materialism – less dependence on God.
- ❖ Increasing tolerance of other religions – other ways to God.
- ❖ Mobility and urbanization resulting in a breakdown in traditional ties to a local church.
- ❖ Multiple choices of churches in an area – resulting in indifference.

Lack of Churches

- ❖ In new housing estates and settlements
- ❖ In rural towns and villages
- ❖ For communities of ethnic-minority people
- ❖ For social-economic classes (e.g. educated elite, poor, illiterate)

Inadequate Church Facilities

- ❖ Overcrowded church meeting places
- ❖ Unattractive and uncomfortable meeting places
- ❖ No facilities for pre-school, primary children, youth, etc.

Time and Length of Services

- ❖ Services of worship not at a convenient time
- ❖ Services too long

Content and Quality of Church's Ministry

- ❖ Worship – not scriptural in principle, nor truly indigenous, meaningful or joyous.
- ❖ Ministry content – not biblical, balanced or life related.
- ❖ Ministry scope – no provision for pre-school, primary age, youth or, young married couples.
- ❖ Ministry appeal – not attractive to men, youth, young married couples, etc.
- ❖ Gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour not preached.
- ❖ Prayer is not central to reflecting the Lordship of Christ and dependence on Him.
- ❖ Evangelism – no genuine concern for the lost or ongoing effort to reach others for Christ.
- ❖ Pastoral leader – dictatorial, lacking in spiritual life, morality, integrity and pastoral gifts.
- ❖ Membership – priesthood of all believers not recognized and the gifts of members utilized.
- ❖ Pastoral care – not organized to give pastoral care and training especially to new converts.
- ❖ Standards and discipline – implications of admission to membership, Lord's Supper and baptism not taught and no discipline exercised in cases of impropriety.
- ❖ Fellowship – lack of warm friendly caring fellowship amongst active members.
- ❖ Social concern – no active and visible commitment to wider community.
- ❖ Over-emphasis on money.

Quality of Para-Church Evangelism

- ❖ Lack of emphasis on repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour
- ❖ Terms of discipleship not spelled out
- ❖ Lack of instruction for converts – no personal shepherding or special classes
- ❖ Converts not introduced to caring churches

The Professing Christian Himself

- ❖ Has never had a conversion experience - consequently has no spiritual desire to worship, to
- ❖ hear the Word of God, pray or fellowship with Christians.
- ❖ A backslider – living in spiritual rebellion.

Church Leaders' Point Of View

The list has been used in other African countries where 'nominalism' is a major challenge. Church and ministry leaders were asked to select what they considered the twelve major reasons for poor church attendance on the part of professing Christians. In one such survey leaders rated the following, in diminishing order, as the twelve major reasons:

- ❖ The *professing Christian* himself has never had a conversion experience – consequently has no spiritual desire to worship, to hear the Word of God, pray or fellowship with Christians.
- ❖ The church's ministry is lacking in evangelism, a genuine concern for the lost or continuous effort to reach others for Christ.
- ❖ The church's ministry is lacking in pastoral care. The pastors and elders are not organized to give pastoral care and training, especially to new converts.
- ❖ The Gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is not being preached.
- ❖ Lack of churches in rural towns and villages.
- ❖ Lack of churches for communities of ethnic-minority people
- ❖ Para-church converts not introduced to caring churches
- ❖ The *professing Christian* himself is a backslider, living in spiritual rebellion.
- ❖ The church's ministry, prayer is not central to reflecting the Lordship of Christ and dependence on Him.
- ❖ The church's ministry and content not biblical, balanced or, life related.
- ❖ Pastoral leader - dictatorial, lacking In spiritual vision and life; morality, integrity and pastoral gifts.
- ❖ Terms of discipleship not spelled out by para-church evangelists.

Non Attenders' Point of View

The above are the views of full time Christian workers. What is the point of view of the *professing Christians* who don't attend church on a regular basis?

In a survey of those not attending church on a regular basis the most common reasons for not attending Sunday services were:

- ❖ Reasons reflecting a lack of real interest or motivation e.g. "I was tired..., I slept late..., I had things to do in the house..., it rained..., my clothes were dirty..."
- ❖ Others said they were sick or had to care for children, sick relatives or visitors.
- ❖ A good percentage gave travel or work as a reason.
- ❖ A significant percentage were critical of churches, saying the services were too long, they didn't like the pastor or that the church didn't do anything for them.
- ❖ Some cited the poor testimony of Christians or the fact that there are too many churches.

- ❖ A significant number gave lack of money as a reason or the fact that there were too many collections.
- ❖ Only a few complained of distance.
- ❖ A few said, because of a funeral.

In summary we might say that very few gave legitimate reasons. The basic underlying reason in most cases was either a lack of spiritual life and motivation in the *professing Christian*, or a lack of spiritual life and holistic ministry in the church.

The majority of those who do not attend appear to have no vital, transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.

Two Fundamental Reasons

If we put aside the reasons over which the *professing Christian* have little or no control (i.e. absence of a church, sickness, or employment), there are two fundamental reasons for low attendance.

- ❖ Lack of spiritual life in the *professing Christian*. The majority of those who do not attend appear to have no vital, transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. They have not been "born from above". Consequently they have no spiritual appetite, no desire to worship, hear the Word of God, pray or fellowship with other Christians. They still need to be evangelized.
- ❖ Lack of spiritual life and ministry in the church. Churches are not meeting the spiritual, social and temporal needs of members in a relevant way.

What Must Be Done?

- ❖ The Gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour must be communicated by churches in clear, compelling and culturally relevant manner. *Nominal Christians* must be introduced to the real Jesus.
- ❖ Churches need to experience spiritual revival and renewal; they must become vital gatherings for spiritual worship, ministry, fellowship and demonstrate concern for others. They must incarnate Jesus.
- ❖ When these two things happen, the problem of *nominalism* will be addressed. *Nominal Christians* will become vital, vibrant members of local churches.

The Gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour must be communicated by churches.

Conclusion

Plan to discuss and evaluate the challenge of *nominalism* with leaders in your denomination or local congregation, then come up with an action plan to address the issues identified.