

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN ASPECTS OF THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE AND FORMS OF COMPLAINT  
BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how church members complain when dissatisfied is a topic that has been

neglected in the marketing literature. Academicians have done a good job in looking at complaint behavior in retail, industrial and service environments. However, one area that has not been investigated is how church members complain. Researchers have been slow to make use of modern marketing techniques in non-profit areas. This article examines the relationship between areas of the church experience (i.e., church environment, pulpit ministry, music ministry, congregational participation and pastoral supervision) that might give rise to dissatisfaction and their attribution to various forms of complaint behavior those members might take. Empirical results indicate that lapses in pulpit ministry, congressional participation, and pastoral supervision evoke significant complaint behavior defining areas where pro-active actions may be needed to alleviate dissatisfaction.

## INTRODUCTION

The service industry in the U.S. is the fastest growing sector in our economy. It accounts for 39.1 percent of all establishments and 79 percent of all employment (Berman, 2001). One establishment within the service sector that has not benefitted from the industry's tremendous growth is churches. Main denominations in the United States have experienced stagnant growth.

(“Religious Makeup”). It is this paper’s contention that it is time for churches to get off the fence and embrace the need for modern marketing techniques in order to help preserve their current membership, in addition to creating brand loyal patrons. Unfortunately it is difficult to find relevant articles involving these issues in a church setting.

Cutler and Winns (1999) in a review of marketing literature involving churches, found that of all the articles published since 1976, only three papers were empirical in nature. Several reasons have been posited for the lack of empirical research on the marketing of churches. First, churches have not seen the need to market their product. Second, academicians have not seen the need to demonstrate marketing techniques relevant to churches and similar nonprofit organizations. Third, churches have tried to maintain the belief that the practice of marketing and recruitment are two unholy terms churches should not employ (Fewster 1980).

Recently Alan (2000) reported similar hesitations for the use of marketing in churches. He noted that in the United States some churches rely heavily on advertising to communicate to potential customers, but it appears that it’s use may not rest well with the present and potential members. Alan notes “that many people both ordinary citizens and Christians, think that church advertising is a distortion of the church” (p.39). Whatever the attitude or reasoning supporting the void of marketing research pertaining to churches, it should be recognized that all organizations are facing increasingly competitive environments. It is this paper’s contention that in order for many churches to reverse recent growth problems they must begin to employ marketing tools (i.e., advertising, marketing research) to promote growth. In addition, churches must concentrate on retaining their present membership. Keeping present members longer will give them more time to sharpen their marketing skills for future growth.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Three empirical articles concerning the marketing of churches were identified by Culter and Winas (1999). They include McDaniel (1989), Mehta and Mehta (1995), and Saunders (1999). McDaniel (1989) focused on uncovering the “dynamics of consumer preferences” (McDaniel 1989, p. 175). Specifically, he asked the question: “What dimensions of worship provide for a satisfying experience?” In 1995, Mehta and Mehta continued with this type of research into church member satisfaction. They investigated four dimensions related to church member satisfaction that included (1) church environment; (2) pulpit ministries; (3) music ministries; and (4) and congregational participation. They found congregational participation ( $R^2 = 76.67$ ) to explain more variance in member satisfaction than the other three dimensions, but all dimensions were statistically significant (church environment  $R^2 = 76.08$ ; music ministry  $R^2 = 73.24$ ; and pulpit ministry  $R^2 = 66.74$ ). In addition to these dimensions, the authors found that the worshiper’s denomination and gender were highly associated with member satisfaction, along with the number of times attending church, and the amount of charitable giving the member engaged in. Saunders (1999) extended the limited empirical marketing research of churches and began to address the issue of specific attributes of the church and their satisfaction. Her research identified thirty-seven attributes that were associated with member satisfaction. The attributes investigated included church programs, social service opportunities, worship services, member support, physical and social ambience in the worship service, congregational harmony, church time and place, Sunday School content, Sunday School leadership opportunities, community obligations, church convenience and image, and administrative communication.

This paper extends the literature of church marketing into the area of dissatisfaction and complaint behavior. Churches in today’s modern world need to understand how members will demonstrate complaint behavior given a dissatisfying experience. This will enable them to be pro-active in retaining and protecting their loyal members. This study draws on the sparse

marketing literature involving churches to compile a list of dissatisfying experiences that might arise in a church setting (Mehta and Mehta, 1995). In addition, it uses Singh's (1990) complaint behavior scale to address the basic question: "Given a dissatisfying experience occurs in church, how would members complain?" The results of this empirical research will help pastors and administrators identify what dimensions of the worship experience are most important and in the event of a dissatisfaction in one of these areas what types of complaint behavior church members will likely take.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

In order to accomplish our research objective, a questionnaire was developed using the four components of worship as stated by Mehta and Mehta (1995). These components included (1) church environment; (2) pulpit ministries; (3) music ministries; and (4) congregational participation. In addition, we added a fifth component called pastoral supervision. This component was added because of some of the recent disclosures of impropriety engaged by pastors/priests in our churches. Our study also made use of the scale developed by Singh (1990) to measure dimensions of complaint behavior. After the questionnaire was developed, an administrative pastor and a retired pastor at this church reviewed our survey for content, relevancy and clarity. Their suggestions were implemented and the questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 300 church members selected from an overall population of 900 church members in a nondenominational church. In addition to the survey, our mailing contained a cover letter written by the administrative pastor requesting cooperation in the study. The overall response rate for this study was 37%. This rate of response seems to be in line with complaint behavior research (Singh 1990; Dart and Freeman 1994). To assess the potential for non-response bias, a time-trend extrapolation test was used and no significant differences were found between early and late

respondents (Armstrong and Overton, 1977).

### Data Collection

Respondents were asked to remember a dissatisfying experience that occurred at church, not necessarily this particular church. They identified their experience by checking from a list of common dissatisfying experiences compiled and created from a previous empirical study on churches (Mehta and Mehta, 1995). Once the dissatisfying experience was identified, they were asked how they expressed their dissatisfaction using Singh's (1990) complaint behavior scale adapted to a church setting. Demographic and psychographics measures such as age, marital status, gender, denomination, attendance habits, etc., were also measured for the purpose of building a sketch of the respondents. Table 1 lists the dissatisfying experiences that were collected from the Mehta and Mehta (1995) study. Table 2 reports the items in the complaint behavior scale by dimension, their factor loadings, eigenvalues and their coefficient alpha.

(TABLE ONE AND TWO—ABOUT HERE!)

### Data Analysis

To answer our research objective the paper made use of canonical correlation analysis (CCA). CCA is appropriate when investigating the interrelationships between multiple independent and dependent variables. In this case, the objective was to find the best interrelationships between multiple categories of dissatisfying experiences and several different dimensions of complaint behavior.

To begin the process, a factor analysis on Singh's (1990) complaint behavior scale was done to identify its dimensional structure. Each dimension represents a form of complaint behavior that the respondent could exercise given they had a dissatisfying experience. Mehta and

Mehta (1995) identified (church environment, music ministry, pulpit ministry, congregational participation, and pastoral supervision) as likely areas of dissatisfaction in a church setting.

Finally, demographic and psychographic information was gathered to help describe the complainant. Table 4 provides a listing of the variables that were found to be significantly different across types of dissatisfying experiences found by canonical correlation analysis.

## Results

The factor analysis resulted in a four-factor solution representing the following forms of complaint behavior (no action, voice, private action, and public action). These results point to the fact that in church settings there may be one additional dimension, no action, of complaint behavior that has not been reported in the consumer or organizational literature (Singh 1990, Dart and Freeman 1994, Hansen, Powers and Swan 1997).

Using canonical correlation analysis, we found one canonical function to be significant at the  $p < .05$  level and a second function significant at the  $p < .10$  level. Both functions were included in our analysis for descriptive purposes. In each function congregational participation explained the most variance in the types of complaint behavior used. The second variable in each equation was different. For example, function one included pulpit ministries, with function two incorporating pastoral supervision. In function one, congregational participation (.8677) and pulpit ministries (.6134) explained most of the variance in the voice and private dimensions of complaint behavior. In function two, pastoral supervision (-.7844) and congregational participation (.3616) combined to explain the majority of the variance in the dependent variable of no action and public action complaint behavior. Demographic variables that were measured included age, number of children, length of membership, and whether or not membership was important to the member. Table 4 summarizes the demographic variables that were significantly different across respondents that complained about dissatisfying incidents involving congregational participation, the pulpit

ministries and pastoral supervision

(Table 3-About Here!)

## DISCUSSION

Based upon these two functions several points can be made. First, the items that represent congregational participation (.8677) and pastoral supervision (-.7844) seem to be most germane to the respondents as indicated by the size of their coefficients in each of canonical equations. These findings indicate that the traditional elements found in any given worship service are important enough to worshipers that if dissatisfied they will complain. For example, respondents stated that over emphasis on the collection of monies or any misuse of monies will evoke their complaint response. In addition, the lack of attention paid to the important traditional components of a worship service such as baptism, communion, responsive readings, and prayer is also consequential enough to elicit complaint behavior. Second, the pulpit ministry dimension was considered significant and if dissatisfied, respondents would evoke complaint behavior. The pulpit ministries dealt with aspects pertaining to the content and relevance of the pastor/priest's sermon as it related to the church member's life. Since the sermon is one of the main attractions in the worship experience, respondents may be quite sensitive as to its content. If the pastor's message is immaterial and/or ambiguous or if the church goer disagrees with the overriding communiqué, it may very well evoke some form of complaint behavior. Third, our study found that the pastoral supervision was also important in explaining the types of complaint behavior manifested. This dimension includes items related to the pastoral staff and their responsibilities. It might be perceived as having some relation to the pulpit ministry but our intentions for including it were to consider more global aspects of demeanor such as the morals and ethical behaviors



exemplified by the pastoral ministers or staff. Certainly, if a member of the church staff is neglectful in his/her duties, doesn't demonstrate appropriate moral/ethical behavior, provides inappropriate advice or counseling, etc., then church members will certainly complain.

### Dimensional Structure of Complaint Behavior Scale

Dimension one in the complaint behavior scale was labeled no action and was indicated by function two to be the main form of complaint behavior when pastoral supervision was the cause of the dissatisfying experience. Doing nothing is a common complaint behavior recognized in the literature (Warland, Herrmann and Willits, 1975, Landon 1977). It is also the type of behavior that a business or in this case a church would want to avoid. If a worshiper is dissatisfied and doesn't complain and continues to be discontent, then the possibility of leaving the church without the pastoral staff given an opportunity for reparation increases. In addition, we did not anticipate a second item (i.e., engaging in complaint behavior to a governing body of the church) to load on the same dimension. A potential explanation for this action is that it might be believed that most complaints to such high profile representatives in a denomination probably would be unfruitful or a waste of time, with the governing body referring the complaint back to the local church. But as described by the canonical function this action appears to be a plausible explanation prompted by an extremely high profile incident such as a pastor/priest molesting a child (i.e., this experience was included in the pastoral supervision dimension of complaints in this paper), then it would be expected that the governing body would act. However, in most cases of lesser importance one might consider complaining to the governing body as ineffective as not complaining at all.

Dimension two was labeled voice and was one of the forms of complaint behavior indicated by function one that respondents would use when congregational participation issues or issues involving the pulpit ministries causes of the dissatisfying experience. Voice complaints are described as the respondent engaging in mild forms of complaint behavior such as asking, phoning

or writing the church staff to take care of the problem. This type of behavior can be profitable because it alerts the church staff to a problem that exists in a rather benign setting. Therefore, the staff has the opportunity to correct the problem and satisfy the member quickly and discreetly.

Dimension three was labeled private action and was also a form of complaint behavior that the respondent might engage when congregational participation issues or the pulpit ministry (function one) describes the dissatisfying incident. The type of complaint action deriving from these incidents should be described as the respondent engaging in negative word-of-mouth communication with members of the church, friends, relatives and co-workers. It even could include the respondent deciding to leave his/her existing church to attend another. One can image a church member deciding to leave the church after a dissatisfying incident occurs without giving the church staff much of a chance to fix the problem. In fact the consumer literature has reported for quite some time that less than half of all consumers who face a dissatisfying experience complain to the responsible party (Andersen and Best, 1977, Wilkie 1986, Riechheld 1996.) Negative word-of-mouth is deleterious to a church's reputation, and the church staff should be alert to this type of activity, in order to promptly react and diffuse this type of complaint behavior.

Dimension four was labeled public action and is a possible complaint action that could arise as a result of a problem with pastoral supervision or congregational participation (function two). Public action complaints from respondents could represent complaining to a licensing authority, to civic leaders in the community, or taking legal action against the church. This form of complaint behavior represents the most detrimental type of complaining and could threaten the church's existence. It is entirely possible that a lack of pastoral supervision could evoke some form of public action complaint behavior. For example, improper ethical behavior displayed by a minister and/or deleterious or irrelevant counseling provided by a minister could conceivably be serious enough to provoke public action complaints such as a legal action.

Table 4 provides the reader with some demographic and psychographic variables that

describe the respondents that complain over issues involving pulpit ministries, congregational participation, and pastoral supervision. First we find membership in a church to be more important to individuals who tend to complain about issues related to pulpit ministries and pastoral supervision. Second, members who have more children at home are more likely to complain about the pulpit ministries and pastoral supervision than congregational participation issues. Finally, we found that respondents concerned with dissatisfying issues that arise out of the pulpit ministries and pastoral supervision, are less likely to recommend the church to other people and are more likely to leave the church, than respondents complaining about congregational participation issues.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has certain limitations. First, the exploratory nature of the study and the use of a single congregation limits the generalizability of these results. Second our survey had a response rate of 37%, though measures taken to determine the extent of nonresponse bias resulted in no significant findings, we feel the response rate was acceptable, but still disappointing. Third, the church respondents that took part in this study were predominantly made up of church members, representing the Judeo-Christian faith. Through canonical correlations we found only one function to be significant at the  $p < .05$  level, although the second function (with  $p < .10$ ) was also included in our discussion. The respondents in this study seemed less concerned with issues of church organization and music ministries. Responses may differ with other churches particularly where organization and music ministries are deficient in the church offerings. It should be noted that respondents in this study did belong to a church that had both strong children and music ministries.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has successfully extended the evidence on complaint behavior to include a church setting. This empirical research has shown the study of complaint responses to be just as relevant in churches as they are in retail establishments, service organizations and industrial relationships (Singh, 1990; Dart and Freeman 1994, Hansen, et al. 1997). Our results show that dissatisfaction in aspects involving pulpit ministries, congregational participation, and pastoral ministries to be the kind of incidents that most likely will provoke the full spectrum of complaints in church members. These results extend the findings of the Mehta and Mehta (1995) study beyond a simple examination of the relationships between the various categories of church worship (pulpit ministry, congregational participation, music ministry and church organization) and dissatisfaction in the church member. Our paper asked the respondent if any of these categories caused dissatisfaction, and if they did, how did they actually complain? This allows the church to focus on incidents that may cause extreme forms of complaint action. Knowing how church members complained in event of a dissatisfying experience is critical for the creation of pro-active plans to counter and solve problems before they occur, rather than just the understanding that a particular aspect of church worship might be dissatisfying. In addition, this paper added another conceivable dimension to Mehta and Mehta's (1995) list of dissatisfying incidents called pastoral supervision. This category of dissatisfying experiences seems to be a major independent variable as it was included in function two and shown to be related to public action complaints such as legal action. Finally, this study found that the traditional elements in a worship service (CONGSUM) were sufficient enough to promote complaint behavior in members, just as the pulpit ministry (PULPITSU) could arouse various forms of complaint behavior in a member.

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TABLE 1

LIST OF DISSATISFYING EXPERIENCES BY DIMENSIONS	
<u>Pulpit Ministry (PULPITSU)</u>	<u>Music Ministry (MUSSUM)</u>
1. Irrelavance of Pastor's Sermon to My Life.	1. Selection of Hymns and Songs
2. Disagreed with Content of Sermon.	2. Excellence of Choir
3. Over Reliance on Guest Speakers.	3. Lack of Congregational Participation Due to
4. Ambiguous Sermon Presentation	Song Leader of Choir Master
<u>Congregational Participation (CONGSUM)</u>	<u>Church Organization (CHURHSUM)</u>
1. Emphasis on Collection of Tithe	1. Lack of emphasis on youth or
2. Amount of Time Allowed for Meditation	children's ministry.
3. Lack of Emphasis on Traditional Components of	2. Inadequate Supervision of children
Worship (baptism, communion, responsive readings.	3. Inadequate Teaching ministry at
4. Improper use of Monies by Church Staff.	children's level
5. Amount of Time for Congregational Prayer	
<u>Pastoral Supervision (PASTSUM)</u>	
1. Lack of Oversight Regarding Key Ministries.	
2. Moral of Ethical Behavior by Church Staff	
3. Irrelevant or Deleterous Counseling Provided by Church Leaders	

#### 4. Availability of Church Minister

TABLE 2

Rotated Factor Pattern for the Complaint Behavior Items From Church Data

Item	No Action	Voice	Private	Public
CCB1	<b><u>-.838</u></b>	-.251	-.038	.095
CCB2	.344	<b><u>.811</u></b>	.104	.038
CCB3	.001	<b><u>.885</u></b>	.128	.151
CCB4	-.208	.125	<b><u>.858</u></b>	.133
CCB5	.209	.256	<b><u>.793</u></b>	.087
CCB6	.460	-.208	<b><u>.599</u></b>	.213
CCB7	<b><u>.618</u></b>	.121	.032	.478
CCB8	.359	.036	.186	<b><u>.782</u></b>
CCB9	.001	.093	.142	<b><u>.921</u></b>
CCB10	-.009	.078	.075	<b><u>.901</u></b>
Eigenvalues	3.537	1.724	1.329	1.129
Coefficient Alpha	<b>.5661</b>	<b>.7683</b>	<b>.6999</b>	<b>.9127</b>
Overall Alpha	<b>.7814</b>			

The items were as follows: CCB1: Decided to do nothing about the dissatisfying experience; CCB2: Immediately complained to church staff about the experience; CCB3: Complained to church staff by phone or writing; CCB4: Complained to friends, relatives, and co-workers about the experience; CCB5: Complained to members of the church about the experience; CCB6: Decided to go to another church; CCB7: Complained to overall governing body of the church; CCB8: Complained to licensing authority or professional organization; CCB9: Complained to civil leaders in the community; CCB10: Decided to take legal action against the church.



Table 3

Canonical Correlation Analysis

Canonical Function	Canonical Correlation	Adjusted Correlation	Approx. Std. Error	Canonical R <sup>2</sup>	F Value	Prob.<.10
Function 1	.4381	.3482	.0773	.1919	2.15	.0033
Function 2	.3602	.3350	.0833	.1298	1.64	.0816

Multivariate Test Statistics

Statistic	Value	F-Value	Prob.
Wilk's Lamba	.6711	2.15	.0033
Pillai's Trace	.3677	2.11	.0038
Hotelling-Lawley	.4339	2.17	.0036
Roy's Greatest	.2376	4.94	.0004

## Standardized Canonical Coefficients for the Independents Variables

## Function One

## Function Two

PASTSUM	0.5832	-0.7844*
CHURSUM	0.0248	-.01392

CONGSUM	0.8677*	0.3616*
MUSSUM	0.0846	0.2413
PULPITSU	0.6134*	0.2216

Standardized Canonical Coefficients for the Dependent Variables

	Function One	Function Two
NO ACTION	-0.0855	-2.021*
VOICE	0.0248	-0.4256
PRIVATE	0.8677*	0.6889
PUBLIC	0.0846	1.4984*

TABLE 4

#### Demographic and Psychographic Data

	PULPITSU	CONGSUM	PASTSUM
1. Membership requires a lot of time	x=2.5 (1) N=12	X=3.11 X=17	X = 2.57(1) N= 19
2. Number of children at home	x=2.33(2) N=12	X=1.46 N=15	X=2.12 (2) N=16
3. If incident was solved would you recommend your church	x=1.75(3) N=12	X=1.53 N=15	X=2.05 (3) N=18
4. If dissatisfying incident was solved would you leave the church	x=3.73(4) N=11	X=4.57 N=14	X= 3.75 (4) N=16

Significant differences occur  
between PULPITSU and CONGSUM

1.  $t = 12.6, p < 0.000$
2.  $t = 6.98, p < 0.000$
3.  $t = 8.42, p < 0.000$
4.  $t = 20.17, p < 0.000$

Significant differences occur  
between CONGSUM and PASTSUM

1.  $t = 15.38, p < 0.000$
2.  $t = 5.46, p < 0.000$
3.  $t = 9.47, p < 0.000$
4.  $t = 18.9, p < 0.000$

Variables measured but found not significant were (1) membership is very important, (2) membership makes me personally vulnerable, (3) marital status, (4) age, (5) attendance habits, (6) if dissatisfying incidents was solved would you (a) recommend your church to others, (b) attend more, (c) become more involved in church activities, (d) tithe more.