

The Rhetoric of Choosing a Church: Murfreesboro, Tennessee

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In 1961, Claire Cox published *The New-Time Religion*. Among other subjects, Cox addressed the question of why people choose one church over another. Among the reasons indicated were: the minister, friendliness of the congregation, convenience to weekend recreational activities, search for status, the Sunday School, and the building facilities. (Pp. 25-43).

This paper reports on some initial research to discover what contemporary reasons are given for the choice of a church. While the final scope of this research will be greater, this paper reports on one locality only, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Murfreesboro is a community of 32,857. Rutherford County has a population of 84,020 and boasts 223 churches of all faiths, except Jewish. Requests for assistance were sent to approximately twenty-two churches in the community. Of these, some declined to assist, and some did not respond. The result was that twelve churches—three Baptists, four Churches of Christ, one Church of God, one Christian Church, one Methodist Church, one Presbyterian Church, and one Cumberland Presbyterian Church participated in the study. Further research will attempt to guarantee the inclusion of more religious groups.

Each of these churches was asked to distribute and collect a simple one-page survey at one of its morning services. Most of the churches did this at a worship service; two chose to limit the survey to a single Sunday School class—a class of 14 at one church and a class of 167 at another. Another church used its Wednesday evening Bible Study for the survey. Another utilized its entire adult Sunday School class system.

Following is a sample of the survey used:

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Name of church _____

How long have you been attending here? _____

Why did you choose this church? Check as many responses as you wish:

- The minister
- Friendliness of congregation
- Convenient to recreational activities
- Geography; convenient to home
- To improve social standing/status
- Doctrine
- Availability of single men/single women
- To make social contacts
- To make business contacts
- Better Sunday School, etc., for children
- Intellectual environment
- New building facilities
- Social activities
- Recreational activities
- Worship services

The average survey form had 3.86 responses checked. There was space on the form for a person to write in responses in addition to the ones listed. Overall, there were 323 items written in, or .27 per form. Of the various write-ins, one was significant enough to merit special attention, as will be noted later in the paper.

The appendices of this paper includes three tables. One is a composite for each church, showing the total number of responses. The other two divide the composite into those attending a congregation two years or less, and those attending longer than two years. Some respondents did not indicate how long they had been attending a church. these are listed in the composite results, but no additional table is constructed for them. The response from one congregation, Stone's River Church of Christ, is a little unique because the church was about ready to disband until a group migrated to it. The response is greater, therefore, from those attending less than two years. Since this church had also been without a minister for a significant period of time, the responses indicating the minister as a reason for choosing a church are almost non-existent.

Results of Data

Among the 12 churches surveyed, the reason given the most often, by a slight edge, for choosing a church was the worship service. Sixty-five percent listed this as one of their reasons. Close behind, at 64-, was the friendliness of the congregation. In third place, at 57-, was the doctrine of the church. Fourth, at 56-, was the minister.

There is a considerable gap between fourth and fifth places. In fifth place, at 35-, was a better Sunday School for the children. Convenience of the location was sixth with 31-.

Responses are not as great for the remaining choices. In descending order, they were: intellectual environment at 16-, social activities at 10-, family ties (a write-in choice) at 9-, recreational activities at 9-, making social contacts at 6-, convenience to recreational activities at 4-, new building facilities at 2-, to improve social standing/status at 2-, and 1- for making business contacts.

One of the most interesting results in this area was the large number (114) of write-in responses indicating that family ties were a factor in their decision. This was expressed in different ways, such as "I grew up in the church," "To please my wife," and "Mother made me."

In looking at the individual churches, worship services ranked as the number one factor in only two congregations even though it was the first choice in the overall composite. The minister was the most frequent response in only one church. Friendliness of congregation led in six churches, while doctrine was the top choice in four.

The rank order is a little different when we examine the responses of those who attended a church two years or less. Worship services remained the number one response at 72-; the friendliness of the congregation was second with 70-. The minister, however, became the third choice at 66-, and doctrine dropped to fourth with 56-. Better Sunday School for children was fifth with 36-, and geography a distant sixth at 24-. All other responses were 15- or less. Family ties were an insignificant 2-.

In examining the individual churches, five listed the minister as the most frequent reason for making a choice. Four listed friendliness of congregation, two listed doctrine, and four listed the worship services. There were several ties for first on this analysis, so the number of firsts is higher than twelve.

In studying the data for those attending a church longer than two years, the ranking of the top four follows the composite rankings. Sixty-nine and two-tenths percent indicated the worship services as a reason, and 68.8- listed the friendliness of the congregation. Doctrine was third at 63-, and the minister fourth at 58-. Geography, or convenience to home, became the fifth response at 40-, while the better Sunday School for children posted 39-. After that, all responses ranked 18- or lower. Significantly, 13- wrote in a family tie type of response.

In studying the individual churches, one listed the minister as the top reason for making a choice among the respondents attending longer than two years. Six listed friendliness of the congregation, four listed doctrine, and one listed the worship services.

There were also a number of other write-in responses. These included:

- The Christian school one church operated;
- Soul-winning emphasis of the church;
- "The Lord led us;"
- Bus ministry;
- Concern for people;
- Invited by friend;
- The Sunday School for adults;
- "More members my age;"
- "This is where the Lord wanted us;"
- Felt more comfortable in a larger church;
- Challenge for service;
- Library;

Singles class;
 Spiritual attitude of members;
 Class size small and personal;
 Youth program;
 "This is where God wanted me to serve him;"
 Commitment to serve community;
 College class;
 "My father is the minister;"
 Girlfriend;
 Potential for growth;
 Conservative;
 Asked to participate in worship;
 Elders;
 "To attend a smaller congregation so I could teach;"
 Large percentage of faithful membership;
 Reputation of congregation in community;
 Acceptance of new members;
 Informal atmosphere;
 "In search of love, freedom, truth;"
 "Spirit of God is so real;"
 Early services;
 "Because they needed me;"
 Progressive spirit;
 Outstanding teacher;
 "God's will that I bear witness;"
 Husband and wife came from different churches; united on this one;
 Freedom of worship.

Since there were three Baptist churches with a total of 638 responses, and four Churches of Christ with 321 responses. It is interesting to examine the collective features of these churches. When the data for the three Baptist churches is combined, the friendliness of the congregation was the most frequent response at 64.4- with worship services a close second at 63.8-. The minister is third at 58-, with doctrine at 57-. A better Sunday School for children is a strong fifth at 51-.

In combining the Churches of Christ data, worship services is slightly ahead of friendliness of congregation, 68.2- to 67.9-. The doctrine becomes the third choice at 62-, and the minister is fourth at 50-. Convenience to home is a distant fifth at 37-. Interestingly, the choice, because of a better Sunday School system for children, so strong among Baptists, was listed by only 18- of those attending the Churches of Christ. Commitment because of family ties was given by 8.4- respondents, compared to 7.5- of the Baptists.

Some Tentative Conclusions

The conclusions suggested in this section must be tentative because they represent data from only twelve churches in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Furthermore, they do not attempt to establish a cross-section of churches represented in the area. With these limitations, the following conclusion emerge from the survey and analysis.

1. The worship services and the friendliness of the congregation were the two most frequent reasons for choosing a church. If a church is attempting to persuade people to choose them, then their rhetoric of persuasion must concentrate on these two areas. The survey could be ego-deflating to the minister, who ranks only fourth in the composite survey.

2. Doctrine was a significant factor, especially among people who have been affiliated with a church longer than two years. Constituting 57- of the composite, many of the churches in this sample presented a picture of an aggressive congregation, deeply concerned about its beliefs. A respondent for one church (which had an 88- response for doctrine) took the time to write an invitation on the survey form to this writer; "Why don't you join us some Sunday. We care about your soul!" It is also interesting to note that among the twelve churches surveyed, the fastest growing church listed doctrine as their most frequent response.

3. Although apparently not as important as some of the other factors, the minister, nevertheless, is one of the major reasons for a person choosing a church. This survey indicated that perhaps the choice is stronger among those who have attended a church two years or less. The responses indicate that if a church wishes to grow, it cannot overlook the importance of an effective minister for the church.

4. Apparently a significant percentage of people attending a church have chosen a church passively. Nine percent gave family ties as a reason. If it had been listed as one of the options, no doubt the response would have been greater. Some people have, apparently permitted their spouse or parents make the choice for them.

Some Suggestions

If a church is to grow, it must concentrate on ways to attract and hold new members. A study of this type, when enlarged, will hopefully reveal how this may be done. Obviously, the sample needs to be enlarged—a process that will take more time and work. To get a more accurate picture, a new item of "Family ties" must be added to the survey responses. Hopefully, when this process is completed, we will understand better the rhetoric of a church and why a person chooses one church in preference to others.

Appendix A

Composite	First Baptist	Franklin Road Baptist	Southeast Baptist	Central Christian	First Church of God	Bellwood Church of Christ	E. Main Church of Christ	Minerva Drive Church of Christ	Stone's River Church of Christ	First Cumberland Presbyterian	St. Mark's Methodist	First Presbyterian	Totals	
The minister	112	137	122	7	6	35	85	41	1	27	59	45	677	56% 4th
Friendliness of congregation	162	81	168	9	8	27	100	67	24	36	67	27	776	64% 2nd
Convenient to recreational activities	14	6	16	-	-	-	5	1	-	1	1	1	45	4%
Geography; convenient to home	86	32	84	-	6	9	61	46	2	9	41	7	383	31%
To improve social standing/status	10	4	4	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	2	2	25	2%
Doctrine	134	147	82	4	11	28	84	77	11	30	32	56	696	57% 3rd
Availability of single men/single women	8	5	8	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	24	2%
To make social contacts	25	7	11	3	-	-	4	4	-	3	8	8	73	6%
To make business contacts	2	3	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	1	1	10	1%
Better Sunday School, etc., for children	142	99	84	-	1	4	23	25	5	3	19	16	421	35%
Intellectual environment	65	12	14	3	1	3	24	14	10	8	16	27	197	16%
New building facilities	6	7	9	-	-	9	3	5	-	-	1	-	30	2%
Social activities	37	12	42	3	1	2	2	3	-	5	10	4	121	10%
Recreational activities	27	11	52	-	1	-	3	2	-	3	4	3	106	9%
Worship services	156	133	118	8	5	28	109	61	21	26	64	56	785	65% 1st
Family ties	32	6	10	4	-	-	21	6	-	6	6	25	114	9%
Responses	272	167	199	14	15	43	151	101	26	48	102	78	1216	

Appendix B

Responses from Those Attending More Than Two Years	First Baptist	Franklin Road Baptist	Southeast Baptist	Central Christian	First Church of God	Bellwood Church of Christ	E. Main Church of Christ	Minerva Dr Church of Christ	Stone's River Church of Christ	First Cumberland Presbyterian	St. Mark's Methodist	First Presbyterian	Totals		
The minister	98	89	85	5	5	26	64	30	-	16	35	29	482	58%	4th
Friendliness of congregation	135	58	121	6	6	19	80	55	3	25	45	15	568	69%	2nd
Convenient to recreational activities	9	6	11	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	1	31	4%	
Geography; convenient to home	79	22	67	-	3	8	51	36	-	7	34	6	313	40%	
To improve social standing/status	7	4	2	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	15	2%	
Doctrine	117	95	57	3	7	21	72	65	-	22	20	44	523	63%	3rd
Availability of single men/single women	4	4	5	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	15	2%	
To make social contacts	17	6	5	1	-	-	3	2	-	2	5	3	44	5%	
To make business contacts	1	2	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	6	1%	
Better Sunday School, etc., for children	119	67	57	-	1	3	20	21	-	3	14	14	319	39%	
Intellectual environment	54	9	10	2	1	3	21	10	1	7	9	22	149	18%	
New building facilities	5	7	8	-	-	7	2	3	-	-	1	-	33	4%	
Social activities	30	10	29	3	-	2	2	3	-	4	4	3	90	11%	
Recreational activities	20	10	33	-	-	-	2	1	-	1	1	3	71	9%	
Worship services	133	86	80	5	3	24	89	47	2	19	44	39	571	69%	1st
Family ties	32	3	9	3	-	-	21	6	-	5	6	22	107	13%	
Responses	230	106	143	10	10	33	127	83	3	36	77	57	825		

Appendix C

Responses from Those Attending Two Years or Less	First Baptist	Franklin Road Baptist	Southeast Baptist	Central Christian	First Church of God	Bellwood Church of Christ	E. Main Church of Christ	Minerva Drive Church of Christ	Stone's River Church of Christ	First Cumberland Presbyterian	St. Mark's Methodist	First Presbyterian	Totals		
The minister	11	42	33	2	1	8	15	9	1	11	17	14	164	66%	3rd
Friendliness of congregation	23	20	42	2	2	6	14	10	18	11	15	11	174	70%	2nd
Convenient to recreational activities	4	-	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	10	4%	
Geography; convenient to home	12	7	15	-	3	-	6	9	2	2	3	1	60	24%	
To improve social standing/status	2	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	2	7	3%	
Doctrine	12	44	22	-	4	5	8	10	10	7	9	8	139	56%	4th
Availability of single men/single women	3	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	2%	
To make social contacts	6	1	6	2	-	-	1	1	-	1	3	5	26	10%	
To make business contacts	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3	1%	
Better Sunday School, etc., for children	21	27	25	-	-	1	2	4	4	-	3	2	89	36%	
Intellectual environment	9	3	4	1	-	-	1	3	8	1	4	3	37	15%	
New building facilities	1	-	1	-	-	2	1	2	-	-	-	-	7	3%	
Social activities	7	2	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	4	1	18	7%	
Recreational activities	6	-	17	-	1	-	1	1	-	2	2	-	30	12%	
Worship services	18	41	35	3	2	2	15	13	16	7	13	14	179	72%	1st
Family ties	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	5	2%	
Responses	34	52	51	3	5	8	18	16	20	11	17	14	249		