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“The Declining Presbyterian Church”

This Thesis is in partial fulfillment of the Senior Seminar Requirement in Religious Studies

Joshua A. Edwards

Nadieszda Kizenko, Ph. D; Research Advisor

December 2017

Abstract

In this thesis I will discuss how the Presbyterian Church has been declining in membership and in the number of people attending weekly services. Within this study, I use my own church, Niagara Presbyterian Church in Niagara Falls, NY as a case study to further prove what is happening within the Presbyterian Church. Though the trend of declining church attendance can be seen across most denominations, I will show how the Presbyterian Church specifically is struggling and show why it is unique in its situation along with other characteristics of the decline that have happened across the denominations. I close out the thesis by giving some advice for how to try and slow the decline and possibly bring more members into the church, first by specifically referring to Niagara Presbyterian Church than expanding to churches in general that are facing these issues.

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The Declining Church

The Christian Church in America has been a center for people's lives in cases of how people acted and lived their daily lives since the beginning of the Seventeenth Century.¹ Religion in all shapes and forms has been something that people tend to be drawn to as it helps them cope with life and gives them something to believe in. However, there has been cases where the number of people attending churches has dropped and continue to drop due to changes in culture and personal beliefs among other factors.² The Presbyterian Church, specifically the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), has been greatly affected by these staggering changes in the culture as it has been facing a large decrease in the number of members in the church. In this study, I will look to determine what the causes of this decline in churches across all denominations, but I will also look at what has made the Presbyterian Church unique in its decline. As a case study, I will look at my own church, Niagara Presbyterian Church in Niagara Falls, NY to show the effects the declining church attendance is having on the church and how the issues in the church has driven people away from the Presbyterian Church as a whole.

With the church consistently declining over the last decade, I have questioned how much more the Presbyterian Church can handle before possibly becoming extinct as a denomination. As a future pastor, it is important to me to know the aspects of the Christian Church as a whole

¹ Bishop, Curtis. "Christian Church History: In the United States of America." (Masters Thesis, University of Michigan-Flint, 1996).

<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/117961/Bishop.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

²Glaeser, Edward L., and Bruce I. Sacerdote. "Education and Religion." *Journal of Human Capital* 2, no. 2 (2008): 189. www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/590413.; Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 17-24; Smith, Peter. "Presbyterian leaders try to make sense of dwindling membership." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. May 23, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017.

<http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2016/05/23/Presbyterian-leaders-try-to-make-sense-of-dwindlingmembership/stories/201605220198>.

; Wulff, Keith M. "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?" *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 1 (2011): 1-7.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940714>.

and what may be causing it to suffer through declining attendance. Since this is the case, I plan to use my research as a future tool for when I become a pastor and to possibly help Niagara Presbyterian realize some of their weaknesses. From this study, I have come to realize even further that the divide in Niagara Presbyterian is even larger than anticipated and that some of the people I spoke to remain in denial about the issues at stake. Since this is the case, some of the issues have caused the church to suffer further than just the declining church attendance.

The Growth of Atheism

The trend of declining church membership and attendance can be seen all across the map for churches in general. This is not limited to the Christian Church, as it can be seen in the Jewish community as well.³ According to Phil Zuckerman, a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, CA., “[i]n the United States, somewhere between 23% and 28% of American adults have no religious affiliation, and these so-called ‘nones’ are not only growing in number, but they are becoming increasingly secular in their behaviors and beliefs.”⁴ Zuckerman also argues that “[a]mong Millennials - Americans in their 20s - over 35% are non-religious, constituting the largest cohort of secular men and women in the nation’s history.”⁵ Based off of these stats, Atheists, people who do not believe in God, are becoming more prominent in American society. Recently in New Mexico, a group of Atheists put up a billboard display with the words “just skip church, it's all fake news” pictured with a nativity

³ Knopf, Rabbi Michael. "What's driving Jews away from synagogues? Not dues, but 'membership'." Haaretz.com. May 26, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/rabbis-round-table/premium-1.721558>. ; Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging_b_9889398.html.

⁴ Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging_b_9889398.html.

⁵ Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging_b_9889398.html.

scene.⁶ Also according to the article, the National Program Director for American Atheists, Nick Fish “says the billboard's goal is to try and start a conversation by reminding people that there are millions of atheists in the country.”⁷ With publicity stunts like this one, people may be more tempted to join the movement and become an atheist themselves. Based off of the movie “God’s Not Dead,” one can imagine that one of the causes for someone to become an atheist is that they have some tragic event happen to them where they are left feeling that God has abandoned them, therefore, he does not exist simply because if he did, he would have prevented the tragic event from happening.⁸ Brian Clinton, a veteran pastor of fourteen years, in his article, “4 Major Reasons Why People Become Atheists,” argues that people become atheists because a person wants to have more moral independence and be separate from God’s rule, the person desires global unity and does not want to criticize other people for their religious beliefs, or they simply are not receiving all the answers for why things in a specific faith are the way they are so they would rather stay neutral on the issues.⁹ Since churches have been unable to adapt to these conditions because of their beliefs, I believe it is part of the reason why it has become more difficult for churches to expand their borders and welcome more people in. Atheists continue to push people to favor their beliefs and with over 35% millennial population being non-religious, it makes for an interesting case for why people of that age group have been lacking in the church.¹⁰

This has not even factored in any of the other reasons why millennials have no interest in the

⁶ "Atheists Call Church 'Fake News'." WNYT NewsChannel 13. December 07, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://wnyt.com/news/atheists-call-church-fake-news/4698429/>.

⁷ "Atheists Call Church 'Fake News'." WNYT NewsChannel 13. December 07, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://wnyt.com/news/atheists-call-church-fake-news/4698429/>.

⁸ Clinton, Brian. "4 Major Reasons Why People Become Atheists." Cross Examined. October 01, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://crossexamined.org/4-major-reasons-people-become-atheists/>. ; *God's Not Dead*. DVD. Directed by Harold Cronk. Pure Flix, 2014.

⁹ Clinton, Brian. "4 Major Reasons Why People Become Atheists." Cross Examined. October 01, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://crossexamined.org/4-major-reasons-people-become-atheists/>.

¹⁰ Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging_b_9889398.html.

church and over a quarter of that population of non-church going millennials have been accounted for.¹¹ I believe that if the millennial population is not attracted to the church in some way, then the church will continue to have its membership decline because as the older people continue to pass, there is not a new population there to replace them if the millennials refuse to attend church. A former attendee of Niagara Presbyterian Church who requested not to be named, so for the purpose of this study they will be referred to as Tim, said “[c]ulture has played a big part in the separation of young people and the church. The society in which we live is becoming more secular. Moreover, each generation of new Americans is becoming farther and farther removed from any church influence from family.”¹² If this is truly the case, then the church needs to adapt in some sort of way to try influence not only the youth but also the family as a whole.

Disconnect With Leadership

With the idea of more modern life and new ideas within culture, more people have tended to become disconnected with faith as a whole.¹³ Some studies argue that people are starting not to relate to their religious leaders which causes them to leave the church.¹⁴ Since people are used to old ways of doing things, many times they are unwilling to accept new leadership. Thom Rainer, a well-respected former pastor and now researcher of issues in the church, wrote a book

¹¹ Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging> .

¹² "Tim" (Former Attendee of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 04, 2017. This was in reference to question 7 about why they believe there has been a decline in younger people in church.

¹³ Zuckerman, Phil. "Religion Declining, Secularism Surging." The Huffington Post. May 12, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/phil-zuckerman/religion-declining-secularism-surging> .

¹⁴ Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 17-24; Smith, Peter. "Presbyterian leaders try to make sense of dwindling membership." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. May 23, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2016/05/23/Presbyterian-leaders-try-to-make-sense-of-dwindling-membership/stories/201605220198> . ; Wulff, Keith M. "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?" *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 1 (2011): 1-7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940714> .

called *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, which was a study of fourteen churches that had closed and he explains the top reason why churches have closed. Rainer argues in this book that in dying churches, “[s]ome would not accept any new pastor except that one pastor who served thirty years ago.”¹⁵ Many of the people who grew up in the 1990s have decided they no longer need church and lose their religious beliefs almost completely.¹⁶ According to Rev. Wellman, a professor of American religion, culture and politics at the University of Washington in Seattle, many of his students have “zero interest in religion” because of the fact they tend to be more secular.¹⁷ Since there has been less people joining the church from newer generations, the older generations tend to cling to the past which leads them to not attract more younger people.¹⁸ This is something that is general concern around churches but has also been seen as an issue at Niagara Presbyterian.¹⁹ For example, Chris Vander Does, a current member of Niagara Presbyterian and is a member of session said “Younger people seem to want a more visual experience with the screen, TVs, coffee bars, power point, etc. They also want a different style of music.”²⁰ I believe that as a result of not willing to adapt, the church is no longer able to see the

¹⁵ Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 22.

¹⁶ Wulff, Keith M. "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?" *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 1 (2011): 1-7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940714>.

¹⁷ Smith, Peter. "Presbyterian leaders try to make sense of dwindling membership." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. May 23, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2016/05/23/Presbyterian-leaders-try-to-make-sense-of-dwindlingmembership/stories/201605220198>.

¹⁸ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. ; Jennifer Pauly (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger, December 03, 2017. ; Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. All of these interviews address this issue in question 7 of their interviews which asks why they believe younger people are not coming to church.

¹⁹ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. ; Jennifer Pauly (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger, December 03, 2017. ; Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. All of these interviews address this issue in question 7 of their interviews which asks why they believe younger people are not coming to church.

²⁰ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 7 of the interview when asked why younger people were not coming to church.

new ideas of what teenagers want and as a result end up not being able to relate to what is being told to them. If people believe that if they are no longer able to connect with the ideas being presented in the church, then they may reach the feeling that the Bible and the teachings from service no longer apply to them. The people lose touch with what the scripture means and as a result take it out of context instead and do not receive the true meaning of church. If they have reached such a conclusion, it eventually leads them to not want to be involved in the church. Chris Vander Does went on to say in his response to the question about why younger people aren't attending church by saying "There are also kid activities that are only done on Sunday morning, such as hockey leagues, etc."²¹ David Vander Does, a 19 year old member at Niagara Presbyterian Church is one of the few younger members that Niagara Presbyterian has left, said in his interview that he "believe[s] young people are not coming to church because they would rather play video games. Also sermons are not group inclusive or fun to hear/watch."²² Similar tones were set in both Kerri Vander Does', a member of Niagara Presbyterian Church and the Clerk of Session, and Jennifer Pauly's, current member of Niagara Presbyterian and pianist for the church, interviews as they both touched on the idea of youth being too involved in other school activities.²³ In Kerri Vander Does' interview she stated that "[o]ther activities came up that made parents have to choose what is more important church or sports so my kid can get a

²¹ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 7 of the interview when asked why younger people were not coming to church.

²² David Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 06, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 7 of the interview when asked why younger people were not coming to church.

²³ Jennifer Pauly (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger, December 03, 2017. ; Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. Both of these interviews address this issue in question 7 of their interviews which asks why they believe younger people are not coming to church.

scholarship?”²⁴ Based off of some of the interviews I have noticed that families are no longer attending church as much as they used to. Kerri Vander Does mentioned in her interview that “Children are more likely to go to church if both parents go to church” which is less common now due to divorce rates and people having to work on Sundays where in the 60s this was more part of the family routine and prior the 60s, the “church was what a community was centered around.”²⁵ Kerri Vander Does also argues that “churches are not always family friendly. They say they are but that is not always the truth.”²⁶ By having this disconnect with the family and not being able to adapt to what families need, it has led to people not being as interested in going to the church or people putting other priorities ahead of going to church. Even in the case of older people, they sometimes struggled with being able to relate to the material because it was not expressed well. If people are not able to know the “importance of having a relationship with Christ and how to engage in it”²⁷ as former member Janice Farnham put it in her interview, then people will lack the sense of understanding of the point of church. I believe that this process of putting priorities ahead of the church is not necessarily a quick an easy one but rather one that morphs over time as a result of continuous issues in understanding or simply that people are stuck in the mindset that other features of life such as athletics, shopping, and working among others, are far more important than the church. However, even with this process of deciding to leave a church for other priorities, I do not think it is something someone thinks about often,

²⁴ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 7 about why younger people were not attending the church.

²⁵ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 7 about why younger people were not attending the church.

²⁶ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 7 about why younger people were not attending the church.

²⁷ Janice Farnham (Former Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 08, 2017. This was addressed in question 7 specifically with younger people however it remains true in all cases.

causing it just to happen as a result of what seems more appealing to the individual at the time. As these things tend to build up, I believe they push religion further down the totem pole which leads to a further disconnect from the church since they are attending the church less frequently as result.

Another reason I believe that people are struggling to connect with the religious leaders is because some pastors struggle with the idea of evangelism. In a survey of pastors done by Thom Rainer, he discovered the number one thing pastors wish they had been told before becoming a pastor was that they “wish someone had taught me basic leadership skills”²⁸ Since they lack leadership they as a result struggle with the evangelism part of the job. If someone is unable lead, even if they are extremely intelligent, it will be very difficult for that person to explain what they are trying to teach. In my observations of Niagara Presbyterian Church, I have personally seen the issue of there being very knowledgeable people in charge, however since they are so knowledgeable, they struggle with trying to share their knowledge with others. This was a common issue with our former pastor as he would constantly talk above people’s heads and not explain himself in a clear way that anyone could understand. As a result of the confusion, this sometimes leads to people be more disconnected and not able to understand what is going on. In my opinion, this struggle seems clearest when members of larger age gaps are talking about issues and concepts of the religion/church. In the interviews I did with some of the members of the church and former members of the church, this concept was clear. Janice Farnham cites multiple times in her interview that “the lack of leadership” was her main reason for leaving the

²⁸ Rainer, Thom. "Ten Things Pastors Wish They Knew Before They Became Pastors." ThomRainer.com. March 09, 2013. Accessed December 04, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/03/ten-things-pastors-wish-they-knew-before-they-became-pastors/> .

church.²⁹ Janice Farnham goes on to say that “[t]he Pastor needed help, direction and accountability for his actions”³⁰ in referencing some of the issues with the leadership that Niagara Presbyterian was under at the time of her departure. When Jennifer Pauly was asked about what she believed has caused people to leave Niagara Presbyterian, her response was this:

[There is a] lack of leadership. Also I think that my age group (just turned 40) and younger are connected socially in so many ways. To attract that group messages need to be dynamic and perhaps in tune to the "times". Worship can still be authentic while appealing to a younger demographic. My age group has young kids. We want worship to be applicable to everyday life. We need guidance. We want purpose.³¹

Since people have seen this issue at hand, Niagara Presbyterian fails to bridge the age gap and refuses at times to try and adapt with the times. If pastors are unable to bridge the age gap and do not continue to create disciples through the pastor’s evangelism, then they are not accomplishing the goal of the Gospel. As Jesus says in Matthew 4:19, “...‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’” This verse tells the disciples to go out and tell people the good news and to preach God’s word. By doing so, we are able to bring people to God and to strengthen their beliefs. However, by having a disconnect with a congregation, it becomes difficult for people to be able to follow the faith and do what God has asked of them in the Bible if they are unsure of what the Bible is telling them to do. I believe that some pastors put themselves in a higher position than the other people within the church, even though they are no different than the average person. Even though everyone sins, people often look to the pastor as being an example

²⁹ Janice Farnham (Former Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 08, 2017. This was addressed in questions 2 and 8 when talking about the main reason people left the church and her own personal reason for leaving the church.

³⁰ Janice Farnham (Former Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 08, 2017. This was addressed in question 8 when talking about her own personal reason for leaving the church.

³¹ Jennifer Pauly (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger, December 03, 2017. This was her response to question 2 explaining what she believes people have left Niagara Presbyterian.

for what they preach. This goes back to Rainer's study in the instance that Pastors did not expect to have needed strong leadership skills in order to preach.³² If Pastors cannot relate to their congregation, it becomes difficult to get the message out and leads the congregation size to dwindle and be less engaged. According to Rainer, Younger Pastors also tend to fall short because "[t]hey don't continue their education. Education should not end with seminary or Bible College. It should be ongoing, either formal or informal."³³ If pastors refuse to try and advance their knowledge, they are then as a result, unable to build on their prior knowledge and present something new to their congregation. Expanded knowledge can only benefit a pastor, or anybody for that matter, and as a result be helpful tool when trying to teach. With expanded knowledge of the Bible, people are able to grow in their faith and become better people in the sense of what God asks of them.

Another reason people are tending not to attend church is a result of poor leadership of the church in general. People in churches tend to leave the church when they no longer feel that their needs are being met.³⁴ People start to search elsewhere for the chance that they will be able to have their needs met.³⁵ According to Thom Rainer, "all the research studies of which [he is] aware, including [his] own, return to one major theme to explain the exodus of church members: a sense of some need not being filled. In other words, these members have ideas of what a local congregation should provide for them, and they leave because those provisions have not been

³² Rainer, Thom. "Ten Things Pastors Wish They Knew Before They Became Pastors." ThomRainer.com. March 09, 2013. Accessed December 04, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/03/ten-things-pastors-wish-they-knew-before-they-became-pastors/>.

³³ Rainer, Thom. "Eight Common Mistakes Rookie Pastors Make." ThomRainer.com. July 25, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2016/07/eight-common-mistakes-rookie-pastors-make/>.

³⁴ Rainer, Thom. "The Main Reason People Leave a Church." ThomRainer.com. January 21, 2013. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/>.

³⁵ Rainer, Thom. "The Main Reason People Leave a Church." ThomRainer.com. January 21, 2013. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/>.

met.”³⁶ An issue that is common is that church leaders tend to care more about their personal wants rather than the ideas that would benefit the church as a whole because they want the church to be shaped how they feel is best for the church, even when others may disagree.³⁷ An example of this is when leadership of the church is mostly older, they may want to keep things the older ways because that is what they prefer and are used to. This goes into the idea that the past is key to people and has been evident in Niagara Presbyterian. Gary Ashby, a current member of Niagara Presbyterian and a member of their church session, stated that “The people who have joined over the last couple of years have stated one reason they chose Niagara was a more traditional form of worship.”³⁸ However, these numbers are not many, in the last year, Niagara Presbyterian has only gained one member and from my own personal observations, maybe two or three new people have attended service consistently since the start of 2017.³⁹ This goes back to the idea that Niagara Presbyterian is failing to bring in younger members because they would rather go with what they are used to and prefer. Out of the four new members the church brought in from 2016 and 2017, the youngest was 35 years old while the other three were above the age of 60. According to Rainer’s study on why people leave a church, he shared some

³⁶ Rainer, Thom. "The Main Reason People Leave a Church." ThomRainer.com. January 21, 2013. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/> .

³⁷ Ellison, Christopher G., Wei Zhang, Neal Krause, and John P. Marcum. "Does Negative Interaction in the Church Increase Psychological Distress? Longitudinal Findings from the Presbyterian Panel Survey." *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2009): 409-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40376094>. ; Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 47-53.; Smith, Peter. "Presbyterian leaders try to make sense of dwindling membership." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. May 23, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2016/05/23/Presbyterian-leaders-try-to-make-sense-of-dwindlingmembership/stories/201605220198>.

³⁸ Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 8 in explaining why he thinks that Niagara Presbyterian as a result is not stuck in the past.

³⁹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. The records show 1 member added in 2017 on December 3, 2017. Our last member prior to this was December 11, 2016. In 2016 the church gained only 3 members. 3 out of the 4 new members are above the age of 60 while the youngest was 35.

of the reasons people stated for why they decided to leave their churches. These were some direct quotes from their exit interviews:

“The worship leader refused to listen to me about the songs and music I wanted.”

“The pastor did not feed me.”

“No one from my church visited me.”

“I was not about to support the building program they wanted.”

“I was out two weeks and no one called me.”

“They moved the times of the worship services and it messed up my schedule.”

“I told my pastor to go visit my cousin and he never did.”⁴⁰

This can be observed in my home church of Niagara Presbyterian as it becomes evident that people are not joining the church as regularly and people are also leaving the church because they feel that they are not part of the community and their needs are not being met. We have so many older people in our church that once they die, we have been unable to have youth or other families fill their place to fill the voids left by the deaths. The community surrounding Niagara Presbyterian has not come to the church and has not been reached out to by the church either. According to Rainer, this is one of the biggest issues churches face when it comes to them dying out.⁴¹ If churches are unable to try and draw on the community, it becomes difficult for them to be able to reach out and expand. Niagara Presbyterian has a tendency to stay in a tight knit community and fails to try and open its doors to everyone in the community. Niagara Presbyterian struggles with this immensely in the sense that they create events that are meant to be open for everyone, yet they fail to advertise them to everyone else in the community. An example of these type of events include Vacation Bible School, The Living Nativity Scene, which is held for about a week and half nightly outside of the front of the church, basket auctions, and different Bible readings. Niagara Presbyterian often only advertises these events on

⁴⁰ Rainer, Thom. "The Main Reason People Leave a Church." ThomRainer.com. January 21, 2013. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/> .

⁴¹ Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 25-30.

their Facebook group, which most only see if they are a member of the group, prior to service during announcements and occasionally on one half of the church sign in front of the church that only one way of traffic is able to see when driving past the church. This year, they did pay for a billboard to advertise the Living Nativity Scene but it did not go into details of what that entailed. Flyers tend not to be posted at local businesses around the community and the word of mouth concept of advertising can only go so far. Since this is the case, most of these events tend to only be attended by the people who normally attend church service. This is problematic because the church is supposed to be somewhere that is supposed to be open to everyone.⁴² Robert Velarde, an author and editor of Christian works, said in his piece “What is the Church?,” “[e]dification is also a role of the church. It involves edifying believers, but also nurturing, building up or helping believers to mature in Christ.”⁴³ Velarde also goes on to say that “[s]ince people often have questions or doubts about Christ and Christianity, knowing the truth and being able to defend it (apologetics) is also part of the role of the church. But beyond evangelism in the sense of reaching out with the gospel, the church must also express compassion and mercy tangibly by helping others. In following Christ's example to love others, the church, too, must seek to make a real difference in the world while not neglecting to share the message of Christ.”⁴⁴ I have observed over the last few years when new people attend Niagara Presbyterian, there is a tendency that these people are treated more like outsiders than potential members of the church. An example of this was when I invited a few of my friends and family to service when I preached that had never been to the church. For the most part, my friends and family were

⁴² Velarde, Robert. "What Is the Church?" Focus on the Family. 2009. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/the-study-of-god/why-study-god/what-is-the-church> .

⁴³ Velarde, Robert. "What Is the Church?" Focus on the Family. 2009. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/the-study-of-god/why-study-god/what-is-the-church> .

⁴⁴ Velarde, Robert. "What Is the Church?" Focus on the Family. 2009. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/the-study-of-god/why-study-god/what-is-the-church> .

ignored by the members and leadership of the church as if they were not there. Another case was when I brought my girlfriend at the time to service, in which she was treated by some members with snarky comments and no one ever said that it was nice to meet her or that they hoped she would come to service again at some point. A final example within my own experiences of Niagara Presbyterian not being a welcoming environment was the church's Youth Group which now ceases to exist. On multiple occasions, we would have people come to the Youth Group meetings for one week and be treated as if they were outsiders and not encouraged to join in conversations or any of the activities by the other members of the youth group. The Youth Group was a click that if you were not part of that group of people prior to coming to Youth Group, you were more than likely not to fit in. I even experienced this my senior year following my wrestling season as I was told that I was not a member of Youth Group but rather now a guest because of my absences during wrestling season. If this is the environment people are experiencing all over in churches, then I imagine that they struggle with feeling comfortable joining a church community, often causing them to turn away from the idea because they are not brought into a comforting environment and as a result are seen more as outsiders in a place where they do not belong.

The Past Is Golden

The trend of declining congregations can also be seen when people live in the past and are not willing to advance with the times. People tend to raise these past figures, such as former Pastors and other people of high standing within the church, up as heroes, people who saved their church and made it a great place.⁴⁵ In Rainer's study on the main reasons churches continue to

⁴⁵ Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 17-24.; Wulff, Keith M. "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?" *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 1 (2011): 1-7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940714>.

fail, he observes that churches are unwilling to modernize and move on from the past. Rainer refers to the idea by saying “the Past is hero.”⁴⁶ Not only do churches tend to look at past figures as being heroes of the church but they also look at some of the old aspects of the church and would prefer to keep them rather than go out of their way to try and improve the situation, even if they think it may be for the better because they are used to the old ways. This is very evident at Niagara Presbyterian and can be seen in almost every interview I had with members and former members of the church. When asked if he believed the church was living in the past and holding past figures as heroes, Gary Ashby stated, “[n]ot at all, of course you would like to see a church geared to your age group [meaning the millennials], but that group makes up a small fraction of the congregation. The people who have joined over the last couple of years have stated one reason they chose Niagara was a more traditional form of worship.”⁴⁷ After hearing this response, I was led to believe that this shows that, in Gary’s point of view, the church is unwilling to advance with the times to bring more people into the church even though he believes personally that the church does not hold the past as their ideal direction. Kerri Vander Does said this about the church when asked if she believed the church was living in the past:

Yes!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This is very true of Niagara Presbyterian Church. “I remember when we had 2 weeks of Vacation Bible School.” “I remember when we had the bus that went around and picked up kids in the neighborhood for Sunday School.” “I remember when all the rooms were full for Sunday School.” “I remember when we had to bring chairs into the sanctuary because there were so many people.” I remember when... fill in the blank. The other one is "we've always done it this way." “I remember when we had a hundred kids at Vacation Bible School.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Rainer, Thom S. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville, TN: B& H Publishing Group, 2014. 20.

⁴⁷ Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 8 in explaining why he thinks that Niagara Presbyterian as a result is not stuck in the past.

⁴⁸ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 8 about the church living in the past.

Kerri's response to this question was the most enthusiastic and gave a long explanation on this one as she really believes that it is a huge problem at Niagara Presbyterian and as a result sets the church back. She addresses this later in her answer by saying "[m]aybe the best fix is to remind those who do the 'I remember when...' that this is a different time and even if we only reach one child it is worth it."⁴⁹ Chris Vander Does explained in his response in a similar way to his wife by saying "There have been times when I have heard of people doing the "remember when" thing. They will bring up Pastor Devine and Pastor Burkley and things like, 'I remember when each Sunday School room was filled'. Or, 'I remember when the puppets did three shows a week.' Or, 'I remember when we had 100 kids for VBS.'"⁵⁰ Janice Farnham even mentions that "Niagara is stuck in The 50's 60's and 70's. People like the church as it is and even upgrading the appearances was hard to do."⁵¹ Another example of the Church living in the past can be seen in the hymn choice according to David Vander Does as he said "[w]e always hear how many people in the church had in years past or with the new music that it doesn't fit how the church used to be or people still think it should be."⁵² Since it has become such a battle over the way to do things, I have observed that Niagara Presbyterian has tended to stick to the old stuff rather than try and improve as Gary Ashby explained in his answer.⁵³ With people living in the past, they are unable to advance their churches and tend to only look at the negative aspects of the

⁴⁹ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 8 about the church living in the past.

⁵⁰ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 8 of the interview when asked if Niagara Presbyterian was living in the past.

⁵¹ Janice Farnham (Former Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 08, 2017. This was addressed in question 9 when asked about if Niagara Presbyterian was living in the past.

⁵² David Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 06, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 8 of the interview when asked if Niagara Presbyterian was living in the past.

⁵³ Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 8 in explaining why he thinks that Niagara Presbyterian as a result is not stuck in the past.

church; rather than trying to improve them they end up just sticking with the same old past ideas they are used to. If people look only at the negative aspects, they are hurting the church in the sense they are unable to grow as a community and be able to have the church advance with the growing times of society. This becomes most common among the older people in the Church as they get too attached to what they are used to and what worked before, that they are unwilling to try something new.

Church on the Holy Days

America no longer lives in the world of the Great Awakening of the nineteenth century and other spiritual uprisings where the church is the center of life. Church has become something people take a luxury as they believe that they do not necessarily have to attend service to be considered a Christian. This argument has been presented in many fashions but including the idea “that [we] are the Church; that God is all around and ever-present and within [us]. And so wherever [we] find [ourselves]....that ground is holy. When your mind and heart are oriented toward the things of God, your very life is an act of worship”⁵⁴ This argument was presented in an article titled “Relax Christians, You Don’t Have to Go to Church” by a twenty year veteran of the ministry, John Pavlovitz who has done studies on the worries of the church and how the church operates. Based on my case study of Niagara Presbyterian Church and talking with others who attend different churches, it is always common to have more people at a Christmas and Easter Services than it is your typical Sunday service.⁵⁵ The stereotype of the “Christeaster”

⁵⁴ Pavlovitz, John. "Relax Christian, You Don't Have to Go to Church." John Pavlovitz. September 04, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2016/09/04/relax-christian-you-dont-have-to-go-to-church/>.

⁵⁵ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. For example, in 2011, our best turnout, we had 165 people on Easter Sunday and 135 people between our Christmas Services while our average attendance for a regular Sunday service that year was 82.44 people. Even in 2016, our worst year up until that point, while we had 97 people on Easter Sunday and only 56 between the two Christmas Services, our average for a regular Sunday service was 58.8 people. For Christians who only attend these two services, see here: ⁵⁵ "8 Reasons Why Some People Only Come to Church on Christmas and Easter." Shepherd

Christian (someone who only comes to church on these two holidays) has become more common and acceptable in American religions. In many cases, the people who attend these services are not actual members of the church and they are just going to church because they believe it is the right thing to do on these significant Christian holidays.⁵⁶ However, even the “Christeaster” effect has shown to have declined in recent years while looking at the yearly church attendance records for Niagara Presbyterian. In 2010, Niagara Presbyterian Church had 124 people at Easter service and the church had a peak of 165 in 2011.⁵⁷ However, in 2017, Niagara Presbyterian Church only had 83 people in church on Easter Sunday.⁵⁸ This trend also showed at Christmas time, which took an even more drastic drop. Christmas and Christmas Eve 2010 the church had a combined total of 114 people in service and peaked in 2012 when the church had 140 people between the two services.⁵⁹ However, in 2016, the church had a very low turnout with only 56

Project Ministries. July 30, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://shepherdproject.com/8-reasons-why-some-people-only-come-to-church-on-christmas-and-easter/> .; Lupfer, Jacob. "In Defense of Christmas-and-Easter Christians." The Atlantic. December 24, 2014. Accessed December 09, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/in-defense-of-christmas-and-easter-christians/384031/> .

For Jews who only attend on the Holy Days, see here: Yolcut, Rabbi Elianna. "Only Go to Shul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Here's why." Haaretz. September 07, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2017.

<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/rabbis-round-table/.premium-1.617400>.

⁵⁶ "8 Reasons Why Some People Only Come to Church on Christmas and Easter." Shepherd Project Ministries. July 30, 2017. Accessed December 09, 2017. <http://shepherdproject.com/8-reasons-why-some-people-only-come-to-church-on-christmas-and-easter/> .; Lupfer, Jacob. "In Defense of Christmas-and-Easter Christians." The Atlantic. December 24, 2014. Accessed December 09, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/in-defense-of-christmas-and-easter-christians/384031/> .

⁵⁷ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. According to the church attendance records the church had 124 in 2010 and our biggest turnout was in 2011 with 165 people.

⁵⁸ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. 2017 was the church’s worst year according to the records with a low attendance rating of 83.

⁵⁹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. According to the Church Attendance Records, the church had 114 between the two Christmas services in 2010 and the church attendance peaked in 2012 to 140 between the two services.

people attending between the two services.⁶⁰ It should be noted also that people also sometimes attended both the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Services but the numbers are still very low compared to previous years. The holy holidays have become less important to people as the ideas of society have become more commercialized.⁶¹ Amy Sullivan who covers Religion and Politics for Time Magazine said “Americans had embraced a civil religion that among other things elevated the ideal of family to a sacrosanct level. The Norman Rockwell image of family gathered around the tree became a Christmas icon that rivaled the baby Jesus.”⁶² People tend to forget the true meaning of these holidays (The life of Christ) and have now transformed them into the idea of gifts and other things.⁶³ Sullivan closes her article by referring to one of the pastors she talked to by saying that “he considered regular Sunday services at his church to be “seeker-friendly,” but holidays like Christmas and Easter were “seeker-focused.” The irony is that by holding Christmas Eve services that cater to first-time visitors and shuttering their doors on Christmas Day, churches often fail to meet the spiritual needs of their longtime members on one of the holiest days of the year.”⁶⁴ As a result of some of these changes in society, the church has moved down on the totem pole yet again and as a result shows reasons for why the numbers have been declining so steadily. However, it should also be noted that this trend of putting other priorities ahead of church is not unique to the holiday seasons as this happens on a weekly basis

⁶⁰ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. According to the Church Attendance Records, the church had a low of 56 people at the two Christmas services.

⁶¹ Sullivan, Amy. "Going to Church on Christmas: A Vanishing Tradition." Time. December 24, 2008. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868647,00.html> .

⁶² Sullivan, Amy. "Going to Church on Christmas: A Vanishing Tradition." Time. December 24, 2008. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868647,00.html> .

⁶³ Sullivan, Amy. "Going to Church on Christmas: A Vanishing Tradition." Time. December 24, 2008. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868647,00.html> .

⁶⁴ Sullivan, Amy. "Going to Church on Christmas: A Vanishing Tradition." Time. December 24, 2008. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868647,00.html> .

in churches.⁶⁵ As a result, it appears to me that people get the idea that if they only attend church occasionally they'll be fine and that there are a lot more important things in life than going and sitting through a service. According to a survey done by The Barna Group, a Christian polling organization, when people were asked what helps them grow in their faith, only 49% of adults said it was important to attend church service, while the other 51% disagreed and said it was unimportant.⁶⁶ With this statistic, it is able to be seen why so many people choose not to bother going to church as they do not think it is an important aspect of their life and they do not believe it grows their faith.⁶⁷ This becomes problematic for the church as they are losing people in their weekly attendance since people do not feel the need to attend service because other things in their life are more important to them.

Gays in the Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Liberal Stance

Something in the Presbyterian Church USA that has specifically been part of the reason why the number of members has declined has been the acceptance of the LGBT community. In 2012, the PCUSA decided that they were going to discuss the idea of allowing gay marriage in the Presbyterian Church.⁶⁸ Though this was slimly voted down in 2012, the Presbyterian Church experienced one of the largest drops in membership and churches within the faith in its history as

⁶⁵ Weems Jr., Lovett H. 2010. "No shows." *Christian Century* 127, no. 20: 10-11. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017).

<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.albany.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=9fe8298b-4920-4b9a-bfc9-7c03b5871af4%40sessionmgr4009>

⁶⁶ Denison, Jim. "Church Is Not Important, 51 Percent of US Adults Say." *The Christian Post*. April 02, 2014. Accessed December 10, 2017. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-is-not-important-51-percent-of-us-adults-say-117263/>.

⁶⁷ Denison, Jim. "Church Is Not Important, 51 Percent of US Adults Say." *The Christian Post*. April 02, 2014. Accessed December 10, 2017. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-is-not-important-51-percent-of-us-adults-say-117263/>.

⁶⁸ Bailey, Sarah Pulliam. "Presbyterian Church (USA) Changes Its Constitution to Include Gay Marriage." *The Washington Post*. March 17, 2015. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/03/17/presbyterian-church-changes-constitution-to-include-gay-marriage/?utm_term=.e0ddc05b34bf.

the Presbyterian Church lost over 100,000 members and almost 200 churches.⁶⁹ As a result of this decline, the PCUSA was later able to change their constitution to allow gay marriage in the Presbyterian Church in 2015.⁷⁰ Prior to this, in 2011, PCUSA changed their constitution to allow for openly gay pastors to be ordained in the church allowing Rev. Scott Anderson to become the first openly gay pastor be ordained in the Presbyterian Church.⁷¹ The Presbyterian church has been considered very liberal in their politics of the church, especially when handling the issue with gays as they have taken on this idea that not many other churches have been willing to tackle as many believe it to be sin.⁷² The idea of homosexuality being sin often comes from Leviticus 20:13 which says “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.” and from the idea of marriage being between a man and a women as it was originally done with Adam and Eve during their creation in Genesis 2.⁷³ Sam Allberry, A Pastor in the UK and a writer who has

⁶⁹ Bailey, Sarah Pulliam. "Presbyterian Church (USA) Changes Its Constitution to Include Gay Marriage." The Washington Post. March 17, 2015. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/03/17/presbyterian-church-changes-constitution-to-include-gay-marriage/?utm_term=.e0ddc05b34bf. ; "PCUSA membership drop in 2012 exceeds 2011 slide." *Christian Century* 130, no. 13:14. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017). <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.albany.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=74832caf-f03f-4e7d-8dab-dc9187d3b76d%40sessionmgr4008>.

⁷⁰ Bailey, Sarah Pulliam. "Presbyterian Church (USA) Changes Its Constitution to Include Gay Marriage." The Washington Post. March 17, 2015. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/03/17/presbyterian-church-changes-constitution-to-include-gay-marriage/?utm_term=.e0ddc05b34bf.

⁷¹ Marrapodi, Eric. "First Openly Gay Pastor Ordained in The PCUSA speaks." CNN. October 10, 2011. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/10/first-openly-gay-pastor-ordained-in-the-pcusa-speaks/>.

⁷²"PCUSA membership drop in 2012 exceeds 2011 slide." *Christian Century* 130, no. 13:14. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017).; Rodriguez, Eric M., and Suzanne C. Ouellette. "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 3 (2000): 333-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387818>.

⁷³ Allberry, Sam. "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?" Living Out. Accessed December 11, 2017. <http://www.livingout.org/the-bible-and-ssa>.

focused on Homosexuality in the church says in his article “What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?” about the verses commonly used to argue for the sin of Homosexuality that:

The plain reading of each passage [about Homosexuality] is the right one. It is homosexual practice in general, rather than only certain expressions of it, which are forbidden in Scripture. To attempt to demonstrate otherwise is to violate the passages themselves. Yet these very same texts list homosexuality alongside many other forms of behaviour that are also against God’s will. The very passages that show us that homosexual activity is a sin, make it very clear that it is not a unique sin. It is one example of what is wrong with all of us.⁷⁴

It can be seen that when the Presbyterian Church had agreed to be very tolerant of Gays and even allow them to be pastors in 2011, the decline was massive and it led to the church membership ratings to fall at a new high.⁷⁵ In 2012, 102,791 members left the Presbyterian Church along with 86 congregations being dissolved and another 110 congregations that were given permission to leave the Presbyterian association and become different denominations.⁷⁶ This trend only became worse with time as over the following four years the Presbyterian Church continued to lose members and congregations to the extent that by 2020, it is predicted that the PCUSA will have lost over 400,000 members since 2015.⁷⁷ With numbers like this, it becomes difficult for Churches to be able to survive. The Presbyterian decline has been evident

⁷⁴ Allberry, Sam. "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?" Living Out. Accessed December 11, 2017. <http://www.livingout.org/the-bible-and-ssa> .

⁷⁵ "PCUSA membership drop in 2012 exceeds 2011 slide." *Christian Century* 130, no. 13:14. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017). ; Gryboski, Michael. "PCUSA on Track to Lose Over 400K Members by 2020." *The Christian Post*. February 8, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017.

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/pcusa-presbyterian-denomination-lose-over-400-thousand-members-by-2020-157099/>. ; "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

⁷⁶ "PCUSA membership drop in 2012 exceeds 2011 slide." *Christian Century* 130, no. 13:14. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017). ; "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

⁷⁷ Gryboski, Michael. "PCUSA on Track to Lose Over 400K Members by 2020." *The Christian Post*. February 8, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/pcusa-presbyterian-denomination-lose-over-400-thousand-members-by-2020-157099/>.

as the amount of members in the PCUSA has been cut by a fourth since 2010.⁷⁸ In 2010 there were 2,016,091 members and as of the latest report from 2016, PCUSA has 1,482,767 members.⁷⁹ Since the Presbyterian Church is tolerant of gays, many people believe it has become too much of a stretch and still see gays as sinners causing them to want to leave the church. When I asked Gary Ashby why he believed people left Niagara Presbyterian, part of his response was that “[w]e have lost some people due to the PCUSA position on the ordination of practicing homosexuals, this has affected many of the more evangelical Presbyterian churches.”⁸⁰ However, what they cease to remember is that through Christian teachings, we learn that everyone is a sinner. Since everyone is a sinner, then people should be more accepting of the gays because if they were to judge everyone by the fact that they sinned, then they too should not be accepted in society, so what makes the Gays any different? Though the Presbyterian Church has often been associated as being very liberal, this has caused problems for the church and other liberal denominations as this is no longer the social norm of the times.⁸¹ It has become clear that during recent years people have become more interested in the conservative views of the church rather than the liberal views of a church.⁸² According to David

⁷⁸ "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

⁷⁹ "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>. In 2010 there were 2,016,091 members and in 2016 it had decreased to 1,482,767 members.

⁸⁰ Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 2 in explaining what he believed to be some of the main reasons why people left Niagara Presbyterian Church.

⁸¹ Haskell, David. "Liberal churches are dying. But conservative churches are thriving." The Washington Post. January 04, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/?utm_term=.506eccb951b2.

⁸² Haskell, David. "Liberal churches are dying. But conservative churches are thriving." The Washington Post. January 04, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/?utm_term=.506eccb951b2.

Haskell, a professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University, that in a study of declining Liberal Churches and rising Conservative Churches, he “found that for all measures, growing church clergy members were most conservative theologically, followed by their congregants, who were themselves followed by the congregants of the declining churches and then the declining church clergy members. In other words, growing church clergy members are the most theologically conservative, while declining church clergy members are the least.”⁸³

Churches now have tended to lean to one way or the other in a political sense. The Presbyterian Church has been historically liberal since the 1930s, however, in more recent times, the church has also been seen as being somewhere in between liberal and moderate.⁸⁴ It was noted in Peter Smith’s article “Presbyterian Leaders try to Make Sense of Dwindling Membership” he mentions that:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has seen 463 congregations nationwide depart for other denominations between 2012 and 2015, according to newly released statistics from the Louisville, Ky.-based denomination. Virtually all left for smaller, more conservative denominations such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which the historic Bellefield Presbyterian Church in Oakland joined last week after reaching a separation agreement with the Pittsburgh Presbytery. Many departing congregations reacted to liberal theological and social trends in the past five years that included the approvals of ordaining and marrying openly gay members. And while the national population as a whole has become more liberal on such topics, not one congregation has joined the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and not only is membership down, but so are rates of baptisms and confirmations.⁸⁵

⁸³ Haskell, David. "Liberal churches are dying. But conservative churches are thriving." The Washington Post. January 04, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/?utm_term=.506eccb951b2.

⁸⁴ Castellitto, A.J. "The Liberal Captivity Of The Presbyterian Church." Western Journalism. October 24, 2015.

Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://www.westernjournalism.com/the-liberal-captivity-of-the-presbyterian-church/>.; Lupfer, Jacob. "Is the PCUSA *that* Liberal? Yes." Religion and American Politics. Accessed December 11, 2017. <http://www.jacoblupfer.com/blog/2014/6/21/is-the-pcusa-that-liberal-yes>.

⁸⁵ Smith, Peter. "Presbyterian leaders try to make sense of dwindling membership." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. May 23, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.postgazette.com/local/city/2016/05/23/Presbyterian-leaders-try-to-make-sense-of-dwindlingmembership/stories/201605220198>.

Ironically, in some of my interviews, it was mentioned that Niagara Presbyterian is a more conservative church than a liberal one like the Presbyterian USA considers themselves.⁸⁶ Kerri Vander Does said in her interview about this being one of the reasons why people left the church. Kerri Vander explained this by saying:

The two largest (in my lifetime) have been the issue of abortion and more recently, the issue of homosexuality. Just like in government where you have the conservative leaning people and ideals and the liberal leaning people and ideals (and of course all those in the middle) some churches will lean more conservative and others will lean toward the liberal. Add to mix the news and trouble can happen. [Niagara Presbyterian Church] is a conservative leaning church with most of the congregation having conservative views (MOST not all) some of the rules that came down were not exactly to our way of believing and some people felt that what was coming down from higher “governing bodies” was wrong (read as immoral, sin, against God and the Bible etc.)⁸⁷

Since Niagara Presbyterian appears to be a more conservative church, it is possible this has stopped some members from leaving the church because they are a more conservative base compared to other Presbyterian Churches. Chris Vander Does mentioned in his interview that both the PCUSA and Presbytery of Western New York “have made very liberal leaning decisions that we feel are counter to the teaching of the Bible.”⁸⁸ Since there has been some issues that have been seen as counter to what the Bible teaches, churches like Niagara Presbyterian are more likely not to agree with these ideas. As a result of this, Gays in the

⁸⁶ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This issue was addressed in question 6 explaining what he believed made Niagara Presbyterian unique compared to other churches.; Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 2 about what she believed was the main reason people left Niagara Presbyterian Church. ; “Tim” (Former Attendee of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 04, 2017. This was in reference to question 2 explaining what he believed the main reason people left Niagara Presbyterian Church was.

⁸⁷ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 2 about what she believed was the main reason people left Niagara Presbyterian Church.

⁸⁸ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This was part of his response to question 1 about some of the issues that Niagara Presbyterian has been facing as a congregation

Presbyterian Church, especially conservative ones like Niagara Presbyterian, sometimes struggle with the idea of being accepted universally even though the PCUSA is accepting of them. The first openly gay NFLer Michael Sam has come forward and said he too has struggled with being accepted in a church community simply because he was gay.⁸⁹ Gays in churches all over the nation have struggled with similar things like Michael Sam as for the fact that people are not sure how to handle gays still.⁹⁰ Though the Presbyterian Church USA as a group has accepted the idea of Homosexuality, it is clear that not everyone else is on board with this issue.

Niagara Presbyterian Church and how it Matches the Presbyterian Church USA

Niagara Presbyterian Church has suffered drastically over the last seven years and seems to follow the trend of The Presbytery. The average attendance declined over the years on a weekly basis beginning in 2013 and can be seen in the churches records. Since Niagara Presbyterian has declined in attendance, it has yet to rebound from these loses just like the PCUSA. It can be seen in the table below that Niagara Presbyterian's decline aligns with decline of the PCUSA:⁹¹

⁸⁹ Michael Sam speech at the UAlbany 34th Annual Sexuality Month Keynote Speaker Event, January 30, 2017, Campus Center Ballroom.

⁹⁰ "Tony Campolo: Why Gay Christians Should be Fully Accepted Into the Church." Premier Christianity. October 27, 2016. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Tony-Campolo-Why-gay-Christians-should-be-fully-accepted-into-the-Church>.

⁹¹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. ; "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

Year	Presbyterian Church USA Membership Totals	Average Weekly Attendance	Easter Attendance	Christmas Eve Attendance	Christmas Attendance
2010	2,016,091	73.69	124	89	25
2011	1,952,287	82.44	165	77	58
2012	1,849,496	83.73	139	122	28
2013	1,760,200	75	133	74	26
2014	1,667,767	71.71	125	43	25
2015	1,572,660	64.84	83	37	25
2016	1,482,767	58.8	97	24	32
2017	TBD	TBD	83	TBD	0 (We have decided against a Christmas Day Service this Year)

What becomes interesting in the case of Niagara Presbyterian is the fact that the attendance of the church takes a dip the year after the big dip for the Presbyterian Church USA.⁹² Also, between 2010 and 2012, Niagara Presbyterian was actually growing rather than decreasing which shows that the Church seemed to be doing well even during a depression in attendance for the Presbytery as a whole.⁹³ However, in my interviews I was informed as a result of the

⁹² Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. ; "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>. The Presbyterian Church USA had lost 166,595 members between 2010 and 2012 while Niagara Presbyterian had gained about an average of 10 people at a weekly service during that same span.

⁹³ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. ; "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>. The Presbyterian Church USA had lost 166,595 members between 2010 and 2012 while Niagara Presbyterian had gained about an average of 10 people at a weekly service during that same span.

continued decline in attendance, Niagara Presbyterian has decided against having a Christmas Day Service this year. At our Thanksgiving service this year, we had 32 people in attendance, however this was also including people from three other local Presbyterian Churches in the area.⁹⁴ Kerri Vander Does pointed out in her interview that “Thanksgiving service went from Thanksgiving Day, to Thanksgiving eve, to the week of Thanksgiving as a combined 4 church service.”⁹⁵ Niagara Presbyterian however has been dealing with its own set of issues where the gay issue of the Presbytery as a whole has not been the biggest concern. Niagara Presbyterian is dealing with leadership that tended to talk over people’s heads and one that was not the best fit for the type of culture Niagara Presbyterian would want as they were looking for a church that would preach the messages from the Bible in a simple way that everyone would be able to understand. As a result of the over complications of the teachings from the leadership, it became more difficult for people to be willing to connect with the church and to want to continue to come. When asked about some of the problems with Niagara Presbyterian, Jennifer Pauly responded by saying “The church is made up of many parts but without the right pastoral leadership we miss the boat on growth. I honestly think we did not have the right pastor over the past term. While academically I think we were taught a lot of great biblical history I think we lacked life application skills and also the basic people to people contact.”⁹⁶ Due to the lack of a permanent pastor, another issue faced at Niagara Presbyterian was the idea of inconsistency. Since we have about three or four different Pastors preaching a month, I have occasionally felt

⁹⁴ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. At our Thanksgiving Service we had 32 people in attendance between 4 Presbyterian Churches.

⁹⁵ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 3 which asked what some of the effects of the decline were.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Pauly (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger, December 03, 2017. This was her response to question 1 which asked what she believed some of the issues at Niagara Presbyterian were.

confused on the ideas being preached because they tend be different viewpoints from the varying pastors. Since there were so many controversial ideas within the church, specifically revolving around the resignation of former pastor, Justin Marple, it came to the point where it was too political for some people forcing them to leave or at least attend less frequently. Pastor Justin Marple resigned last November and since Niagara Presbyterian has been without a permanent pastor. Since we have been bringing in three to four different people a month to preach, I imagine it would indeed cause people to question the state of the church and even lead them to not wanting to stay in the church. Members of Niagara Presbyterian also tended to butt heads with each other on many occasions. As of right now, pretty much two families run all of the top leadership positions in the church. Since only two families represent the majority of the leadership, I have questioned how much input the rest of the church tends to get on situations discussed by the leaders of the church. This too added to the tensions that only seemed to grow at the church. When tensions got tough, the church began to split and in some cases people went off looking for elsewhere to go. Since there has been a lack of so many people attending the church, it is hard to fill the leadership positions with people other than in those two families. It has been so difficult to fill these positions in the first point that Kerri Vander Does points out that “[r]ecently, at a congregational meeting, we had to change the bylaws regarding the elders of the church. First from 12 down to 9 a few years ago to most recently from 9 to 7. We also had to get special permission from Presbytery to allow elders and deacons to serve 3 consecutive terms instead of 2 terms and a mandatory year off.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 3 which asked what some of the effects of the decline were.

Below I will show how many times a year we received a certain amount of people in a service:⁹⁸

Year	100+	90-99	80-89	70-79	60-69	50-59	40-49	Under 39
2016	0	1	1	5	22	15	5	5
2015	0	0	3	10	20	11	2	4
2014	2	0	13	21	14	3	3	2
2013	3	2	18	12	9	8	2	3
2012	5	13	18	8	10	1	0	2
2011	5	8	20	8	9	1	1	1
2010	1	8	10	9	10	8	1	3

It has been since 2014 that Niagara Presbyterian had a Sunday service (Not including any religious holidays) where more than 100 people showed up for the service.⁹⁹ In 2017, Niagara Presbyterian has had a few services where there has been about 40 people in attendance, with the lowest attendance for 2017 at a weekly Sunday service, as of December 10, 2017, was 35 people, showing that the number of attendees continues to drop. As a result of the loss of the Pastor and his family last year and other families who have stopped coming over the last few years, Niagara Presbyterian only continues to decrease in attendance and struggles to regain the presence of people in the pews.

Niagara Presbyterian's age makeup is mostly older people who are probably 50+ years old which causes a problem with the idea of trying to keep up with the times. Most of the youth that is in the church are of college age which means they are too old to be even considered youth

⁹⁸ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585.

⁹⁹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Attendance Records 2010-2017, These records are located in the Narthex of Niagara Presbyterian Church at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585.

at this point as they are reaching the stage of being adults. Niagara Presbyterian has in recent years eliminated its youth group which has caused there to be even more limited opportunities for young people to learn, cut its Bible study which was meant for all ages, and has also eliminated other special events like the Good Friday New Testament reading. On top of this, Kerri Vander Does pointed out that during her time at the church she has noticed these things have also been eliminated due to decline in attendance:

Many programs, clubs, or activities no longer exist. For example: We have no choir, no 50+ club, no MOPS (Mothers of Pre-School) group, Sunday School is now one class where the teachers for the younger children (6th grade and under) rotate who is teaching. There is no longer a Christmas play put on by the Sunday School. Sunday services have gone from 2 services per Sunday down to 1 per Sunday. Christmas Eve service has gone from 2 services down to one service.¹⁰⁰

With the elimination of these things, not much has been done to replace them or to cause people to be more interested in being involved in the church. When families are looking for a church to attend, they try and look for the features of a church that are family oriented and give everyone in the family a chance to learn, even in some cases outside of Sunday service.¹⁰¹ According to Chris Reinolds, a pastor in North Carolina who studies different ways churches are needing to thrive, some things families look for in a church are outreach that impacts lives, development of a community rather than just a church, and the idea of trying to advance themselves as people and disciples.¹⁰² Tim, the former Niagara Presbyterian attendee, argued in his interview that “each generation of new Americans is becoming farther and farther removed from any church

¹⁰⁰ Kerri Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Facebook Messenger and Email, December 03, 2017. This came in part of her response to question 3 which asked what some of the effects of the decline were.

¹⁰¹ Reinolds, Chris. "7 Ways to Better Reach the Millennial Family." ChurchLeaders. February 10, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://churchleaders.com/children/childrens-ministry-how-tos/152627-7-ways-to-better-reach-the-millennial-family.html>.

¹⁰² Reinolds, Chris. "7 Ways to Better Reach the Millennial Family." ChurchLeaders. February 10, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2017. <https://churchleaders.com/children/childrens-ministry-how-tos/152627-7-ways-to-better-reach-the-millennial-family.html>.

influence from family”¹⁰³ which shows that the church continues to struggle with bringing in families. In my opinion, Niagara Presbyterian has struggled to be able to connect with families on this level and that has not appealed to families because they lack a sense of connection. All the programs that once existed are now non-existent or have been dismantled to the bare minimum in the sense that they are not nearly as helpful anymore. Niagara Presbyterian faces the issue of not evangelizing enough as I had mentioned earlier. In order for a church to succeed, people need to be able to have a good sense of what is going on and to be able to understand it. As a result of this, Niagara Presbyterian has lacked in the sense that it needs to expand its boundaries and be a stronger church. Since the church appears unwilling to adapt to these functions and ideas, it continues to slowly fall apart and become closer to possibly becoming a dead church.

According to the records given to me by Kerri Vander Does on the number of new members and baptisms that have taken place over the last seven years at Niagara Presbyterian, they seem to match up with some of the trends of the PCUSA. According to the Presbyterian Church USA records, the yearly totals for baptisms have been increasing among adults where in the case of children, they are declining over the past seven years.¹⁰⁴ Niagara Presbyterian goes along with the trend of the Presbyterian Church USA by having more kids baptized than adults but the total is much closer than it is in the perspective of the Presbyterian Church USA. Another way that these records show that the decline in the Presbyterian Church is happening is that it

¹⁰³ “Tim” (Former Attendee of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 04, 2017. This was in reference to question 7 about why they believe there has been a decline in younger people in church.

¹⁰⁴ “Members down 3 percent in PCUSA, adult baptisms up.” *Christian Century* 127, no. 16 (August 10, 2010): 15. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2017). <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.albany.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=9337abae-a7a2-44ef-96f0-129e4c4aba7e%40sessionmgr120>. “Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics.” PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

shows that the total number of baptism in the Presbyterian Church USA have seemed to go down as does the total amount of baptisms at Niagara Presbyterian over the last seven years.¹⁰⁵ Below is a chart comparing Niagara Presbyterian's Baptisms to the amount of Baptisms recorded by the Presbyterian Church USA:¹⁰⁶

Year	Niagara Presbyterian Child Baptisms	Presbyterian Church USA Child Baptisms	Niagara Presbyterian Adult Baptisms	Presbyterian Church USA Adult Baptisms	Niagara Presbyterian Total Number of Baptisms	Presbyterian Church USA Total Number of Baptisms
2016	0	13,427	1	4,775	1	18,202
2015	0	14,943	0	4,169	0	19,112
2014	1	17,027	2	4,634	3	21,661
2013	1	17,929	0	4,583	1	22,563
2012	5	19,862	4	6,129	9	25,991
2011	5	21,422	0	5,740	5	27,162
2010	4	22,460	1	6,148	5	28,608

As the Presbyterian Church USA continues to have less baptisms, it continues to show the trend of there being less families and younger people within the church. Niagara Presbyterian is in the same situation as they continue not to have as many baptisms in recent years. Part of this is due to not having a permanent Pastor at the church right now, however it also has to do with the fact that we do not have many young families in our church either. Since there are not many young families in our church, that also means there are not young children to be newly baptized. As the number of baptisms continue to drop, it shows there has been less people accepting Jesus as their

¹⁰⁵ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

¹⁰⁶ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

savior in the Presbyterian Church. However, this trend is not unique to the Presbyterian Church as it can be seen in other denominations such as the Baptist Church which said that in 2016 baptisms were down about 4.89% from the previous year even though there had been an increase in the number of Baptist Churches.¹⁰⁷

Though the attendance records of Niagara Presbyterian make it seem like Niagara Presbyterian is a dying church, there has been thirty-nine new members, meaning they have professed their faith to God, admitted into the church since 2010.¹⁰⁸ However, even though this number sounds encouraging, a good amount of them do not attend service on a weekly basis and some of them have not been to the church in a very long time. Even though they are technically considered members of the church, a good number of them are not active within the church and it is something that Niagara Presbyterian plans to work towards updating as we do not have a clear number of how many people are actually still involved in the church. Since the records only contain the number of people who are officially members of the church, there is currently no accurate number for how many active members the church has. Two of the thirty-nine new members since 2010 have died also so there is only thirty-seven remaining “members” who are able to remain active.¹⁰⁹ Niagara Presbyterian also has seven shut-ins who are incapable of attending service on a weekly basis which further removes from the number of members that

¹⁰⁷ Pipes, Carol. "Southern Baptists Report More Churches in 2016; Baptisms, Membership Decline." LifeWay NewsRoom. June 08, 2017. Accessed December 11, 2017.

<http://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2017/06/08/southern-baptists-report-more-churches-in-2016-baptisms-membership-decline/>.

¹⁰⁸ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585.

¹⁰⁹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. Melinda Hutchison became a member in June 2010 and later passed and Ronald McKay became a member on September 6, 2010 and later passed.

church has that are able to be active within the church. Like the Presbyterian Church USA, Niagara Presbyterian has had a decline in the number of new members who come into the Church yearly. This can be seen below¹¹⁰:

Year	Niagara Presbyterian New Members	Presbyterian Church USA New Members
2017	1	TBD
2016	3	31,866
2015	3	33,566
2014	8	37,862
2013	5	42,506
2012	7	47,838
2011	3	54,496
2010	9	59,001

As shown in the chart above, it can be seen that the church has been slowly gaining new members. However, like the amounts at the Presbyterian Church USA, the yearly total of new members at Niagara Presbyterian continues to decline.¹¹¹ If the church continues to have less new members, it will struggle to maintain a congregation as the number of members will continue to decrease as more deaths occur. If new members are not being brought into the church to replace these deaths, then the attendance and membership numbers, in all churches in general, will continue to fall. The strength of the church depends on its members and how active they are.

The trends of the PCUSA dying out can be seen all across Western New York as Gary Ashby mentioned in his interview:

¹¹⁰Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017.

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

¹¹¹ Niagara Presbyterian Church Membership/Baptism Records 2010-2017, These records were given to me by Kerri Vander Does, Clerk of Session of Niagara Presbyterian. Niagara Presbyterian Church is located at 3712 Military Rd, Niagara Falls, NY 14305 USA. The church can be reached at (716) 297-3585. "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017.

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>.

The Presbytery of Western New York had 77 churches just a decade or so ago, it now contains 50 churches. Society has changed, where the church was at one time the hub of a community, people are now more mobile and the church is less important as a social venue. We have been meeting with the other 3 PCUSA churches in Niagara Falls recently in an effort to work together in ministry and mission. Each has seen decline in recent years, NPC falls in the middle as far as significant loss.¹¹²

Though Niagara Presbyterian has been unique in some aspects of their decline, this decline has been happening all over and continues to hit churches across the board for the PCUSA. Some of the churches that have disappeared from the Presbytery of Western New York have either closed or dissolved themselves from the PCUSA, such as Colonial Village Presbyterian Church, located about ten minutes from Niagara Presbyterian Church, as a result of some of their liberal views.¹¹³ This trend is not unique to Western New York as over the last ten years, PCUSA has lost 1,369 churches due to closure or dissolving from the PCUSA.¹¹⁴ As a result of this, the decline of the PCUSA also shows all over Western New York.

Personal Advice for Fixing Niagara Presbyterian and Churches in General

As the church continues to try and work through its issues, it continues to struggle with deciding how to bring more members into the church. Niagara Presbyterian has tried a few different ideas such as hosting some new events like the Gospel Readings which were shorter than our usual New Testament Readings, and non-church related events like a Paint Night, Gem Studies, a block party that eventually turned into an after party for VBS rather than its original intent, and a few other small events however, not much progress has been made. Like service and our other annual events, the turnout was very small and they failed to advertise outside of the

¹¹² Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 1 as he explains some of the issues that Niagara Presbyterian has had.

¹¹³ Colonial Village Presbyterian Church. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.cvpchurch.org/>.

¹¹⁴ "Office of the General Assembly: Denominational Rolls and Statistics." PC(USA) OGA. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/denominational-statistics/>. In 2007, there was 10,820 churches in the PCUSA while in 2016 there were only 9,451 churches remaining in the PCUSA.

church. Even Niagara Presbyterian's yearly events like the Living Nativity Scene and Vacation Bible School have taken a hit in attendance. The community continues not to find its way to the church and as a result this has made it more difficult to try and resurrect the church. If the yearly events continue to fail and show less interest, these events may too vanish like other parts of Niagara Presbyterian. However, even during difficult times, Niagara has managed to stay semi-strong and try and work with what they can.

In my opinion, after doing this study, if churches want to try and stop this trend from continually happening, then they need to start looking at the churches internal problems and fix those first. From my interviews with some of the leadership, both Chris Vander Does and Gary Ashby seemed to focus on outside issues that they believed was the cause of the fall. Gary Ashby specifically cites the Presbytery USA for part of our issues by saying "We have lost some people due to the PCUSA position on the ordination of practicing homosexuals, this has affected many of the more evangelical Presbyterian churches."¹¹⁵ Chris Vander Does also mentions that "the starting of a new church by someone who used to go to our church has taken away several members."¹¹⁶ In my opinion, this is an issue because Niagara Presbyterian has to realize that the issues run deeper than these outside factors. The other church that Chris Vander Does references has only had services since late 2016 and the decline of Niagara Presbyterian had begun four years prior. PCUSA's position of gays has indeed driven people away from the church as I pointed out earlier, however it was also mentioned that Niagara Presbyterian was more conservative and did not agree with this stance. Niagara Presbyterian has a poor leadership setup

¹¹⁵ Gary Ashby (Member of Niagara Presbyterian), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, email, December 07, 2017. This was a portion of his answer to question 2 in explaining what he believed to be some of the main reasons why people left Niagara Presbyterian Church.

¹¹⁶ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This was part of his response to question 5 in which he explains that he believes this was part of the disconnect between the congregation and leadership.

since the church is pretty much run by these two families which causes there to be tensions and also leads to the congregation not being well represented. I think to improve this, the church needs to have a more diverse group of leadership and possibly include someone in their members who are in their early twenties on one of the committees because then they will have a younger perspective to give better insight on what needs to be fixed to attract younger people. It comes down to the idea that people tend to know their own age group better than they know other age groups' habits as there is often a mixing of stereotypes for those age groups. If the church is willing to allow input from a wide variety of people outside of these two families who pretty much run the church, more ideas may come forward. In my personal experience with the church, there has been people who complain that no one wants to step up and take leadership, however, ironically when the youth (in this case the members around the age of twenty) step up to offer to help, they often turn the help down, but then continue to complain about not having any help. If this wants to be avoided, then the church has to realize that any help is better than no help, no matter the age of the person offering the help.

Something else that I think needs to be done at Niagara Presbyterian is the expansion of social events to the community. Chris Vander Does mentions that the church has “also [begun] using social media to promote events at the church.”¹¹⁷ This expansion towards social media is huge, however, the outreach only goes so far since the church is posting these events to the Niagara Presbyterian Facebook group which only group members tend to see even though it is a public group. This outreach is not enough as there needs to be more done within the community. A good suggestion would be to go into the community and knock on doors and tell people about

¹¹⁷ Chris Vander Does (Member of Niagara Presbyterian Church), interviewed by Joshua Edwards, Email, December 03, 2017. This was part of his response to question 4 explaining what is being done to improve the church.

the events that are going on. Riverview Missionary Baptist Church, where I interned at during the Spring 2017 semester, did this for one of their events and they had a pretty decent turnout as a result. Niagara Presbyterian would not even have to go door to door in the community, they could even do something simple like posting flyers around the neighborhood and at local businesses and that is bound to bring more people to the church events. If people are unaware of the events going on at the church, then the church cannot expect people to show up to these functions. With the inclusion of the thru-way bulletin board for our annual Living Nativity Scene this year, it should be interesting to see if this helps boost the number of people who attend the event. Furthermore, on top of advertising for these events, there needs to be more of a push to mention to people who come to these events when our church service is and what other future events are going on to try and encourage them to come back. It is nice to have people there for these events, however, if we are not encouraging them to come back for things like church service, then we are losing our chance and furthering our mission of teaching God's Holy Word.

Niagara Presbyterian's biggest issue and focus right now should be on finding a new pastor. As of November 2017, the church has been over a year without a permanent pastor and as a result has caused the inconsistencies of service and shows a lack of stability in the church. With the acquisition of a new pastor, the church will be on more level ground and have more consistency within the church. Personally I am not a fan of having a different pastor preach every week because I feel as though I have to get used to a different style every service and as a result it causes me to focus more on the style rather than the message itself. I think if the church were to find a permanent pastor, it would be a huge step towards recovery and it would be a good start for fixing other issues. With a new pastor, it may also bring in new connections to the church that that pastor brings with them such as new members and new ideas.

My biggest advice to those in the Presbyterian Church and churches in general across all denominations is that in order to improve, people need to be more open to the idea of acceptance. This idea is specifically about the acceptance of Homosexuals, however it also is aimed towards the acceptance of everyone including people of different races and beliefs. In a 1963 interview, Dr. Martin Luther King said that “it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.”¹¹⁸ Though today we are not necessarily segregated in the same way that Dr. King referred to, we have still ended up not diversifying our churches. As explained earlier, churches are not fully accepting of the gays and many times, they criticize people for any kind of sin they commit. However, I ask the church then, how is this “loving your neighbor as yourself” as Mark 12:31 says to do? The church as a result is hypocritical in their teachings if they are not accepting everyone. Therefore, I suggest that the church practices exactly what they preach. I believe that people should not be discriminating against others based off of some sort of personal feature. In order for the church to be able to grow they need to be able to accept everyone for who they are, they need to realize that everyone sins and not no sin is greater than another as the Bible says. If people really want to be accepting of this like the Bible says, then people need to not criticize people for their way of living, but rather try and help them. A person cannot change who a person is, but they can help show them what they believe is the right way to live life.

Finally, I think that the church needs to attend to the needs of the people to the best of their ability. This means that they need to try and help people who are asking for help, they need to be able to preach in a way that is easy to understand, and they need to be able to communicate

¹¹⁸ Klagge, James C. "The Most Segregated Hour in America?" Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.phil.vt.edu/JKlagge/ConductorChurch.htm>.

with their members. If there is this lack of communication in all of these things, then the issues will continue. Churches need to have members on the same page rather than being so scattered and unsure of what is going on. If there is confusion, people are bound to not be as engaged in the church and may eventually decide to leave. As shown before, people often leave the church when they feel as though their needs are not being met.¹¹⁹ Again, this is something that can be prevented if churches listen to their people and try and make things better for the person asking for help. Churches that are connected with their members will be better off as I have noticed when attending Barefoot Christian Community. At Barefoot, the services tend to be more personal and engage the congregation in the service by including them in a discussion prior to the sermon. Also, the sermon that is preached at Barefoot tends to be tied to everyday life which makes relating to service much easier. Churches need to find ways like this to be able to connect with their members so there is clarification about what is going on. If members are able to better relate to the church services and feel like their needs are being engaged in some way, there is a good chance the member will decide to stay at that church because they feel like they are a part of the community and are important in the sense of the scheme of the entire church.

Final Thoughts

As the church continues to struggle with finding its base, many congregations are facing the side effects of losing members. The Presbyterian Church's experiences have been unique in the sense that they have been deemed as being too liberal and based on the fact that the church has accepted the Homosexual population in multiple ways. Though this trend does not necessarily cover all Presbyterian Churches within the PCUSA, it has been seen as the

¹¹⁹ Rainer, Thom. "The Main Reason People Leave a Church." ThomRainer.com. January 21, 2013. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://thomrainer.com/2013/01/the-main-reason-people-leave-a-church/> .

overlapping stereotype that has upset many. Common trends among churches of most denominations including the Presbytery like disconnect between members and leadership, the lack of communication between the church and the community it sits in, the growing atheist population, and churches not willing to advance with the times have been major problems for churches in their fight against this decline. At Niagara Presbyterian Church, many of the issues mentioned have been evident which has led to a further split within the church that had already been caused by their unique internal problems. The church as an institution across most denominations has faced a difficult task of trying to maintain the number of people attending their churches and as a result it has had its consequences. However, it remains possible that the church can rebound if it takes advantage of the opportunities presented to them to improve. If the church is able to rebound, who knows where it may be in the future and how many new churches and members may be created as a result.

Appendix A

Interview Guides:

1) Interview questions for current Members of the Church

1. What has been some of the issues with Niagara Presbyterian Church as a whole, in its attempt to try and keep members and bring in new members?
2. Without getting into too many details, in your opinion, what has been the main reason many people have left Niagara Presbyterian?
3. As a result of the declining attendance, what has been some of the things that have happened to the church?
4. What is being done to improve the church?
5. In my studies, I have found a common trend that people have left the church due to there being disconnect between the congregation and the leadership (specifically the pastor), in your opinion, has this been the case with Niagara Presbyterian over the last 7 years? If so please explain your reasoning.
6. What makes Niagara Presbyterian unique, if in any way, in the sense of its issues in comparison to other churches?
7. Why do you believe there are less younger people, such as people my age or even younger, attending church? Why has there been less families attracted to churches?
8. In my studies I have also seen that churches that struggle tend to look to past heroes of the church and are somewhat stuck in the past. In my observations of Niagara Presbyterian, I have found this to be true. Do you agree? If so cite examples and how this can be fixed.

2) Interview questions for those who left the Church:

1. What has been some of the issues with Niagara Presbyterian Church as a whole, in its attempt to try and keep members and bring in new members?
2. Without getting into too many details, in your opinion, what has been the main reason many people have left Niagara Presbyterian?
3. As a result of the declining attendance, what has been some of the things that have happened to the church?
4. What is being done to improve the church?
5. In my studies, I have found a common trend that people have left the church due to there being disconnect between the congregation and the leadership (specifically the pastor), in your opinion, has this been the case with Niagara Presbyterian over the last 7 years? If so please explain your reasoning.
6. What makes Niagara Presbyterian unique, if in any way, in the sense of its issues in comparison to other churches?
7. Why do you believe there are less younger people, such as people my age or even younger, attending church? Why has there been less families attracted to churches?
8. In your case, you have personally left the church, without getting into too much detail what led you to leaving the church?
9. In my studies I have also seen that churches that struggle tend to look to past heroes of the church and are somewhat stuck in the past. In my observations of

Niagara Presbyterian, I have found this to be true. Do you agree? If so cite examples and how this can be fixed.

Appendix B

List of People I Interviewed:

- 1) People who currently attend Niagara Presbyterian
 - a. Chris Vander Does (Member of Session)
 - b. David Vander Does (Member of the Church)
 - c. Gary Ashby (Member of Session)
 - d. Kerri Vander Does (Clerk to Session, Deacon)
 - e. Jennifer Pauly (Pianist)
- 2) People who have left Niagara Presbyterian
 - a. Janice Farnham (Former Member and Youth Group Leader)
 - b. “Tim” (Former Attendee)*

*This person has requested to have their name left out of this thesis, for the purpose of this study, I have changed their name to protect their identity and to be able to use what information they were willing to contribute.

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