

WHY DO PEOPLE JOIN THE CHURCHES IN ESTONIA?

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Estonia is a country of 45,227 sq. km on the east coast of the Baltic sea. In early 1996 its population numbered 1,476,031, of whom 64.6% were Estonians, 28.5% Russians, and the rest of various nationalities. The number of cities and towns in Estonia is 56. The largest cities are Tallinn, the capital, with 427,114 inhabitants, Tartu with 103,418 inhabitants, and Parnu with 51,455 inhabitants. On August 20, 1991, Estonia once again became an independent state after being a part of the Soviet Union for about fifty years.

In February 1997 Estonia had fourteen different Christian confessions (churches) registered by the Bureau of Religious Affairs. The total membership of these Christian churches in 1995 was 231,000. This means that only about 16% of the population are members of a Christian church. The largest church in Estonia is the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church with its 172,000 members (1995) (Roeder, Uudam, & Parman, 1997).

One of the trends in the religious development in the early 1990s was the increase in church-going and church membership. The high point of joining the churches was 1993. Rapidly changing societies pose interest both for sociologists and psychologists. One of the issues of interest was why people join Christian churches. The answer for this can be gleaned from various sources. In the current article the opinions of ecclesiastical and public figures publicized in the Estonian press will be considered along with some theoretical views. Then a study performed in Tartu, Estonia, will be reported.

A reaction against the communist ideology has been mentioned among the motives for joining churches. Church-joining has also been linked to personal insecurity and the inability to cope with the rapidly changing circumstances. Some think that first and foremost it is fashion that pulls people to come to church; it is just a popular thing to do. Also mentioned were family tradition and existential crisis. However, it is still predominantly accepted that people join

churches due to religious needs (Kurg, 1993; Lehtsaar, 1994; Tammo, 1992)

The question of why people join churches has been an important theoretical issue for decades. Psychologists and sociologists of religion have analyzed from different perspectives the possible reasons that bring people into church. Below are presented some of the more important ones, with illustrations.

Religious affiliation has been regarded as a result or form of religious commitment. Roberts (1990, p.18) states that religious commitment (or extent of religiosity) is measured in two components: religious consciousness and religious participation. Religious consciousness refers to a respondents' evaluation of the importance of religion in her or his life. Religious participation refers to the peoples' religious behavior and is, in most cases, related to their denominational affiliation. Rosabert Kanter (1972) identified a number of dimensions of commitment in successful religious communities. She found that commitment occurs on three different levels: commitment to the organization (instrumental commitment), commitment to other persons in the group (affective commitment), and commitment to the regulations and rules of the group (moral commitment). Though different religious groups may stress one particular type of commitment mentioned, the most successful ones practice all three levels. Usually religious involvement with a particular group begins with the commitment in one of the dimensions mentioned.

One question answered differently has been about the relationship between the conversion experience and church affiliation (Gillespie, 1991). Lofland and Skonovd (1981) have suggested that not all conversions are alike, and church affiliation depends on the type of conversion. For instance, in the case of intellectual conversion people consciously investigate religious alternatives, and after conversion they put themselves into interaction with members of a particular religious group. In the case of affectional conversion people first create positive relations with the members of a particular group. The conversion experience is a result of attendance. The conversion type (motive) determines which comes first, attendance or conversion experience.

Several other subjective reasons for affiliation have been analyzed. A person may be affiliated due to the fellowship or the status of respectability that a certain affiliation may provide (Roberts, 1990, p. 57). Lenski (1963) concluded that religion may influence a person either through the formal structure or through the informal network of friends. But belonging to a community appears to be the more important factor. Demerath (1965) found that church membership tends to be a particularly poor measure of personal religiosity. Church attendance and church affiliation are two different things. Stark and Bainbridge (1987), proceeding from the exchange theory, claim that religion is essentially an attempt to gratify desires and secure rewards. Spilka, Rood and Gorsuch (1985, pp. 242-244) discussed based on different theories five major social contingencies of church commitment: deprivation-, status-, local cosmopolitan-, socialization and the belief contingency. Each of these contingencies has different motive for joining a church.

One possibility to get an answer to the question of why people join religious organizations is to ask the people themselves. The study performed in 1995 did not proceed from any concrete opinion or theoretical conception of joining; instead, the aim was to find out the very viewpoints of those who joined a congregation. Only after such a survey could theoretical model be

developed.

Method

Sample

The subjects of the study were 94 persons who joined seven established churches in Tartu, Estonia, during the period of 1992-1994. Thirty six (36%) of the respondents were male and sixty four (64%) female. The distribution of respondents by age groups was as follows: 69 aged 29 years or younger, 17 aged 30-49, and 8 older than 50. The education of respondents was varied: 8 had a scientific degree, 43 had graduated from a college, 28 had graduated from high school, and 15 had graduated from basic school. The number of respondents by churches, their percentage of the total number of respondents, and the number of people affiliated to a particular church is as follows.

TABLE 1

Churches, respondents, percentage of respondents and number of affiliates in 1992-1994

Name of church	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents	Number of affiliates 1992-1994
Estonian Methodist Church	7	7.4%	15
Estonian Pentecostal Church	8	8.5%	40
Word of Life Church	11	11.7%	12
Two Baptist congregations in Tartu	13	13.8%	55
Seventh Day Adventists' Church	26	27.7%	89
Roman Catholic Church	10	10.6%	40
Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church	19	20.2%	525
TOTAL	94	100%	77

Procedure

The study was performed in three stages: 1. Finding out possible motives for joining.
2. Constructing the questionnaire 3. Conducting the questionnaire.

For finding out possible motives for joining, 1-2 representatives (not pastors) from each church being studied were called to a special two-hour meeting. Altogether 12 representatives from different churches participated in the meeting. In the first part of it the representatives from each church were to list possible motives for joining their church. In the second part of the meeting the representatives of all churches introduced the listed motives, which was followed by a general discussion for finding out reasons why people join Christian congregations. After the conceptual analysis of the results was made, a 52-statement questionnaire was constructed. Each statement had to be rated on a four-stage likert type of scale: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree and strongly disagree. Also included were additional questions concerning education, employment, economic situation, sex, and age.

The questionnaires were distributed through the church representatives. A member from each church was asked to randomly distribute the question forms, and to re-collect them after an appointed time.

Results

Based on the results it is possible to provide a preliminary answer to the question of why people join churches in Estonia. For this, the mean values of the answers for each of the 52 statements were compared. Of first and foremost interest were the statements the mean value of which corresponded to the grades of strongly agree - somewhat agree (means 1.0-2.0). The total number of such statements was 12. These statements reflect important reasons for joining churches. Also informative were the statements the mean values of which corresponded to the grades of somewhat disagree - strongly disagree (means 3.0-4.0). There were altogether fourteen such statements. These statements reflect the unimportant reasons for church-joining. The following two tables describe both results.

TABLE 2
Mean values and standard deviations
for important statements of joining churches

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
It was God's will for my life.	1.36	.58
I sought peace of mind	1.57	.84
I wished to better understand the Bible	1.62	.82
I sensed the Holy Spirit's presence here	1.68	.78
I liked the teaching of the church	1.69	.83
I liked the mentality of the church	1.70	.83
After joining I experienced divine cleansing	1.70	.84
The joining satisfied my thirst for truth	1.78	.86
I liked the moral values of the church	1.79	.90
Joining was the visible reflection of my religious convictions	1.83	1.01
My personal religious convictions coincided with those of the congregation	1.93	.99
I tried to find an answer to the main problems of my life	1.93	1.03

TABLE 3

Mean values and standard deviations

for unimportant statements of joining the churches

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I liked the social standing of the church	3.04	.98
I came upon the church by chance	3.15	.89
I sought an opportunity for putting my skills into practice	3.19	.86
I joined the congregation due to a concrete revelation	3.36	.90
I liked the lovely church building	3.41	.93
<u>I was drawn here by curiosity</u>	3.45	.85
Belonging to a congregation is our family tradition	3.46	.91
I came to the congregation because of the Pastor	3.47	.77
I was led into the congregation by a grave personal misfortune	3.50	.85
This congregation is the closest to my home	3.53	.88
One must belong somewhere	3.62	.74
I joined the congregation out of spite against my non-believing friends	3.76	.54
I joined it out of boredom	3.76	.60
I needed humanitarian aid	3.86	.46

Thus, out of the 52 items, 26 (50%) were described as either an important (12, 23%) or unimportant (14, 27%) reason for church joining. The most important reason for joining was "It was God's will for my life" (mean 1.36). The least important reason for joining was "I needed humanitarian aid" (mean 3.86).

Discussion

While analyzing the results, the question arose as to whether the gathered data was representative. Is it possible to apply the conclusions based on the answers of 94 respondents to the whole of Estonia?

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The best answer to the question is repeating the same study in some other town.

It must be mentioned, however, that Tartu is the second largest town in Estonia, possessing the same kind of churches as in other towns. The general trends as to the number of church-joiners are similar in the different towns of Estonia. The distributions of the respondents by gender and education are representative of the total church membership. This allows for an assumption that the trends observable in the present sample are probably pertinent in the whole of Estonia.

Based on the results, it is possible to point out some general tendencies. If we regard the results as valid throughout Estonia these tendencies can be applied to the whole country. The following description of the discussion about the data covers the analyses of both the important and unimportant statements for church-joining. Finally, general conclusions are drawn.

It is possible to divide the important items of church-joining into three groups by meaning. These groups represent the church-related, intrapsychical, and God-related reasons.

Church-related reasons are: the appeal of the church's mentality and teaching, the desire to better understand the Bible, and the appreciation of the church's moral values.

Thus the answers reveal that a church is joined due to the personal relevance of its functions, such as teaching, mentality, and moral values.

Intrapsychical reasons are: seeking peace of mind, finding solutions to life's main problems and to the thirst for truth, and expressing one's religious convictions through joining. The answers reveal that church-joining is due to the serious rather than the superficial motives of one's personality.

God-related reasons are: church joining was God's will, after the fulfillment of which the presence of the Holy Spirit and the divine cleansing were experienced. The mention of such motives proves that church-joining is linked with God both on the explanatory and experiential level.

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It is characteristic for all three answer groups that a personal bond and an internalization are expressed. Phrases like "I liked", "I sought", "I tried", "I experienced" prove that a church is joined predominantly for internal reasons.

Contrary to the important reasons for joining, the unimportant ones are difficult to divide into groups by their meaning, as so many reasons were mentioned. In general, the unimportant reasons are distinguished by their externality. Mentioned are factors like chance, lovely church building, humanitarian aid, and proximity to one's dwelling.

Contrary to the motives presented in the introduction of the article, the family tradition, the church's social standing, and a grave personal calamity were viewed as non-essential. The small importance of family tradition is explicable through the fact that the majority of church-joiners in Estonia in the 1990s came from non-Christian homes. One of the possible explanations to the small importance of the social standing is the fact that the stratification of the society as a whole and the social prestige of various institutions (incl. the church) have not yet taken form. The rating of the personal calamity as unimportant shows that the joiners have other personally important positive motives.

In an effort to generalize the important and unimportant motives of church-joining, it is possible to point out the following factors:

1. For church-joining, essential are the meaningful functions of church life, such as

teaching, mentality, and moral values. The external factors, e.g. the architecture of the church building, the church's physical/geographical proximity or the humanitarian aid offered in the church are unimportant for joining.

2. Church-joining is spurred on by purposeful motives, such as liking something (mentality, teaching), seeking something (peace of mind) or desiring something (understanding of the Bible). The unpurposeful motives like curiosity or boredom are non-essential.

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3. Church-joining is a reflection of one's personal religious convictions. The formal joining is a consequence of personal assurance.

4. For joining, the experiential dimension of faith (the Holy Spirit's presence, God's cleansing) is essential. Unimportant motives lack the experiential dimension.

5. Joining is the result of a conscious decision. The teaching is valued, one's personal convictions are compared with the views of the church, truth is sought. A pure coincidence, or the statement that ~ne must belong ~ somewhere, has no particular importance.

The above is a general survey on church-joining motives. Evidently the results reflect the general trends in the small state of Estonia. In order to compare the different churches, the different regions and the different persons, it is necessary to increase the base of the sample. Consequently, the current study is of a preliminary nature that may provide initial data for further studies. It would also be of interest to compare the results of this questionnaire with other sociological data. If the current article yields some meaningful information about the events on Estonia's religious landscapes and lends itself for further studies, it has served its purpose.

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