# Dissertation Research Prospectus (Pre-Proposal)

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# Problem Statement

The problem is declining membership among Spring Gardens Moravian Church because of changing social attitudes toward church attendance (Cormode, 2020).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to the decline in attendance at worship at Spring Gardens Moravian Church.

**Background of the Problem (1-2 pages)**

Describe the problem in the context of extant literature…

The Spring Gardens Moravian Church in Antigua began its mission and ministry in April 1756. This was twenty-four years after arriving in the Danish West Indies having heard from an enslaved man, Anthony, of the plight of black people in the islands. While in St. Thomas, they heard similar conditions existed in the other island. This started the quest to expand the mission. Antigua was the first attempt outside the Danish islands (For the Brethren's Society for the furtherance of the gospel among the heathen, 1853).

Over the year since 1756, Spring Gardens made significant strides (For the Brethren's Society for the furtherance of the gospel among the heathen, 1853). By the early 1800s, enslaved people in Antigua attended Spring Gardens. A teachers’ college was later created to support the thrust to empower enslaved people. The Moravians were passionate about education and ensured that the enslaved people were educated to read the Bible.

Spring Gardens Moravian Church was a significant community of faith in the worship life of the nation as important national events were held there and many groups and organizations visited to celebrate their events. In 2000, the average attendance for the year was about 500. Nineteen years later, the average attendance was 264. That number was much lower in 2022 (157) given the added challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Average attendance is used as the measurement as official membership records are not adjusted to reflect a lack of attendance. In nineteen years, average attendance dropped by almost 50%. At that rate, all things being equal, Spring Gardens will be relegated to beautiful memory. Even if they can maintain that average attendance, the economic realities of supporting their current physical infrastructure and location which they have inhabited for over 260 years, are daunting. It is reasonable to wonder if this precipitous decline is also represented in the wider Moravian Church in Antigua.

Whereas the statistics on the decline in church attendance for Antigua and Barbuda are not readily available, statistics globally show that the decline experienced in the Spring Gardens Moravian Church in Antigua is part of a global phenomenon. “Research on membership trends shows an ongoing decline in membership within Protestant churches in different countries worldwide” (Ferreira, 2021, p. 2). The scholars further indicate that Westerns countries show the highest rates of decline.

Without being overly concerned about fulfilling the Great Commission and the missiological problem the church faces, the phenomenon requires investigation. How did the church get here when Westernization and Christian mission were traveling partners (Siggelkow, 2014). I “medieval times, Christianity almost single-handedly kept classical culture alive…” (Schmidt, 2001, p. xi). Schmidt contends that the influence of Jesus Christ through his followers, has lifted “civilization to the highest plateau ever known” (Schmidt, 2001, p. 2).

Notwithstanding this formative influence, the church finds itself in an unfamiliar place. “The world has changed, but the church has not” (Cormode, 2020, p. 1) writes Scott Cormode. His larger thesis is that “the church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exist” (Cormode, 2020, p. 1). The rudiments of life have changed, so basic assumptions about time, money, community, volunteerism, and ecclesiology have changed. Once basic assumptions change, modes of operation must follow.

Charles Taylor suggests that we are living in a secular age (Smith, 2014). James K. A. Smith distilled the thoughts expressed by Charles Taylor in his book *The Secular Age* and describes the secular space as one in which religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable. This means that God is no longer central to people’s existence. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is no longer normative but one of many options that are available to pursue in life. If Taylor is right, then church has also been relegated to an option and not a necessity in people’s lives.

The mission of God is still to be accomplished and the church has that mandate (Matthew 28:19-20). That work needs to be done to determine the next steps in the journey of restoration.

**Significance**

This study will contribute to the gap in research…in the decline in attendance at worship at the Spring Gardens Moravian Church by identifying…. the factors contributing to this phenomenon.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the attitudes toward church among people who no longer attend Spring Gardens Moravian Church?

RQ2: What factors contributed to people no longer attending Spring Gardens Moravian Church?

**Research Methodology**

This study will utilize a qualitative methodology because research questions will be answered through inductive coding and exploratory thematic analysis.

**Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

This study is framed by two facets of Osmer’s four tasks of practical theological interpretation - the **descriptive-empirical task – what is going on** – and **the pragmatic task – how might we respond** because this framework uses pastoral approaches which are helpful in addressing church decline (Osmer, 2008). These facets are also referred to as “priestly listening” and “servant leadership” respectively. Since this study is not only about gathering information to bridge a gap, the additional component of responding to the phenomenon dovetails with the missional mandate of the church.

**Social Theory**

This research will use social constructionism theory to explore the people’s attitudes to attending worship. Social constructionism holds that “our beliefs, ways of thinking, and values are not inherently, innately, or objectively given,” (Quillin, 2003, p. 56) but are developed through social interaction (Taylor, 2021). In using this theory, the researcher may gain insight into why people develop certain attitudes to church attendance.

**Instrumentation**

This study will utilize a semi-structured interview protocol for instrumentation. Semi-structured interviews will last 30-60 minutes each and will be recorded for transcription. Questions will be developed based on the literature review and field tested by 3-5 Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

**Research Design**

Basic Qualitative: explore emergent themes from open-ended participant responses (qualitative, inductive)

This basic qualitative case study will utilize a basic qualitative design because it will explore perceptions of changing attitudes to church among people who no longer attend Spring Gardens Moravian Church

**Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study will be people who no longer attend Spring Gardens Moravian Church.

**Data Analysis Plan**

Qualitative

This study will utilize manual coding and Creswell and Poth’s Data Analysis Spiral for data analysis:

Step One: Managing and organizing the data (data preparation),

Step Two: Reading and memorizing emergent ideas,

Step Three: Describing and classifying codes into themes,

Step Four: Developing and assessing interpretations,

Step Five: Representing and visualizing the data.

# Works Cited

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