

DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY EXPLORING THE CULT-LIKE CHARACTERISTICS OF
SELECTED DOCTRINALLY ORTHODOX CHURCHES

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DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY EXPLORING THE CULT-LIKE CHARACTERISTICS OF
SELECTED DOCTRINALLY ORTHODOX CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

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Readers: John Reed and Kerby Anderson

Cults such as Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians, Peoples' Temple (Jim Jones) and many lesser known groups have certain characteristics. But is it possible that some evangelical churches with biblical doctrine have similar characteristics as full blown cults? What are those characteristics and how strongly do they make their presence known?

This project seeks to examine if churches that have evangelical doctrine can be similar to cults despite their underpinnings of biblical truth. Results from thirteen unhealthy churches represented by thirty former members are examined through the use of a descriptive survey. The descriptive survey's results are examined so that useful recommendations could be made to help churches recover from cultish conditions or to prevent churches from becoming cult-like.

This dissertation makes the case from the literature review for the presence of a large number of cultic characteristics and that many Protestant, evangelical churches have similar problems. Both the literature review and the survey results and analysis make the case for bold moves towards church health so that the Great Commission can be advanced and Christ be glorified.

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DEDICATION

Since this applied research project is about the Church, I dedicate it to the head of the Church, Jesus Christ. He is the One who died for it and is the One who will present it pure and blameless at the marriage supper of the Lamb!

Jesus is my Savior, Master and Sustainer. He is the only One who is 100% dependable and trustworthy. I love the way He gently and consistently directs and guides me. He disciplines me kindly and wisely. He knows me much better than I know myself and always helps. Sometimes He does not provide an answer to a question, but He lets me know over time that I am asking the wrong question. His word directs me to the right questions to ask, and for those, He provides abundant answers!

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As my Doctor of Ministry studies draw to a close, with this dissertation as its finale, I cannot help but acknowledge certain people for their sacrifice, encouragement and support. They are people from all the areas of my life; personal, professional and educational.

The most thanks by far, go to my wife and best friend, Carolyn. She is my soul mate and much better half. She encouraged me and took up the slack in many areas of life that I left so that I could pursue these final, formal studies of my life. My children, Brittany, Brian, Jenna and Andrew, put up with my sequestering myself for periods of time so that I could finish this work. My mother, Lillian, always encouraged me with her kind words to continue on with the project to completion.

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I also want to give credit to my church family at Bear Creek Bible Church for their encouragement and prayers. Some, who were eligible, helped out with responding to the descriptive survey. Members of the former and present leadership encouraged and prayed for my participation in this D. Min. program and in the writing of this dissertation.

My advisor and first reader, Dr. John Reed left his mark on my professional and personal life during my earlier years at Dallas Theological Seminary. He continued his influence in the development of this project. His wisdom and guidance was deeply felt and has been passed on to others who are under my leadership. Kerby Anderson, the director of Probe Ministries, gave valuable insight and encouragement as my second reader. I would also like to also recognize Dr. Jerry Wofford and my editors, Jenae

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Because of human failings, some churches are unusually dysfunctional. Problems in church health result from the leaders' individual sins, weaknesses, "dark sides" and limitations. Many churches are unhealthy to the point of appearing cult-like despite having standard, evangelical, doctrinal statements. Dysfunctional congregations are not effective and usually do not grow; if they do grow, it is because their unhealthy aspects are successfully covered up for a time. Once the corruption is found, a collapse occurs that hurts the entire church body and community. Unhealthy churches do not accomplish the Church's overall purposes: to spread the gospel, disciple believers and glorify God (Matt 28:18-20).

The term, "cult," is used primarily to define groups such as the Unification Church, Heaven's Gate, Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. Unfortunately, some aspects of these cult groups also characterize churches that are doctrinally orthodox. Churches that hold to the basics of biblical Christianity can be vulnerable to the characteristics of cults such as unhealthy personality and dysfunctional behavior. Evangelical congregations that believe in the Triune God of Scripture, the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth and deity/humanity of Christ and salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ alone can have cult-like attributes such as legalism, poor communication, abusive and autocratic control and unresolved leadership sin. These churches can also be considered cult-like or unhealthy.

Bear Creek Bible Church in Keller, Texas was formed in 1993 out of another church that had cult-like tendencies. This new fellowship, with many of the members from the first church, experienced firsthand how these tendencies affected believers negatively and repressed their ability to glorify God within their congregation. The root cause of the church split was leadership sin that was not properly dealt with. The surface appearance made the cause seem to be personality differences. Bear Creek Bible Church is a healthy, grace-oriented, comprehensive church and though not perfect, seeks to glorify God and show others that the members are his disciples by “our love to one another” (John 13:34). Bear Creek Bible Church, even though coming from a difficult beginning hopes to be a healthy, comprehensive and biblical church in the 21st century.

Cultic Categories

The following are different levels of cultic tendency. Totalistic groups seek to dominate every aspect of a follower’s life. Jonestown and Hare Krishna are two examples of totalistic groups. Non-totalistic groups still influence their followers, but the followers live and work in the secular world. Examples of such groups are Transcendental Meditation, Mormons and Scientology. Both of these cult levels seem to exhibit stereotypical cult-like behavior.¹ The third level, which is the focus of this study, can be added to the non-totalistic category: churches that are orthodox in doctrine, but are cult-like in tone and personality. This project focuses on evangelical churches that resemble non-totalistic cults. For this project, the following definition of a cult will be used: “a cult is a religious group that presents a distinctly alternative pattern for doing religion and adhering to a faith perspective than that dominant in the culture.”² There is a wide range

¹ John J. Collins, *The Cult Experience: An Overview of Cults, Their Traditions, and why People Join Them* (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1991), 58-9.

² Richard Kyle, *The Religious Fringe* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 23.

of dysfunction and abuse in local faith communities. Just short of a full “cult” are “SACO’s” (Significantly Aberrant Christian Organizations). These are groups that hold to mainline Christian doctrine but practice unreasonable control over the decisions of their adherents.³ The characteristics of “SACO’s” that ex-adherents observe from their former groups will be the focus of this project. In order to better understand a broader range of cult-like characteristics, it is helpful to examine a few other definitions of the term “cult.” The term, “cult” has been defined through multiple worldviews. One definition that comes from a secular perspective is,

A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree, (a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, (b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control and socialize members (i.e., to integrate them into the group’s unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices), (c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, (d) exploits members to advance the leadership’s goals, and (e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community.⁴

A similar and secular, but shorter definition is,

Cults are small, new, innovative and marginal religious groups based on a charismatic founder/leader who, based on some special supernatural knowledge and/or experience, is capable of helping followers deal with their individual and/or societal dissatisfactions.⁵

These two definitions are labeled “secular” because they do not define a cult based upon a difference with orthodox Christian doctrine such as their rejection of belief in the Triune God of Scripture, the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth and deity/humanity of Christ and salvation by grace through faith alone. One of the

³ Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 96.

⁴ Michael D. Langone, ed., *Recovery from the Cults* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 4.

⁵ John J. Collins, *The Cult Experience: An Overview of Cults, Their Traditions, and why People Join Them*, 104.

greatest authorities on cults, the late Walter Martin, describes a cult as, "A group of people gathered around a specific person's misinterpretation of the Bible." Cults are groups that claim to be in harmony with Christianity but deny foundational Christian doctrines such as the Trinity or the unique deity of Jesus Christ.⁶

Cults have an aberrant theological system, but are also known by the spiritual abuse of their members. The standard negative view of cults contrasting with a generally positive opinion of "religion" provides these observations:

Religions respect the individual's autonomy. *Cults enforce compliance.*
 Religions try to help individuals meet their spiritual needs. *Cults exploit spiritual needs.*

Religions tolerate and even encourage questions and independent critical thinking. *Cults discourage questions and independent critical thinking.*

Religions view money as a means, subject to ethical restraints, toward achieving noble ends. *Cults view money a means towards achieving power or the selfish goals of the leaders.*

Religions view sex between clergy and the faithful as unethical. *Cults frequently subject members to the sexual appetites of the leaders.*

Religions respond to critics respectfully. *Cults frequently intimidate critics with physical or legal threats.*

Religions cherish the family. *Cults view the family as an enemy.*

Religions encourage a person to think carefully before making a commitment to join. *Cults encourage quick decisions with little information.*⁷

Many people tolerate and willingly follow cult-like spiritual abuse. Scripture tells us that there will be false teachers and those who use God's offer of a spiritual relationship with a fallen humanity for their own selfish purposes (1 Tim 4:1-5), and many people stand in line to receive abuse from insecure and narcissistic wolves in sheep's clothing. Many Christians join unhealthy churches and even after the seeing signs

⁶ Patrick Zukeran, *Character of the Cults: Challenge of the Cults*, Probe Ministry website, http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdkEIMNsEIMNsEoG/b.4217733/k.60E3/Character_of_the_Cults.htm (accessed March 28, 2008).

⁷ Michael D. Langone, ed., *Recovery from Cults*, 255.

of strange behavior, still decide to stay. Even if they reach the decision to leave, they find it difficult to do so. Some stay out of loyalty, while others stay because of intimidation.

Aberrant group behavior seems to be the natural outcome of bad theology, but spiritual abuse is also present in some churches with orthodox doctrine. This phenomenon is especially dangerous because it means that any evangelical church is vulnerable to be a perpetrator of spiritual abuse. The intention behind the descriptive survey of past participants of selected doctrinally orthodox churches is to produce helpful recommendations so that churches can maintain or regain health allowing the church to accomplish its mission of representing the character of Christ and building His Kingdom. The overarching theme of this project is church health. The greater conformity to Christ's vision of the church means greater effectiveness and a more accurate representation of Jesus Christ Himself by the Church.

As the church is an organism and not just an organization, it has a high standard, calling and expectation. It is alive with people, activity and spiritual power and presence. The church is a living body. It is the bride of Christ with Him as its head. The church's success is not just in numbers or results. Its success is measured more so *how* it does things.⁸ Success is gauged more in process than in the results of any project. Does the church show love and integrity in what it does? Does it display the character of Christ? As with any organism, a local church's health can be measured to determine its level of health in its fellowship. How does it treat itself and others? The vital signs that measure the church's growth in spiritual maturity are: Is the church actively seeking to bring nonbelievers to a saving knowledge of Christ? Is there the absence of strife and division in the congregation (1 Cor 1-6; Eph 2:11-22, 5:1-10; 1 Thess 1:1-10; 2 Tim 4:1-5)?

⁸ Donald J. MacNair, *The Practices of a Healthy Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Press, 1999), 9.

The church should have healthy practices that help it maintain its condition. They are as follows: (1) The church must be committed to the Holy Scriptures without compromise; (2) The church must engage in regular and vibrant worship; (3) The church must continually train and implement caring, shepherding leadership; (4) The church must use the gifts of its members and allow them to initiate through the guidance of leaders; (5) The church must have a modifiable and timely plan so it can implement its mission and purpose; (6) The church must prayerfully seek God's grace to build commitment to biblical health. The leaders must advance the church program and plans with integrity. The plans are not the end; rather, the integrity and style is the end. So much rests with the leaders. They set the tone and personality of the church. They influence the most and are ultimately responsible and accountable to God.⁹

Literature

Many scholars have written about cults, unhealthy churches and to a lesser degree, spiritual abuse. The literature in this project focuses on five major areas of study: (1) Cults in general; (2) Spiritual abuse of cult-like, but evangelical churches; (3) Healthy church models; (4) negative aspects of local church life or doctrine; (5) the Bible and support material.

The first genre is mainly secular and focuses on cults, their influence and how persuasion works. This genre includes the following authors: Robert Cialdini's *The Psychological Influence of Persuasion*, Michael D. Langone's *Recovery From Cults* and Philip G. Zimbardo's *The Psychology of Attitude Change and Social Influence*.

Another common theme are books that focus on spiritual abuse that are mainly from an evangelical perspective. Some examples are David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen's *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Ronald Enroth's two *Churches*

⁹ Ibid., 8-12.

That Abuse and Recovering From Churches That Abuse, Stephen Arterburn's *Toxic Faith*, Ken Blue's *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ron and Vicki Burk's *Damages Disciples*, and Jeremiah James' *What's In Your Pulpit?*

A third series of resources focus on church health that come from a positive and ideal perspective. They describe the way the church should function and relate to God, itself and the world. Some examples are Stephen A Macchia's *Becoming A Healthy Church*, Donald J. McNair's *The Practices of a Healthy Church*, Herb Miller's *Church Personality Matters*, Scazzero and Bird's *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy For Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* and Christian Schwarz's *Natural Church Development: A Guide To Eight Essential Qualities Of Healthy Churches*.

The fourth category of books tend to examine negative aspects of local church life or doctrine. Some representatives of this group are Brunson and Caner's *Why Churches Die*, Hank Hanegraff's *Counterfeit Revival*, David Main's *Healing The Dysfunctional Church Family*, Marshall Shelly's classic *Well-Intentioned Dragons* and Stephen Wookey's *When A Church Becomes A Cult*. A fifth category is all the other resources needed to sort through this subject such as commentaries and of course, the Bible itself.

Research Design

The purpose of this project is to study cult-like characteristics of selected doctrinally orthodox churches through the experiences of former members. Cult-like behavior is usually equated with full-blown cults such as the Unification Church or the Heaven's Gate. But cult-like behavior exists in churches that believe in and teach basic evangelical (or orthodox) doctrine: the Triune God of the Bible, inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, virgin birth deity/humanity of Christ and salvation by grace through faith alone. Authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism are examples of cult-like characteristics that can exist in both full-blown cults

and doctrinally orthodox evangelical churches. The focus of this study is not the full-blown cult, but evangelical churches that have cult-like tendencies.

This research will seek to provide helpful recommendations on how a church can avoid cult-like characteristics, thereby maintaining its health or regaining it. This researcher used descriptive surveys given to members from the selected doctrinally orthodox churches to reveal specific dysfunctional behavior in leadership and in the congregations. The descriptive survey was the best methodology to use for this project because it allowed people to tell their story and experience.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this project are as follows:

1. Primary cult-like characteristics in doctrinally orthodox churches are abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism.
2. The unprepared, insecure and spiritually immature leadership of doctrinally orthodox churches with cult-like characteristics will be found in churches which have unhealthy tendencies.
3. The first attempt at confronting these unhealthy tendencies even in doctrinally orthodox churches is usually unsuccessful.
4. Doctrinally orthodox churches have a closed system that is difficult to penetrate.

Research Subjects

Thirty-six former members from nineteen churches were surveyed. Some of the churches they attended still exist and some do not. Through brief interviews, only subjects who previously attended churches with orthodox, evangelical doctrine as described in the introductory paragraph were included. All former members who were surveyed had some time since their cult-like experiences. They had time to heal, gain perspective and reflect.

The researcher contacted the subjects through various means. Some of them currently attend the church he serves. The topic of an abusive church past has come up in general conversation. Others came forward through a bulletin announcement that described the dissertation topic and survey. Others were gained through word of mouth and others from a blog focusing on the recovery of unhealthy church experiences.

Research Instrument

The descriptive survey is the best methodology to use for this dissertation because it examines a common ministry condition as experienced by a number of people in multiple churches. The descriptive survey allows the respondents to tell their story and let that experience reflect on the research. The survey measures the presence or absence of church health. The research instrument was designed based upon the hypotheses. The hypotheses were based on the preliminary research. The survey has thirty fixed-choice questions (Likert Scale), each measuring aspects of the hypotheses. Each question asks the participant how true (if at all) a certain aspect of each hypothesis was of his experience in the cult-like and unhealthy church. All response options range from 1 to 7 but have two different types of answer options. For example, for questions requesting the degree of a characteristic, the response options range from “extremely weak” (1) to “extremely strong” (7). For questions requesting the frequency of a characteristic; the responses options range from “never” (1) to “always” (7). Most of the completed surveys were not anonymous to the researcher so that follow up clarification could be done if necessary. Some were anonymous according to the wishes of a few of the respondents. The researcher knew some of the respondents personally, but for some he only had an e-mail address and first name.

The research question is, “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of selected orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership,

poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?” The researcher believes that this instrument was successful in showing the presence of these characteristics and that analysis and interaction with Scripture and previous research can produce beneficial advice to make the Church healthier.

The survey was developed and completed as part of an independent study. A copy of the survey appears in the appendix of this dissertation. The researcher enlisted the assistance of Jerry Wofford (Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Ministries, Dallas Theological Seminary) for help in the development of the survey instrument. John Reed, a Senior Professor of Pastoral Ministries Emeritus at Dallas Theological Seminary, was consulted as well.

Research Procedure

The surveys were mailed and e-mailed out on July 1, 2009 to accommodate the preferences of the participants. A few were e-mailed to respondents who desired some degree of anonymity. The survey was also posted on a blog that helps people who have been involved in a cult-like church recover from their experience. The survey included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey with the expressed desire to ultimately increase the health of the Christian Church. A request for demographic data from each participant such as occupation, age, family and spiritual status was also included. Each survey respondent could check a box if they desired to receive the compiled results of the survey.

The participants were assured of confidentiality so that each could respond candidly regarding their difficulties and disappointments at their previous churches. Respondents were asked to return their survey by August 1, 2009. For the surveys sent out by postal mail, a self-addressed, stamped return envelope was included. A follow up reminder was mailed or e-mailed around July 15 to encourage people to return their

completed surveys. About 85 percent of the surveys were returned, the last ones were returned around August 15. Thirty surveys were returned representing thirteen churches.

As the surveys were returned, Jerry Wofford helped tabulate the responses in a systematic way so that conclusions could be used to test the hypotheses and provide useful recommendations for churches.

Conclusion

The use of the descriptive survey took this topic from a subjective to an objective realm. A few books have been written on this specific subject, but they are largely anecdotal. The use of the descriptive survey in this project formalizes the topic and therefore will hopefully allow better recommendations to flow from it. The responses were evaluated and analyzed. Then, the results were compiled in this doctoral dissertation. Conclusions and recommendations will be made to help churches recover from unhealthiness or to prevent other churches from falling into dysfunctional congregations.

Preview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter two is the previous research and literature review. This chapter explores Scripture to see what it says about spiritual abuse, church health and the responsibilities of church leadership to the people. While there has been a large amount of writing on cults, recovery, doctrine, and witnessing, there are not many texts about churches that have evangelical doctrine but unhealthy cult-like characteristics. Church health is the overarching theme of this project; therefore, many books are reviewed on that subject. Books on church health describe the ideal for what church should look like. They provide the ideal church scenario and recommend ways to prevent or recover from a cult-like situation. Furthermore, some volumes are reviewed on full-blown cults, their influence techniques and recovery from them.

Chapter three describes the chosen research method and procedure. This research was conducted by using descriptive surveys from members of selected doctrinally orthodox churches to reveal specific dysfunctional behavior in their leadership and congregations and to test the hypotheses. The descriptive survey is the best methodology to use for this project because it allows people to tell their experience, which reflects on the research. Research subjects, the survey itself and procedures are examined in chapter three.

Chapter four provides a summary of the conclusions from the descriptive survey, the rationale for each of the thirty questions, the results of the survey and analyzes the meaning of the results. It gives the evidence that provides the foundation to answer the research question, which is as follows: “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of doctrinally orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?”

Chapter five provides some recommendations and areas of study for further research. For example, despite the blessing of biblical doctrine, many churches do not apply it. This makes the case for better expositional teaching and preaching which should include application. The leadership and congregation’s willingness to consistently apply truth is also essential. This final chapter shows the research to be beneficial to the body of Christ and to the specific ministry at Bear Creek Bible Church. It suggests future research on the topic that could ultimately influence the health of other churches. While there has been some writing on this subject and some writers have conveyed the experiences of spiritual abuse victims anecdotally, this project has shown itself to be unique in that it surveys former participants of doctrinally orthodox cult-like churches in a systematic manner.

The appendix includes the full research instrument: the descriptive survey used to measure the validity of the hypotheses and research question, charts from the

responses from all 13 churches, a chart that compares salvation legalism, lifestyle legalism and Christian liberty and copies of the cover letter and reminder letter sent to the survey participants.

Conclusion

The Christian Church is the body of Christ and so should mirror His personality. Truth should be loved but not at the expense of love and compassion. Love and compassion should run rampant but not at the expense of teaching absolute Truth. Too many churches are not complete or are unbalanced with inadequate portions of each; they tilt towards one and do not value the other. Our Savior's love should emanate from the tone of the church and His Truth should be proclaimed from its pulpits with vigor and reflection. The writer hopes that this subject will be explored and that many will seek not only a gracious and free relationship with Christ individually but also desire to seek their churches to mirror the personality of the Savior, who is *full of grace and truth* (John 1:14b).

CHAPTER 2

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The following analysis of the literature on cults, cultic characteristics, leadership and church health hopes to build a foundation for this project. It seems that many scholars, though not all of them, focus on certain aspects of cult-like churches such as spiritual abuse, phenomenons in specific denominations or sects and anecdotal evidence of ecclesiastical dysfunction. Hopefully, this project is useful in describing the characteristics of cult-like churches, measuring those attributes and providing recommendations to prevent churches from becoming cult-like or to recover from a lack of health. The descriptive survey measures the effects of cult-like church behavior and makes helpful, biblically accurate recommendations. These recommendations will be the major contribution of this dissertation.

This chapter reviews and interacts with some of the works that pertain to each of the hypotheses. The four main sections of this chapter include a review of previous research on the primary cultic characteristics of autocratic control, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism. This section explores the effects that these characteristics have on the church members. Second, the unhealthy leadership of cult-like churches and their tendencies will be explored. The third section of this chapter investigates why cult-like churches tend to be resistant to change in their ministries and how they respond to challenges and opposition. The fourth section explores why cult-like churches tend to have a closed system mentality. A conclusion ends the chapter.

Primary Cult-like Characteristics

There are different views on what separates a cult from accepted mainline religion or faith. Churches can have a wide range of dysfunction and abuse. As referenced in chapter one, “SACO’s” (Significantly Aberrant Christian Organizations) fall short of a full “cult.” These are groups that hold to mainline Christian doctrine but practice unreasonable control over the decisions of their adherents.¹⁰ Aspects of the definitions of the term, “cult,” can fit individual congregations even though they may have orthodox, evangelical theology. Orthodoxy (correct doctrine) is required for orthopraxy (correct practice) but does not guarantee it. Orthopraxy should be normal and expected, but sadly, it is frequently the average experience. It seems that many churches do not fundamentally practice what they teach, and many take on characteristics but not the doctrine of full-blown cults.¹¹ For the purposes of this project and as a way to summarize the research, the primary cult-like characteristics that will be explored in seemingly unhealthy, doctrinally orthodox churches are abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism.

Other writers generally identify unhealthy dynamics in evangelical fellowships as follows: Legalism, authoritarian leadership, manipulation, excessive discipline and intimidation.¹² Willa Appel, an anthropologist suggests four non-doctrinal attributes: (1) an authoritarian structure; (2) regimentation of followers; (3) renunciation and distance from the world; (4) only the cult is gifted with the truth.¹³

¹⁰ Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 96.

¹¹ Michael D. Langone, ed., *Recovery from the Cults* (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 214.

¹² Ronald Enroth, *Churches that Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 107

¹³ John J. Collins, *The Cult Experience: An Overview of Cults, Their Traditions, and why People Join Them* (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1991), 6-9.

Steve Arterburn presents the following list of characteristics for what he calls “Toxic Faith Systems”: (1) Authoritarianism—Even in small congregations or small groups, leaders can be dictatorial. While pastors need authority to accomplish goals, power without accountability can lead to authoritative abuse. (2) Punitive nature—If followers do not follow the rules or expectations or decisions of leadership, they receive a negative response. The punitive leader usually lacks grace and overreacts to others’ sin or disobedience. Oftentimes, such leaders are tougher on people than God is. (3) Closed Communication—In a toxic system, the group’s needs are second to the needs and desires of the leader’s; therefore, bottom up communication is not important. The congregation is not consulted because the leader knows what he needs and wants. Communication is from the top down or from the inside out. (4) Legalism—Rules become a distortion of God’s intent, and a relationship with Him is de-emphasized. The external or how things look is more important than the condition of a person’s heart. (5) Labeling—This idea is almost a “pre-emptive strike” against those who may cause problems in the organization. Their value is discounted as they are labeled “detractors,” “malcontents,” or “traitors.” As they are devalued, others are less likely to listen to them, and their influence and possible threat to the power of the leadership is diminished.¹⁴

In addition to authoritarianism, Stephen Wookey lists four other characteristics of a cult-like church that is in the process of moving toward full-cult status: (1) Elitism—Many unhealthy and cultic churches believe they are the only ones who are interpreting Scripture accurately. They believe they are more spiritual and superior to other churches who may believe the same doctrine. (2) The Ends Justify The Means—As soon as the group believes it is better than other churches, the process of

¹⁴ Steve Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2003), 141-155.

cutting ethical corners begins. Deceit, misrepresentation and seduction become techniques to get results.

Many other deceptions are used. Perhaps the most extreme form was that practiced by the members of the Children of God, now known as The Family. Their young women engaged in what came to be known as “flirty fishing”—effectively offering sexual services to draw people in. In each case the overall thinking is simply pragmatism: If it works, we will do it.¹⁵

(3) Financial Dishonesty—With so much concentrated unaccountable power, money is often a problem in cult-like churches. There are some that teach that Christians should be wealthy and healthy. Many others do not necessarily teach such doctrine, but they may raise or spend money in unethical ways or take salaries that are extravagant.

(4) Psychological Manipulation—Healthy churches respect reasonable boundaries with their people; cultic churches do not. Some often use false guilt, but others use even more severe forms of influence such as “heavy-discipling” or “shepherding,” group pressure and “love-bombing.”¹⁶

David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen observe the following seven characteristics of an abusive system: (1) Power-Posturing—Leaders spend a lot of time reminding people that they are the ones in charge or consolidating their power. They do this because their authority is based upon their insecurity and not on their character.

(2) Performance Preoccupation—The focus goes from the process of spiritual growth to “how do things appear.” A specific amount of time in Scripture, numbers of people witnessed to, and attendance are all central. (3) Unspoken Rules—Some things are not discussed; certain people are never challenged; some programs cannot be changed.

(4) Lack Of Balance—This can come in two forms: either in extreme objectivism where

¹⁵ Stephen Wookey, *When a Church Becomes a Cult* (London, England: Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berks, 1996), 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-23.

everything becomes black and white with no exceptions or in extreme subjectivism where feelings or circumstances rule what is right or acceptable. (5) Paranoia—The outside world will not understand what we are like. They are against us. There may be people inside our group who oppose us too. (6) Misplaced Loyalty—The follower’s loyalty to the leader becomes supreme. It is more important than commitment to Christ, the rest of the body of Christ and to building His Kingdom. (7) Secretive—Issues are discussed only behind closed doors. In actuality, members do not live up to the standards set by their leadership, but continual failure is not revealed for fear of repercussions.¹⁷

Author Jeremiah James lists nine characteristics of cults or destructive religious groups. James’ characteristics tend to fit full-blown cults more than cult-like churches, but they could fit a doctrinally orthodox church to a lesser degree. They are as follows: (1) A living and persuasive charismatic leader. (2) The leader claims special access to God. (3) The group is deceptive in recruiting and fund-raising. (4) Each group has its own “phobia” that the members fear and another teacher, group or doctrine. It is something they can be “against.” Manipulation is done through guilt, shame and abandonment. (5) Members are distanced from family as much as possible. Loyalty is primarily to the group. Outside information is controlled. (6) Members are kept from interacting with each other in meaningful ways. They are often played against each other. (7) Questions and doubts are discouraged. (8) Cults often hide from cult members and the public under the guise of political, economic or military agendas. (9) A cult’s ultimate goal is to remake members in the image of its leader.¹⁸

In his writings on unhealthy churches, Ronald Enroth observes the following telltale characteristics of abusive fellowships: (1) Dependency—While believers should

¹⁷ David Johnson and Jeff VanVondren, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers), 63-79.

¹⁸ Jeremiah I. James, *What’s in Your Pulpit?* (Brainerd, MN: Lightfall Publishing, 1999), 174-5.

be dependent upon God and interdependent with one another, members of abusive systems are encouraged to live by the directives of the leader(s). Members are manipulated to need their leaders to be in charge of greater aspects of their lives.

(2) Legalism—Focus is not on Christ but on following rules. (3) Isolationism—Outside groups and speakers are criticized as information flow is discouraged. Their church is seen as the spiritual elite. They are either currently persecuted or harp on the impending threat of hostile outside opposition. (4) Discipline—There is an obsession with submission and obedience. The response for those who sin is negative and vengeful rather than characterized by sadness and reconciliation. (5) Disrupted Family Relationships—Groups who encourage the severing of ties with their biological families are sick. Families sometimes separate when a member becomes a believer, but this should never be encouraged by a church. (6) Surveillance—Members are encouraged to report each other's sins to the leadership.¹⁹ (7) Emphasis on experience rather than rationality—The members' emotions are tapped and not their brains. (8) A Painful Exit Process—Fear of repercussions and rejection.²⁰

LaVonne Neff provides eleven questions that distinguish healthy from unhealthy churches. The following questions are helpful in that they show how the group moves towards healthy goals and puts the needs of its members over the needs and desires of insecure leadership: (1) Does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of contact with the group? (2) Do members of the group seek to strengthen their family commitments? (3) Does the group encourage independent thinking and the development of discernment skills? (4) Does the group allow for individual differences of belief and behavior, particularly on issues of

¹⁹ Ronald Enroth, *How to Spot an Abusive Church*, GCX Web Library website, <http://www.gcxweb.org/Articles/GroupMag-03-1992.aspx> (accessed February 19, 2009).

²⁰ Langone, ed., *Recovery from Cults*, 257.

secondary importance? (5) Does the group encourage high moral standards both among members and between members and nonmembers? (6) Does the group's leadership invite dialogue, advice and evaluation from outside its immediate circle? (7) Does the group allow for the development of theological beliefs? (8) Are group members allowed to ask hard questions of any kind? (9) Do members appreciate truth wherever it is found, even if it is outside their group? (10) Is the group honest in dealing with nonmembers, especially as it tries to win them to the group? (11) Does the group foster relationships and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving?²¹

Abusive leadership frequently shows itself in autocratic control often through overenthusiastic, enmeshed discipleship. The members are manipulated by their leaders for the benefit of the leaders' ego, finances or sexual gratification.²² Abusive leadership uses control techniques such as guilt, fear and the claim of subjective insight or communication to maintain unchallenged power over the organization.²³ There is usually little or no accountability, and this is usually justified by the reasoning that the leader is accountable "only to God."²⁴ They put themselves above any criticism or questioning because they are "God's anointed." While strong pastoral leadership is necessary for a healthy church, autocratic leadership goes too far.²⁵ In dysfunctional churches, there is no room for compromise, and the result is a dictatorship.²⁶ They miss the scriptural truth that

²¹ Ronald Enroth, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 27-32.

²² Langone (editor), *Recovery from Cults*, 5.

²³ Wookey, *When a Church Becomes a Cult*, 16-17.

²⁴ James, *What's in Your Pulpit?*, 181.

²⁵ Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 35-36.

²⁶ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 141.

leadership serves for the benefit of the people and seeks not to be served (2 Kgs 12:7; Mark 10:45).

Unresolved leadership sin is commonplace in most cult-like churches. Since these leaders usually answer to no one, there is more temptation and opportunity to fall to sexual, financial or power-related sin. Usually, these events do not come out immediately, but over time, they do. These sins fester as sores in the body life of the church. The ends justify the means; lies and financial dishonesty have the tendency to be more common in unhealthy cult-like churches.²⁷ Frequently, the leader is seen as above the law and is not expected to follow the rules he creates.²⁸

Poor communication is another characteristic. Two-way communication is rare since the importance of the individual is lessened. The voice of the common person is ignored because his needs are not important since the organization is about meeting the needs of the leader(s). The only important statements come from the top or from the organization as a whole. If there are questions about a problem, the person who asks the question becomes the problem.²⁹ Pre-emptive strikes are common in a dysfunctional church. A person who causes trouble because he has knowledge may be harmful to the leadership posture of power; therefore, word is spread about this person. They may be partially true or fabrication, but that does not matter to the purposes of the leadership because maintenance of authority is the most important goal.³⁰ Healthy groups depend on the free flow of communication so that the temptation for gossip is lessened.³¹

²⁷ Wookey, *When a Church Becomes a Cult*, 19-23.

²⁸ James R. Lewis, *Cults in America: A Reference Handbook* (ABC-Clío, Contemporary World Series, 1998), 40.

²⁹ Johnson and VanVondren, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 68.

³⁰ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 155.

³¹ Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 73.

Legalism is probably the most conspicuous attribute of a cult-like church. It is the greatest weapon of spiritual abuse. Legalism is especially toxic since it teaches that God's approval can be gained or maintained in ways other than the grace of Jesus Christ. Full cults teach a salvation legalism, that something more is needed than Christ to gain or to maintain one's salvation. Cult-like churches, on the other hand, propagate more of a lifestyle legalism (see appendix D). Biblical Christianity teaches a morality based on Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit, but cult-like churches gravitate towards making the "gray areas" of the Christian life (moderate drinking, dancing, watching movies, etc.) into "black and white" issues. Scripture teaches that believers should restrict their liberty so that "weaker brothers" who believe they would sin if they participated in a particular gray area in order to show them love (1 Cor 8; Rom 14-15). Cult-like churches enforce a rigid and repressive system that retreats from the rest that Jesus offers in Matthew 11:48. Broadening religious rules and making accepted behavior stricter help the leaders gain control over followers. This increased control gives the leaders a greater sense of security and predictability. If the congregation can be trained to obey a list of extra-biblical rules, then they can be expected to accept other non-biblical teachings and thereby expand the power of the leaders.³² These man-made standards, imposed by the leader(s) can change month-to-month or week-to-week creating a fluid environment making the members more dependent on the leadership.³³ The lifestyle requirements can be especially tedious, depending on the intensity and background of the group. The examples of rule-making are endless: not using certain terms such as "pregnant women," getting rid of stereotypes, giving up dating, guidelines on proper makeup and underwear

³² Ibid., 43-44.

³³ Langone, *Recovery from Cults*, 214.

type.³⁴ Clothing can often be a topic of strict rules. Author Ronald Enroth writes about one particular church's rules:

...the pastor at one point included these specific regulations in the Sunday bulletin: "Remember our rule: All women who show up at the church offices should be dressed femininely, and if they are wearing slacks, those slacks should be definitely feminine complemented by feminine tops and feminine shoes... Please respect the right of your shepherd to guide you into more appropriate, conservative, and feminine dress." Men of the church were not overlooked. The church bookstore sold a pamphlet entitled, "Jesus Had Short Hair!" The bulletin advised males to "avoid low cut and unbuttoned shirts, jeans, beards, unkempt hair, long fancy sideburns, and frizzy hair." Neither sex could wear amulets or crosses.³⁵

Man-made religious rules tend to block out God and the intention of the Great Commandment, which is to love God instead of regulation. Rules make man the center rather than the holy and loving God. Lifestyle legalism squelches individuality and the ability to personally discern a moral dilemma without someone else's help.³⁶

Unexpected and sometimes harmful change comes to people immersed in a cult-like community. Spiritual abuse is subtle but powerful. Johnson and Van Vonderen explain:

Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment.³⁷

The abuse in churches such as the Boston Movement, Great Commission International or a shepherding movement church is far less dramatic than in groups like

³⁴ Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, 136

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-137.

³⁶ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 153.

³⁷ David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers), 20.

the People's Temple or Heaven's Gate, but it is more subtle, manipulative and psychological. Former members feel manipulated, used, bruised and wounded.³⁸ Author Ken Blue writes about the effect of the abuse:

At the top of the continuum I place the deliberate exploitation and domination of the weak by a grandiose, authoritarian spiritual dictator. Almost any kind of abusive behavior may be found at this level: threats, intimidation, extortion of money, demands for sex, public humiliation, control over private lives, manipulation of marriages, elaborate spying and similar practices. When the psychological and spiritually weak people fall under the control of a narcissistic demagogue, there is potential for great harm to all. The examples of spiritual abuse I use in this book fall somewhere on the spectrum between significant but minor abuse to extreme abuse.³⁹

Spiritual abuse alters the victim's perspective in the following ways as defined by authors Bill Johnson and Jeff VanVondren: (1) You develop a distorted image of God; (2) You may be preoccupied with spiritual performance; (3) You have a distorted self-identity of yourself as a Christian; (4) You may have a problem relating to spiritual authority; (5) You may have a hard time with grace; (6) You may have a problem in the area of personal boundaries, an unclear understanding about "death to self" teachings and "rights"; (7) You may have difficulty with personal responsibility; (8) You may suffer from a lack of living skills; (9) You may have a hard time admitting the abuse.⁴⁰

Some recipients of spiritual abuse react like victims of other kinds of abuse. After they leave and have time to reflect, they wonder what was wrong with them. Many people consider cult groups to be strange, and they wonder if their group was a cult because they are not strange people. They also struggle with who they are; they seem to

³⁸ Ron and Vicki Burks, *Damaged Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 16.

³⁹ Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 14.

⁴⁰ Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 41-49.

lose aspects of their personality and identity. Former participants adapt their personality inside the group, but when they get away from influence, they wonder who they are.⁴¹

Patrick Zukeran cites Psychologist, Flavil Yeakley conducted the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a leading personality assessment tool, on 900 members of the Boston Movement, a quasi-cult group. The test identifies sixteen personality types. After administering the test he discovered these results:

A great majority of the members of the Boston Church of Christ changed psychological types scores in the past, present and future versions of the MBTI. Among the 835 individuals who took all three forms of the MBTI, less than five percent showed no change at all and less than seven percent had the same past and present type...The present distribution was significantly different from the past distribution. The difference between past, present and future type distributions was highly significant...A second result of this study that must be noticed is that the observed changes in psychological type scores were not random since there was a convergence in a single type...What all this means is that the Boston Church of Christ is producing in its members the very same pattern of unhealthy personality change that is observed in studies of well known manipulative sects.⁴²

Similar testing in traditional religious groups did not yield similar results. The respondents overwhelmingly maintained their core personality type. The members tended to not become more like their leaders in a relatively short period of time.⁴³

Unhealthy Church Leadership Tendencies

The professional and lay leaders of churches with cult-like characteristics tend to be unprepared, insecure and spiritually immature. This lack of preparation reflects more about who they are than what they do. It explores the “who” and the “why” of autocratic leadership. Authoritarian leaders often spiritually abuse followers due to their

⁴¹ Langone, *Recovery from Cults*, 11.

⁴² Patrick Zukeran, *Boston Church of Christ* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1996), 34.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

own personal weaknesses and insecurities for which they try to compensate. McIntosh and Rima's book on the "dark side" of leadership is brilliant. Everyone, particularly those drawn to leadership, has a "dark side" consisting of compulsions, motivations and disfunctions which drive them toward success or undermine their accomplishments.⁴⁴ Leaders react with their dark sides of paranoia, compulsive control, passive-aggressive tendencies, narcissism or codependency. This book helps explain the expressions of the flesh of men and women in Christian leadership. Some leaders are paranoid to protect what they have built.⁴⁵ Others control compulsively so they can make sure things are done according to their way.⁴⁶ Yet some are passive-aggressive, appearing to be pleasant on the outside but are willing to "stab people in the back."⁴⁷ Some are narcissistic, needing the attention and focus from whomever will listen.⁴⁸ Many Christian leaders are codependent. They need to be needed. They place themselves in scenarios where they will be required to give of themselves with mixed motives—not really to help, but to be wanted.⁴⁹ Some leaders approach life from a fallen perspective, including leadership. They use everything in life, including ministry leadership, to attempt to fill the void. Some have achieved great things for the Lord motivated by a personal weakness or tendency. But their leadership is not an act of worship; rather, it is an attempt to fill a personal need.⁵⁰ According to McIntosh and Rima, every human has a dark side. It must

⁴⁴ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 29.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 61.

be redeemed so that the body of Christ can be more effective for Him and glorify Him.⁵¹ This volume is especially insightful because it provides wisdom on the *why* of cult-like church leadership.

Though Scripture commands believers to submit to the leadership of their elders, the elders are called to responsible leadership. 1 Peter 5:1-4 exhorts elders to lead, "...according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; not lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock..." Church leaders are to lead and not to exploit the sheep. Honor and submission can only be offered freely by the people under leadership. It is not based upon a title or seat of authority.⁵²

The leadership is supposed to be there for the people and to primarily lead them to God. False leadership fails to guide its flock to God to know Him better. When leadership does not serve the people, God has a strong response. His view of false spiritual leadership is openly expressed when Jeremiah criticizes the "shepherds" of Judah for their false and self-serving leadership (Jer 23). They scatter the sheep by leading them into Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah offers hope when he prophesies that God will eventually raise up new leaders, but he observes the national distress due to the low standard of the prophets and priests (Jer 23:1-2). Their character is poor. They impugn the name of God because they claim His authorization for them to speak for Him (Jer 23:25-29). Instead of leading the people to repentance and a greater commitment to their covenant with Yahweh, they continue to allow the nation to stray on a wicked path. Though outwardly religious, they allow the land and the temple to be defiled through

⁵¹ Ibid., 147-8.

⁵² Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 31.

their lack of confrontation of the national sin.⁵³ Jeremiah accuses the prophets of the day of prophecying by Baal, being spiritual adulterers, evildoers and using their power unjustly (Jer 23:10-14). He claims that they created their own messages and did not consult God for what He wanted the nation to hear. They used the name of Yahweh without authorization. Their dreams and visions were designed to offer false hope and promised among the people and to encourage the people to forget the name of God (Jer 23:16-24). In short, their messages and visions were from a false source and had false content.⁵⁴ They had a fundamental misunderstanding of God: that He was a god they could hide from and not fear. Jeremiah expresses God's great anger and future punishment towards them because they did not give care to the flock.⁵⁵ Poor shepherding brings a passionate and vigorous response from God.

The essence of biblical leadership is that it must lead through sacrifice and service. Another example of proclaiming the need for selfless leadership through an example of selfish leadership is the indictment against Judah's shepherds in Ezekiel 34. The false shepherds did not sacrifice or serve the people. They put their own interests above the needs of the Israelites. They ate the food intended for the people and did not tend to the people's wounds and needs. Not only did they care only for themselves, but they abused the people. They ruled harshly and brutally (Ezek 34:1-4). As a result, the nation became weak and was eventually scattered to the Assyrians and Babylonians. Ezekiel observes that no one searched or looked for them. Yahweh, then states, through the prophet, that He would search for them, rescue them, bring them back to their land, tend to their needs, look for the strays and judge the strong (Ezek 34:5-16). The powerful

⁵³ Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah", *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1158-9.

⁵⁴ Charles L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 520.

⁵⁵ Walvoord and Zuck eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1159.

and predatory leaders would be severely criticized and removed from authority. God's people would gain peace and security in their land and enjoy millennial blessings.⁵⁶

The people are not primarily there for the leaderships' purposes, but they are expected to respect and care for their pastors and elders (1 Tim 5:17). Jesus uses harsh words in Matthew 23 to criticize the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees did not lead; rather, they used the people for their own purposes. The leaders were supposed to serve, but instead, they used the religious system for self-service. The religious system that was designed to introduce its adherents to God was used for the benefit of those who were supposed to administer it. Johnson reveals the character and impact of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 as a result of not being biblically prepared servant-leaders. They claim authority they do not really have (23:2). They lack integrity (23:3). They give nothing to help remove loads from people; instead, they place burdens on them (23:4). They are shallow seeing religion as only an outward practice (23:5). They prevent people from seeing and knowing God (23:13). They use the peoples' resources and devour them (23:14). They reproduce and pass on their spiritual disease to others (23:15). They do not say what they mean but lie to appear good (23:16-22). They invert spiritual values. The small become large, and the large become small (23:23-24). They are clean on the outside but dirty on the inside (23:25). They are unclean and ubiquitous (23:27). They honor the prophets of the past but hate today's prophets even though today's true prophets say the same thing (23:29).⁵⁷ According to this passage, leaders of cult-like churches are spiritually immature and are not trained in leadership, and as a result, they lord it over

⁵⁶ Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1295.

⁵⁷ Jeff Van Vonderen, "Spiritual Abuse Seminar" (lecture, Arlington, TX, February 5, 1994).

and use their people to meet their own needs.⁵⁸ Matthew 23 provides an outline for the criteria of evaluating whether or not a church is unhealthy and abusive.⁵⁹

The leaders of cults tend to be immature and unprepared,⁶⁰ but the people they attract are usually dependent and emotionally needy. Everyone needs to feel connected and needed, but the profile of someone who attends a spiritually abusive church is someone who desires a strong authority and likes being directed and guided because of their own uncertainties and insecurities. They have a “learned helplessness” that allows them to delegate the difficult questions of life to others who are more sure of themselves and are glad to provide it for them.⁶¹

Resistance to Change

Unhealthy churches also are resistant to change. This type of stubbornness shows itself more in what they do as opposed to who they are. This resistance to change reveals the unhealthy leaders’ strategy in dealing with what is currently “outside” the system and attempting to influence and control their own followers.⁶² There is also inflexibility regarding confrontation and challenge. If someone asks a question about a problem, they become “the problem.”⁶³

Cult-like churches heavily monitor their organizations to maintain control. Different types of surveillance are used to keep the leaders aware of trouble that might be coming over the horizon. Members are encouraged to report the sins of other members to

⁵⁸ Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 41-49.

⁵⁹ Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 134-135.

⁶⁰ Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, 200.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 201.

⁶² Ronald Enroth, *How to Spot an Abusive Church*, GCX Web Library website, <http://www.gcxweb.org/Articles/GroupMag-03-1992.aspx> (accessed February 19, 2009).

⁶³ Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 68.

the church leadership. This scrutiny goes beyond sin and can also delve into comments on faults and unsolicited advice. Another more direct method of control is through preaching and teaching that comes from the pulpit. The need for “spiritual authority” is emphasized and certain key terms and themes are repeated frequently such as submission, obedience, and authority. Personal issues discussed with the pastor can come out in sermons as a not-too-subtle reminder of who has the pulpit and the final word.⁶⁴ There is a negative view of individual and analytical thinking. It is discouraged because thinking leads to action and possible change resulting in loss of control.⁶⁵ Concentrated discipleship, or “shepherding,” is used to reinforce control over the individual. Input from the discipler frequently goes beyond the spiritual realm to that of the practical and mundane: where one should live, who they should marry, and the type of car one should drive.⁶⁶ The rationale for this life micro-management is that the disciple needs the input because he is a sheep. Life is more than just spiritual; it is comprehensive. Therefore, all of life is under the scrutiny of the discipler.⁶⁷

Closed System Mentality

Unhealthy, cult-like churches have a closed system mentality. This type of resistance shows itself more in who they are as a community rather than what they do in ministry. A closed system mentality is largely the group’s opinion about outside influences. There is a tone of isolation, intolerance, elitism and perceived persecution. Outside speakers are rare; other churches are denounced or ridiculed regularly. Most cult-

⁶⁴ Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, 107.

⁶⁵ Zukeran, *Character of the Cults: Challenge of the Cults*, 3.

⁶⁶ Langone, *Recovery from Cults*, 214.

⁶⁷ Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, 115-117.

like church pastors are ecclesiastical loners.⁶⁸ Members are discouraged from reading books or listening to speakers who are not in full agreement with the church leadership. Strong terminology can be used against them. For instance, the leadership might deem a person “of Satan.”⁶⁹ Even family outside the group can be suspect. Steps are often made for members to sever ties with family because biological families are competition to the authority and influence of the church. They teach that the spiritual ties of the family of God are a higher priority than blood ties.⁷⁰ The two are often not considered compatible, and the followers must decide between their biological and spiritual families. The leadership encourages the followers to place their primary loyalty with the church.⁷¹

Whether they are full-blown cults or doctrinally orthodox churches, dysfunctional religious groups are attractive to many. Most people search for transcendence through experience. The truth is not the most important core value in this quest, but the source that offers the most hope, gives the best answers, and provides purpose and meaning wins out. Many people also desire authority figures; weaker personalities will follow someone who seems sure of himself. In an increasingly fragmented and confusing world that rejects direction and guidance from traditional sources such as the family and community, many yearn for someone who they can trust. People want heroes: men (usually) who *seem* to know what is going on, exude confidence and perhaps who have survived opposition and accomplished much are typically prime candidates.⁷² Coupled with a desire for authority, many crave a stronger sense of certainty

⁶⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁹ Zukeran, *Character of the Cults: Challenge of the Cults*, 3.

⁷⁰ James, *What's in Your Pulpit?*, 175.

⁷¹ Enroth, *How to Spot an Abusive Church*, GCX Web Library website.

⁷² Wookey, *When a Church Becomes a Cult*, 68, 70-71.

for answers.⁷³ Sadly, simplistic but confident solutions are usually what is provided. They give inspiration and provide an idealistic example. People always need love and acceptance, which comes from identifying with a particular assembly of people.⁷⁴

Robert Jay Lifton's study on mind control examines the far end of the cult spectrum. He comes from a secular perspective, and while not holding to a Christian worldview, his observations are interesting in that they provide a humanistic spin to the description of a cult. He outlines eight conditions that result in "ideological totalitarianism" or a follower's complete acceptance of the cult's control over his life. The first condition is milieu control. All forms of influence from the outside world are limited. The member may even be physically isolated in a separate compound or commune.⁷⁵ The second, he calls, mystical manipulation. The subject is convinced that he is working for a higher purpose represented by only that group and that he has a vital part in accomplishing that goal.⁷⁶ Lifton's third prerequisite is "sacred science." The group's unique doctrine is taught as absolute truth and cannot be challenged. By this condition, Lifton may categorize evangelical churches as "cults." However, if a church presents all of its beliefs and teachings as totally understood and equally fundamental, then they may be unhealthy anyway.⁷⁷ The fourth condition is subordination of the person to doctrine. Being an individual is seen as being selfish. The group's needs are placed at a higher priority than each member's. As a result, each member is encouraged to give up his individuality. The fifth condition is called "dispensing of existence." Only members of the group will be saved from damnation. Again, this may also apply to evangelical churches but to a lesser

⁷³ Ibid., 69-70.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 72-3.

⁷⁵ Langone, ed., *Recovery from Cults*, 91-92.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 92-93.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93-4.

degree, because a healthy church would not see membership in their local church as a requirement for salvation but inclusion in the Church universal by faith alone in Christ alone.⁷⁸ His sixth condition is personal confession. He sees the idea of revealing failures and fears to one another as a path to thought control and manipulation. Being vulnerable with one another leads to the surrender of an individual's identity.⁷⁹ The last two are the "need for purity" and "loading the language." Lifton sees purity as a striving for perfection. "Loading the language" refers to using emotionally charged terms such as "brother and sister" as ways to separate from biological families.⁸⁰

Contrary to common belief, most cults do not kidnap and brainwash victims to make them adherents. Geri-Ann Galanti, who infiltrated the Unification Church's training program as an alleged interested party observed that she did not experience any stereotypical techniques the media is frequent to report. What she found was subtle and friendly. She writes:

Although the terms brainwashing and mind control place emphasis on their effects on the intellect, what I found was that the process works first on an emotional level and a behavioral one. Since the emotional brain (limbic system) is phylogenetically older than the analytical neocortex, its power is very strong. The need for love and approval -- upon which the cult members play -- leads to psychological and behavioral identification with the group. Over time, beliefs change as well, but more through the repression of the intellect than the changing of the intellect. Thus, deprogramming, exit counseling, and post-cult rehabilitation are geared toward re-stimulating the analytical faculties.⁸¹

The ability to influence can be powerful. Guilt, pity and emotional needs are strong tugs, but some people seem predisposed to joining a cult-like group. They tend to

⁷⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁰ Langone, ed., *Recovery from Cults*, 96.

⁸¹ Ibid., 102.

be young and have recently experienced a large life transition.⁸² Another commonality is that they have grown up in a broken family and never experienced a committed group. There may have been abuse and neglect resulting in deep feelings of alienation. They yearn for a feeling of connection and acceptance. The profile person also has low affirmation, high expectations, an attitude of perfectionism and a fantasy mentality. They may have a “religious addiction.”⁸³ Some newer or less mature believers are vulnerable because they come from legalistic backgrounds or were victimized by family members and expect abusive behavior.⁸⁴

Geri-Ann Galanti made these two observations. First, in addition to the content, the learning style that was encouraged was one expected of a small elementary school child. The information was expected to be memorized and accepted. Questions, challenges and analysis were all discouraged. The lecturers reinforced and enhanced the authority normally afforded to a religious speaker. Second, even though she was a cult researcher, this researcher had personal religious beliefs and actively monitored herself during the time. After spending some time in the cult, she felt that she had been influenced. Her observation was that although their techniques fell short of the classical brainwashing techniques of U.S. POWs during the Korean War, they were still powerful enough to alter one’s spiritual worldview.⁸⁵

These systems are difficult to leave because over time the behavior seems more normal and the potential loss of fellowship and failure seem overwhelming. Dysfunctional, abusive churches can act like spiritual magnets making it difficult for a

⁸² Collins, *The Cult Experience: An Overview of Cults, Their Traditions, and why People Join Them*, 22-31.

⁸³ Arterburn and Felton, *Toxic Faith*, 106

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁵ Langone, ed., *Recovery from Cults*, 91.

person to pull out of their orbit. Van Vonderen has called this phenomenon a “spiritual black hole.” Light cannot leave because gravity is so strong. It can get in, but cannot get out.⁸⁶ Because the group believes that it has the most insight on spiritual things and that the world is a hostile place, a member may fear losing such a “special position” in the group. There can be a sense of paranoia about what might happen if a member leaves the group.⁸⁷ Misplaced loyalty also can be used to keep people in the sphere of the church’s influence. Scare tactics are used. There are threats of loss of spiritual blessing and provision. Some churches see the need for “loyalty statements” and “no-compete” ministry clauses that must be signed.⁸⁸ Loyalty is seen as an unconditional core value of the church. This is reinforced through teaching and the experience of tight-knit fellowship.⁸⁹

The greater the conformity of a person to a group, the greater the influence the group has on the individual. Racial groups, age, subculture and nationality produce a stronger conformity of behavior.⁹⁰ Familiarity is a powerful force that often overcomes other adversities when it comes to whether or not a person stays in a group. People tend to like things and others that they are more familiar with and are less comfortable with what is strange or different.⁹¹

In an unhealthy cult-like environment, the church member ultimately needs to decide whether to pursue a “fight” or “flight.” If the decision is to fight to change the

⁸⁶ Jeff Van Vonderen, “Spiritual Abuse Seminar” (lecture, Arlington, TX, February 5, 1994).

⁸⁷ Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 73-4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-77.

⁸⁹ Burkes, *Damaged Disciples*, 52.

⁹⁰ Robert B. Cialdini Ph. D., *The Psychological Influence of Persuasion*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), 142.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

system, then the individual must realize the cost. He must understand that his ultimate enemy is not the leadership but is the evil one and not accept the temptation to become a dragon to fight one. Sometimes, it may be God's will to leave the church and not fight. These types of questions should be asked by the one pursuing adversity: (1) Do I need to be right? (2) Can I stay healthy inside of this unhealthy situation? (3) Am I searching for revenge? (4) Do I know my goals in trying to reform the current system?⁹²

Conclusion

Evangelical churches can have cult-like characteristics despite possessing good doctrinal statements. Churches can appear to be cultic and thus render themselves ineffective in discipling believers and reaching out to non-Christians. There is ample literature showing the connection between unhealthy, orthodox churches and cults.

The hypotheses and the characteristics were developed based upon the research. Almost all of the cult-like characteristics discussed in chapter two were combined and categorized into the ones expressed in the hypotheses. These characteristics were measured by the descriptive survey discussed in chapters three and four.

It is very evident that the literature review shows the vital role of good leadership for the proper development of a healthy church. Likewise, the affects of poor leadership can be devastating to the local church. Leadership can induce dysfunctional patterns into the congregation through their immaturity, fears, lack of preparation and spirituality. The pastors and elders who are chosen to lead must be men who biblically qualify for the role. They must shepherd, care and equip the flock without using the church for their selfish needs and purposes. They must guard, oversee, be examples and

⁹² Johnson and Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 223-231.

shepherd God's people.⁹³ Poor leadership is what steers some churches to have cult-like appearances. This includes churches that have the advantage of evangelical doctrinal statements.

By far, the most effective tactic churches can use to overcome dysfunctional characteristics is to work to stay healthy. First Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 speak of the church as a body that must be unified. The body must take good care of itself. The truth must be spoken in love; there must be anger without sin; Satan must not be given an opportunity; forgiveness must be present; and giftedness must be expressed as each member must participate. The mutual encouragement that Scripture calls for must be practiced and obeyed (Rom 1:12). The local church can inoculate itself against spiritual toxins and be healthy and more effective when these principles are followed. As the subject is examined in chapter three through the research instrument and results are analyzed in chapter four, other helpful recommendations that will lead to church health will be provided in chapter five.

⁹³ MacNair, *The Practices of a Healthy Church*, 12.

CHAPTER 3 PROCEDURE AND RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the process used to verify the hypotheses. It will explain the chosen research method, how the subjects were selected, the design of the research instrument, the implementation of the research procedure and how the survey results were organized. The chosen research method is the descriptive survey.

The descriptive survey seeks to provide information to respond to the problem that needs to be addressed, “to discover what cult-like characteristics are present in selected doctrinally orthodox churches.” The survey revealed what characteristics were predominant in unhealthy evangelical churches. The research question is, “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of selected doctrinally orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?” The use of the descriptive survey gained the analytical data so that the helpful recommendations could be formulated.

Research Design

The purpose of this project is to study cult-like characteristics of selected doctrinally orthodox churches through the experiences of former members. Cult-like behavior is usually equated with full-blown cults such as the Unification Church or the Heaven’s Gate. But cult-like behavior exists in churches that believe in and teach basic evangelical (or orthodox) doctrine: the Triune God of the Bible, inspiration and inerrancy

of Scripture, virgin birth deity/humanity of Christ and salvation by grace through faith alone. Authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism are examples of cult-like characteristics that can exist in both full-blown cults and doctrinally orthodox evangelical churches. The focus of this study is not the full-blown cult, but evangelical churches that have cult-like tendencies.

This research sought to provide helpful recommendations on how a church can avoid cult-like characteristics, thereby maintaining its health or regaining it. This researcher used descriptive surveys given to former members from the selected doctrinally orthodox churches to reveal specific dysfunctional behavior in leadership and in the congregations. The descriptive survey was the best methodology to use for this project because it allowed a good sized sampling of people to tell their story and experience. The focus of the study is not on the individual 13 churches themselves, but on the collective responses of the individuals who are former members and who responded to the survey.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this project are as follows:

1. Primary cult-like characteristics in doctrinally orthodox churches are abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism.
2. The unprepared, insecure and spiritually immature leadership of doctrinally orthodox churches with cult-like characteristics will be found in churches which have unhealthy tendencies.
3. The first attempt at confronting these unhealthy tendencies even in doctrinally orthodox churches is usually unsuccessful.
4. Doctrinally orthodox churches have a closed system that is difficult to penetrate.

Research Subjects

Thirty-six former members from nineteen churches were initially contacted. Some of the unhealthy churches they attended still exist and some do not. The subjects who confirmed through e-mail, face-to-face, or phone conversation, that they had previously attended churches with orthodox, evangelical doctrine as described in the introductory paragraph were included. As a double check, the first question of the survey confirmed that the subjects were referring to their former church experience in a church that was not a full-blown cult, but one that had evangelical doctrine. The first survey question was, *“Did the church have evangelical doctrine in areas such as the Trinity, Christ born of a virgin, 100% God, 100% man, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone and a high view of Scripture?”* All former members who were surveyed had various periods of time since their cult-like experiences. Hopefully, their time was used to heal, gain perspective and reflect and were not tempted to answer their questions in a vengeful way.

The researcher initially made contact with the potential subjects through various means. Some of them currently attend the researcher’s church. The topic of an abusive church past has come up in general conversation and in sermons. Others came forward through a church bulletin announcement that described the dissertation topic and survey. The announcement ran for several months. Other potential participants were gained through word of mouth and others from a blog focusing on the recovery of unhealthy church experiences. Since the researcher has been planning to write his Applied Research Project on this subject for a number of years, he began to accumulate potential subjects a long time ago.

During the search for potential subjects, a number of people had to be turned away because their former church did not meet the definition of an evangelical church. They either had belonged to a cult group such as the Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Christian Science. Because of the title of this Applied Research Project, a couple

individuals thought that the subject was the Russian or Greek “Orthodox” Church. Of course, none of these potential participants were used.

Research Instrument

The descriptive survey is the best methodology to use for this dissertation because it examines a common ministry condition as experienced by a number of people in multiple churches. The descriptive survey allowed the respondents to tell their story and let that experience reflect on the research. The survey, called “Survey Describing Community Life In An Unhealthy Evangelical Church,” measured the presence or absence of church health. The research instrument was designed based upon the hypotheses. The hypotheses were developed based upon the characteristics found in the research. Almost all of the cult-like characteristics discussed in chapter two were combined and categorized into the ones expressed in the hypotheses. The survey has thirty fixed-choice questions (Likert Scale), each measuring aspects of the hypotheses. Each question asked the participant how true (if at all) a certain aspect of each hypothesis was of his experience in the cult-like and unhealthy church. For a complete version of this descriptive survey, see appendix A.

As already discussed, the first question was designed to insure that the respondent was answering the questions based on their experience in a church that had evangelical doctrine. Questions two through six dealt with the first characteristic of the first hypothesis -- abuse of authority. These questions attempted to determine the degree, extent, objects and type of abuse that was possibly present in the respondents’ churches.

Questions seven through eleven attempted to measure the second characteristic of the first hypothesis—unresolved leadership sin. The question raised the possibility of any type of sin pattern, but these questions were designed to learn if there were any sexual and/or financial sin patterns in the leadership. Several participants asked if they could respond positively to these questions if they had learned of the presence of

these patterns after they had left the church. They were instructed to answer in the affirmative.

Questions twelve through fourteen handled the third characteristic of hypothesis number one -- poor communication. These questions attempted to uncover the possibility of inadequate one way communication; from the leadership to the congregation, not to understand, but only to maintain and control the direction, ministries and finances of the church.

Questions fifteen through seventeen examined the fourth characteristic of the first hypothesis—legalism. These questions were designed to learn if lifestyle legalism was the dominant tone of the congregation. To the extent that legalism was prevalent would be the level that the church had made minor issues of sin and behavior the major issue. The survey did not take on the possibility of salvation legalism in the churches because the question of the presence of grace-based salvation through faith in Christ alone had already been established by pre-screening and a positive answer to question number one. For a comparison between salvation legalism, lifestyle legalism and Christian liberty (see appendix D).

Questions eighteen through twenty-three measured the level of strength and weakness of the professional and lay leadership of a cult-like church, the second hypothesis. These questions sought to learn if the pastors and elders or deacons were immature, untrained and/or unspiritual. In a church environment, so much begins and ends with the leaders. It is presumed that a good mixture of education, skills and spirituality make a big difference in the health of a local church.

Questions twenty-four and twenty-five asked about the subject of hypothesis number three—confronting the unhealthy tendencies of cult-like churches. These questions tried to measure the success or failure of attempted internal reform. The greater the success would show greater health. The more resistance to the confrontation would reveal greater dysfunction.

Lastly, questions twenty-six through thirty dealt with hypothesis number four—the closed system mentality of unhealthy churches. These final questions were designed to determine if the church was closed to outside influence and positive change. The higher answers to these questions would reveal a sense of superiority, self-sufficiency and pride.

All response options range from 1 to 7 but have two different types of answer options. For example, for questions requesting the degree of a characteristic, the response options range from “extremely weak” (1) to “extremely strong” (7). For questions requesting the frequency of a characteristic; the responses options range from “never” (1) to “always” (7).

Most of the completed surveys were not anonymous to the researcher so that follow up clarification could be done if necessary. However, some were anonymous according to the wishes of a few of the respondents. The researcher knew some of the respondents personally, but for others he only had an e-mail address and first name.

The research question is, “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of selected orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?” The researcher sought to use the survey to prove the presence of cult-like characteristics and that analysis, interaction with Scripture and previous research can produce beneficial advice to make the Church healthier.

The survey was developed and completed as part of an independent study. A copy of the survey appears in the appendix of this dissertation. The researcher enlisted the assistance of Jerry Wofford (Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Ministries, Dallas Theological Seminary) for help in the development of the survey instrument. John Reed, a Senior Professor of Pastoral Ministries Emeritus at Dallas Theological Seminary, was consulted as well.

Research Procedure

An adequate number of surveys were copied for the mail-out and some extra were made in the event that more potential respondents were uncovered. Address labels were printed from the database and applied to the envelopes. Adequate postage was applied. Self-addressed, stamped return envelopes were prepared. The surveys, along with a cover letter and the return envelopes, were mailed and e-mailed out through the regular postal and e-mail systems of Bear Creek Bible Church on July 1, 2009 to accommodate the preferences of the participants. A few were e-mailed to respondents who desired some degree of anonymity.

The survey was also posted on a blog, <http://forum.gcmwarning.com/index.php>, that is a support group forum for people who have been involved in a cult-like church so that they can recover from their experience. The survey included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey with the expressed desire to ultimately increase the health of the Christian Church. See appendix E for a copy of the cover letter.

A request for demographic data from each participant such as name (optional), gender, age, current occupation, level of education, date of birth and age at salvation was also included as a preface to the survey.

An introductory statement was included just before the body of the survey. It encouraged the survey taker to consider the value of the survey, its intention and desired effect. The statement was designed to make sure the respondent would be doing something ultimately positive for the body of Christ by recounting a negative, personal experience.

Your careful response to this survey is deeply appreciated. Your confidential results will be used to ultimately build up the health of the church as these issues of cult-like characteristics are explored and examined. All questions pertain to the church where you experienced an unhealthy/dysfunctional form of Christianity. Please circle the number that best applies.

Each survey respondent could check a box if they desired to receive the compiled results of the survey. Those who checked the box will be offered a copy of the entire dissertation which will, of course, include the compiled results of the survey. The dissertation will either be e-mailed or a hard copy could be mailed through the U.S. postal system if desired.

The participants were assured of confidentiality so that each could respond candidly regarding their difficulties and disappointments at their previous churches. Respondents were asked to return their survey by August 1, 2009. A follow up reminder was mailed or e-mailed around July 15 to encourage people to return their completed surveys. See appendix E for a copy of the follow up letter.

About 86 percent of the surveys were returned, the last ones were returned in late August. Some of the surveys had brief remarks written on them that sought to clarify the responses. Some of the remarks gave some detail or justification to the chosen answers. Thirty surveys were returned representing thirteen churches. Eleven of his respondents came from one, unhealthy local church experience in the early 1990's. Two churches each had three respondents in common. Three churches had two each. Seven churches each had one.

As the surveys were returned, Jerry Wofford helped tabulate the responses in a systematic way so that conclusions could be used to test the hypotheses and provide useful recommendations for churches. Mr. Wofford sent the researcher a format to tabulate the responses onto an excel spreadsheet. Three of the respondents' answers were recorded as a sample and sent back to Mr. Wofford to make sure if the process was handled correctly. When confirmation was received, the other twenty-seven answers were posted onto the spreadsheet in the same manner. The answers were tabulated to answer how the participants responded to the hypotheses as a group. They were also arranged to see how the respondents from each of the churches answered. All of the respondents were

assigned a code on the excel spreadsheet. Their names were not used. The hard copy surveys were kept in a secure storage area.

Conclusion

The use of the descriptive survey took this topic from a subjective to an objective realm. A number of books have been written on the subject of spiritual abuse, cultic behavior and unhealthy church life, but they are largely anecdotal. The use of the descriptive survey in this project formalizes the topic, and therefore, will hopefully allow better observation, conclusions and recommendations to flow from it.

The descriptive survey was designed based upon the hypotheses so that they could be tested. Proper, potential survey participants were located and surveyed. A good percentage of surveys were returned. The responses were evaluated and analyzed.

The results were compiled into this doctoral dissertation. Conclusions and recommendations were made to help churches recover from unhealthiness or to prevent other churches from becoming dysfunctional congregations. The full results of the research are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

SURVEY RATIONALE, RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter will address three primary issues. The first issue concerns the rationale for including each cluster of questions for each hypothesis. What information were the question clusters seeking to discover? What was the motivation behind each question group? The second issue addressed in this chapter is the survey results. What did the descriptive survey show? The data received from each of the surveys will be examined. The charts showing the appropriate results will be included in this chapter or the appendix, wherever deemed appropriate. The third issue is the meaning of the survey results. What do the results mean? What can be learned or discovered from the survey so helpful recommendations can be made to help churches avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?

Some of the questions were originally phrased in a way to make the higher number response show a healthier church. Other questions were phrased to reveal an unhealthy church. As the responses came in, the response numbers for the answers to questions 10-14 and 18-30 were flipped to make all higher numbers show a lack of health or a negative response and the lower numbers a positive response or stronger church (e.g. a “6” answer on the Likert scale was made a “2”, a “1” became a “7”, etc.).

The hypotheses were proven to be true. The participants in the descriptive surveys expressed many of the same overall responses, but to varying degrees. Of course, each completed survey was unique. Each participant interpreted some of the questions

somewhat differently since some of the categories and terms are not defined and are intentionally broad.

In this chapter, the following items will be examined in this order: The overall results of all four hypotheses, the demographic information on the survey, the survey diagnostic question, and the “question clusters” for each hypothesis. A conclusion for the chapter follows.

Overall Results -- All Four Hypotheses

With regards to the first hypothesis, the primary cult-like characteristics: abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism, were found to be prevalent in the experience of each participant. Almost all churches have these characteristics to at least a small degree. Each characteristic in each church will manifest itself differently, but each was found to be present. Hypotheses two, three and four were found to be true as well. Each church did not exhibit all the cult-like characteristics to the same degree of the others. The literature review revealed other characteristics, but the ones chosen for the first hypothesis are categorized generally enough to include many of the others without going into excessive detail. See figure A for the results from all respondents on all four hypotheses. For the charts on the survey results for all four hypotheses, from each of the thirteen churches, see appendix B.

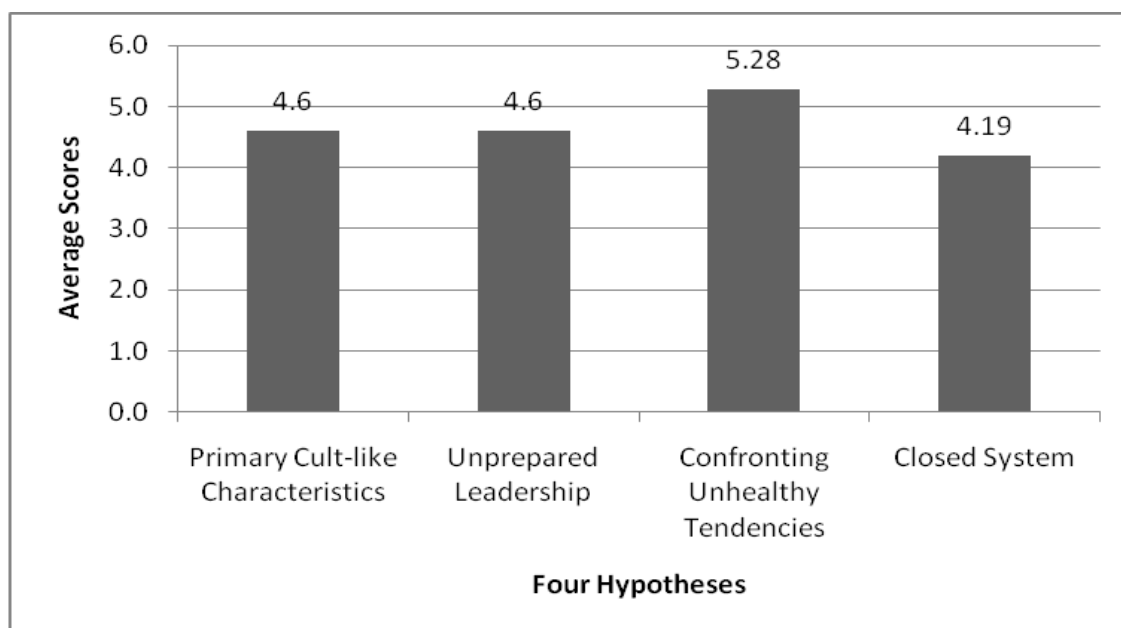


Figure A. Results of Four Hypotheses From All Churches.

Demographic Questions

The Rationale for These Questions

These questions were helpful to gain a sense of who was answering the surveys. The answers were helpful to show that there was a fairly broad mix of respondents. The participants had to be from a narrow experience. They had to have been part of an unhealthy church with evangelical doctrine. The church could not be a full cult or have liberal doctrine. They also had to be involved in their churches enough to be able to answer the questions with some depth.

Results

The results from the demography of the participants showed a good diversity. There were sixteen males and fourteen females. The average age of the respondents was 49, with the youngest being 26 and the oldest being 78.

Though most of the participants were white collar professionals, there was still a healthy mixture of occupations. There were six homemakers, three retired, two clergy, two self-employed, one pilot, one journalist, one salesperson, one graphic designer, one massage therapist, one security guard, one chief operating officer, one accountant, one program manager, one cosmetologist, one secretary, one computer programmer, one nurse, one switch technician, one writer, one administrator, and one teacher.

Almost all the respondents had some post high school education. Their highest educational degrees were as follows: Two had high school diplomas, four had some college, eighteen had earned bachelor degrees, and six had post-graduate degrees.

Their average age at salvation was sixteen.

Eighteen desired to receive a copy of the survey results and twelve did not request them.

Analysis of the Results

The respondents were a representative cross section of people. There was a wide age range. There was a balance of genders. It was a well-educated sampling. Most were white color employees with a college degree. The most important question asked the respondents at what age they each became a believer. All answered a specific age, determining that each saw himself as a Christian.

Survey Diagnostic Question

The first question of the descriptive survey was, “Did the church have evangelical doctrine in areas such as the Trinity, Christ born of a virgin, 100% God, 100% man, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone and a high view of Scripture?”

The Rationale for this Question

This question served as a diagnostic question to ensure the respondents were each a part of an evangelical, conservative church and not a cult organization. Since the focus of this project is not on cults, but on evangelical churches, there had to be a definition of the doctrine of such a church. This question was the only one of all thirty that had a higher response indicating a healthier church. The responses highlight the irony that a church with good doctrine can have a cult-like signature.

The Results

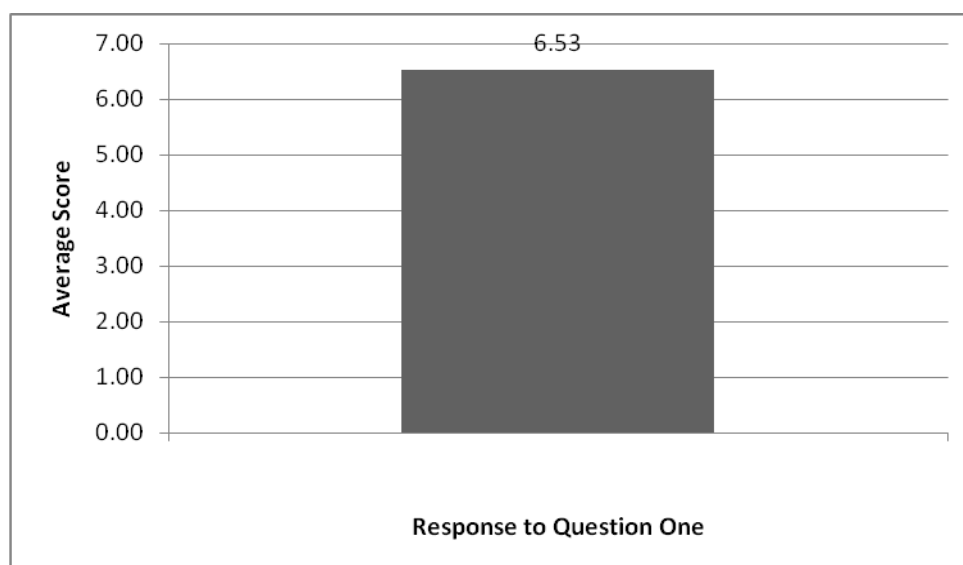


Figure B. Response To Survey Question One.

Analysis of the Results

If people could not respond at least to a moderate degree to this question, then they were not eligible to participate to the survey. Not responding to this question to at least a moderate degree (4 or higher) meant that the prospective respondent was not a member of a church that is the subject of this project. A moderate score was acceptable because either some doctrines were not taught at all, not taught that often or no position

was taken. The score of all thirty respondents showed they were generally confident of their church's doctrinal stance. Only four respondents scored their churches as a 5. All others chose a 6 or 7. See figure B for the average from all thirty respondents.

Hypothesis #1 -- Primary cult-like characteristics in doctrinally orthodox churches are abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication and legalism.

*Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Primary Cult-like Characteristics (Hypothesis #1)
--Abuse of Authority*

These questions sought to determine the presence and extent of the abuse by authority in the subjects' former churches.

2. To what degree did you observe any abuse by the authority at your church?
3. To what degree were you a recipient of this abuse?
4. To what degree were others recipients of the abuse?
5. To the best of your knowledge, did the abuse break any federal, state or local laws or regulations?
6. In your opinion, did the abuse break standard business ethics?

The Rationale for this Question Cluster

These questions were designed to show knowledge of any abuse of the members by the leadership of the church. Did the leaders take advantage of their power for personal or church control advantages? Were there instances when the respondents could recall abuse aimed at others or themselves? Was there autocratic control that used its power arbitrarily? Did the leaders seem heavy-handed and insensitive to the needs of the congregation? Were they leading primarily for the benefit of the church or for their own advancement? Several respondents asked if they should include information from what they learned about their churches after they left. They were instructed to include those experiences in the formation of their answers.

The Results

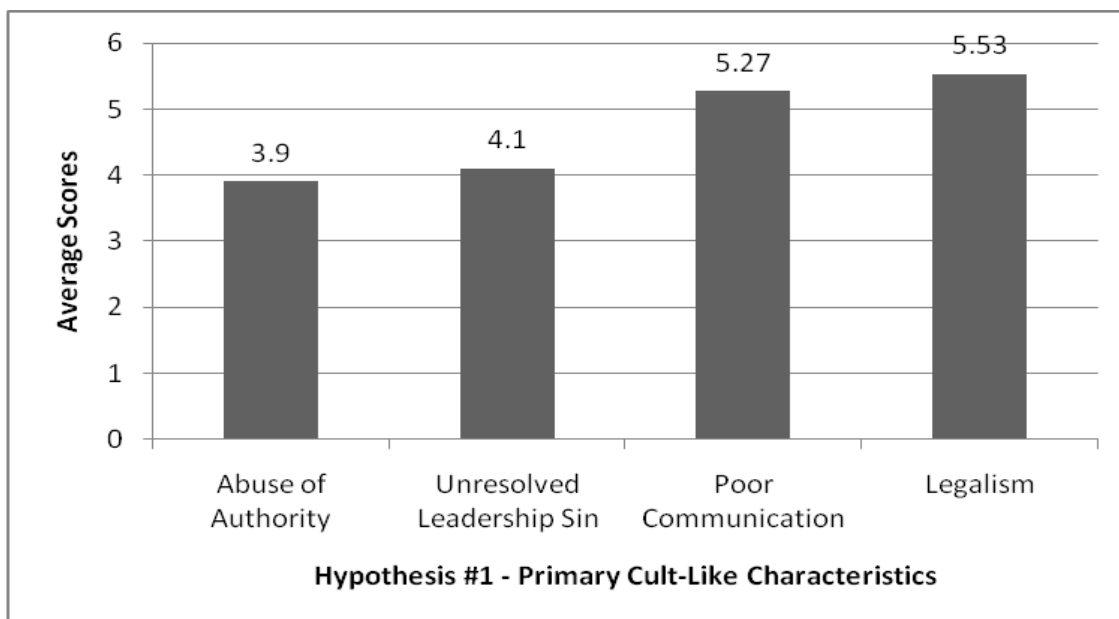


Figure C. Result of Hypothesis One From All Churches.

The overall results for the cluster were moderate, showing the presence of some abuse of authority. The responses ranged from a low of 2.2 from church 11 to a high of 4.51 for church 1, with an average of 3.9 for all 13 churches. See appendix C for the charts of all thirteen churches.

The average for question 2 was a 4.57, for question 3, 4.3 but the response to question 4 was especially strong. This answer scored a moderately high 5.43. Even though abuse against the participants themselves scored in the moderate zone (4.3), they were more likely to see others as the victims of abuse by the leadership of their church. This showed a good degree of situational awareness on the part of the participants and that they were at least a reasonably vital part of their churches. They were more likely to see how others were hurt than they themselves being abused. The answers to questions 5 and 6 show that the abuse was not the breaking of legal (1.87) or ethical codes (3.2), but possibly in the realm of interpersonal power plays.

Analysis of the Results

The numbers clearly testify to the presence of some abuse of authority. It is a question of further research to find the type of the abuse. Since church health usually begins with the health of the leadership, this data may explain the reason for the general lack of health in the remainder of the responses. If the shepherds are fleecing the flock, then the flock cannot do what it is designed to do. Thus, this is a foundational answer and helps to explain the basis for the rest of the answers. If the leadership are corrupt and bending the rules to help themselves, the way the rest of the body acts will be distorted as to its true desired design.

Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Primary Cult-like Characteristics (Hypothesis #1) -- Unresolved Leadership Sin

These questions sought to determine the presence and extent of unresolved leadership sin in the subjects' former churches.

7. As you reflect back on that time, was there any personal pattern of sin in any member(s) of the church leadership (clergy or lay leadership)?
8. Was the sin of a financial nature? Note: No need to respond if answer to #7 was "none at all".
9. Was the sin of a sexual nature? Note: No need to respond if answer to #7 was "none at all".
10. During your time at the church, were there any attempts to resolve this sin?
11. To what degree were the attempt(s) at resolution successful? (If there was no attempt to resolve the sin, please skip this question.)

The Rationale for This Question Cluster

These questions were posed in an effort to discern the power and influence of the personal sin of the leaders. How much did their personal sin contribute to the overall

lack of church health? Was there leaven that corrupted the spiritual harmony of the body similar to Achan's sin leading to the weakness of Israel and its defeat at Ai (Joshua 7)?

Question 10 and 11 tried to determine if and how those sins were resolved. There could be an attempt at working through a sin issue, but that does not guarantee a healthy resolution. The attempt itself could be flawed. Unhealthy churches usually do not have good resolution abilities and therefore can resemble cults in this regard.

The Results

The results in figure C show a moderate amount of leadership sin. The numbers ranged from a low of 1 in church 7 to a high of 6.5 in church 13. The general response to the question of personal leadership sin was moderate (4.33), but the specific sins of financial (2.83) and sexual sins (3.22) were lower. Questions 10 and 11 were moderately high (5.0) and high (6.29) respectively, which showed the few attempts at confrontation and resolution were successful. See appendix C for the charts of all thirteen churches.

Analysis of the Results

This was a high response factoring in the high likelihood that sins such as sexual immorality and financial mishandlings are not always uncovered. It is quite amazing that so many people knew about the sins of the leaders in their previous church homes. Several respondents asked if they should include information from what they learned about their churches after they left. They were instructed to include those experiences as they considered their answers.

These findings are also significant because they show the relationship between sexual or financial sins and the presence of other cult-like characteristics. These sinister patterns seem to have correlation.

It is also important to note that these are unresolved leadership sins. If sins were committed, uncovered, repented and forgiven, that would be biblical and healthy. But these sins were not properly dealt with and therefore contributed to the dysfunctional nature of the churches.

*Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Primary Cult-like Characteristics (Hypothesis #1)
– Poor Communication*

These questions sought to determine the presence and extent of poor communication of the subjects' former churches.

12. Was the leadership's communication effective?
13. Did the leadership entertain questions from members in a positive manner?
14. Did the congregation have any opportunity to vote or give authoritative input on big issues facing the church?

The Rationale for This Question Cluster

These questions were asked to find out if the body had poor communication within itself, especially from the leadership to the people. When the leaders did communicate, was the communication effective; meaning, did the people respond? Was the leadership positive and inviting, or was it predominantly the leadership telling the congregation what to do? Did the congregation only take orders, or did they have any say in the direction of the church?

The Results

The results, shown in figure C show a moderately high degree of poor communication with a 5.27 average. The number ranged from a low of 3.3 in church 5 to a high of 6.5 in church 4.

Questions 13 (5.66) and 14 (5.8) averaged moderately high, showing that the leadership did not listen well nor give the congregation the sense that their opinions mattered. See appendix C for the charts of all thirteen churches.

Analysis of the Results

The results show that poor communication is a strong element in unhealthy church situations. It is a cult-like characteristic. Communication in cult-like churches is usually not effective, is usually negative, one-way and the congregation's influence is non-authoritative.

Leadership that does not listen is leadership that does not care or love. The way we talk and listen to each other is the most obvious and telling way for people to discern the quality or lack of quality of a relationship. The content of the words, volume, tone of the conversation and non-verbals such as body language and eye contact are all part of the message.

Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Primary Cult-like Characteristics (Hypothesis #1) -- Legalism

These questions sought to determine the presence and extent of legalism in the subjects' former churches.

15. To what degree were the "gray areas" (smoking, moderate alcohol usage, gambling, etc.) of the Christian life presented to be "black and white" (wrong in all circumstances)?
16. Was there an under tone of judgment and negativity?
17. Were certain behavioral sins especially criticized?

The Rationale for This Question Cluster

These questions were asked to determine the extent of lifestyle legalism in each participant's church. Lifestyle legalism is the most conspicuous aspect of a cult-like church. Is spirituality measured in externals, such as abstinence from certain arbitrary behaviors? Was the chief motivator the fear of judgment, or the presence of love? Were certain sins overemphasized? Did the leaders use them as a litmus test for the followership of the people?

The Results

The results, shown in figure C, reveal a moderately high degree of legalism, with a 5.53 average for all 13 churches. The numbers ranged from a low of 2.67 in church 13 to a high of 7 in churches 2, 8 and 12.

The two more specific questions (15 and 17) garnered moderately high scores (5.1 and 5.4, respectively), but the response to the more general question on tone resulted in a high 6.03. See appendix C for the charts of all thirteen churches.

Analysis of the Results

Because of its high score, this could be considered the primary "primary" characteristic of cult-like churches. These churches that claimed to teach the grace of Jesus Christ at least as far as salvation was concerned, failed to teach the liberty of the daily Christian life. A focus on externalism and the exalting of certain sins could only lead to a modern day form of Pharisaicalism. Lifestyle legalism distorts the Christian life and deemphasizes the centrality of Christ. It reduces the need for dependence upon the Holy Spirit and produces unrighteous pride.

Legalism is the cult-like characteristic that makes the most impact on peoples' everyday lives. Abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin and poor communication by leadership all make their imprint, but legalism is a lifestyle that touches people in their everyday lives as it affects inter-personal relationships, fellowship and intimacy with

God. It is a toxic characteristic that hurts the church and all relationships, thereby reducing the display of the glory of God. It gives the look and feel of spirituality, but legalistic religion is a poor substitute for a vibrant, spirit-filled, grace-based relationship with God. For a comparison chart on the differences between salvation legalism, lifestyle legalism and Christian liberty, see appendix D.

The high score on the presence of a negative and judgmental tone spoke volumes. It showed the underlying personality of the churches and feeling that they gave off. This is perhaps one of the most damaging aspects of a cult-like, unhealthy church. They hurt their own people and scare off many others who are interested in knowing more about spiritual issues. The presence of this characteristic is a forecast on how ineffective they would be on reaching others for Christ. These churches were better representatives of the worst Pharisees than the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

Hypothesis #2 -- The unprepared, insecure and spiritually immature leadership of doctrinally orthodox churches with cult-like characteristics will be found in churches which have unhealthy tendencies.

Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Immature Leadership of Doctrinally Orthodox Churches (Hypothesis #2) -- Unprepared Leadership

These questions sought to determine the presence and the extent of the lack of preparedness of the leadership of the subjects' former churches.

18. Was the clergy well-educated and experienced in Christian leadership?
19. Did the clergy seem secure?
20. Was the clergy spiritually mature?
21. Was the lay leadership well-educated and experienced in Christian leadership?
22. Did the lay leadership seem secure?
23. Was the lay leadership spiritually mature?

The Rationale for This Question Cluster

These questions were asked to help determine the backgrounds and spiritual status of the leaders of the churches that were examined. Since so much begins and ends with the leadership of an organization, it was necessary to explore the level of preparation of the pastors, elders and deacons of these unhealthy churches. Who are the leaders and what are their characters? Are the professional and lay leaders prepared spiritually and academically? Are they secure and responsive, or non-reactive? What feelings did they project to the congregations and others? This research predicted that the survey would show there would be an inadequacy and/or imbalance of leadership preparation, especially in spiritual matters.

The Results

The results in figure A on page 50 show the second hypothesis was proven to be true as well. The average for all 13 churches was a moderate 4.6. The numbers ranged from a low of 2.17 in churches 9 and 11 to a high of 6.83 in church 8. See appendix C for the charts of all thirteen churches.

Each group (lay leaders and clergy) was seen as moderately weak. The average for the clergy's three questions was 4.47 and the average for the lay leadership's three questions was 4.72.

The average for the education weakness of both groups was 4.61, for the insecurity level was 4.47 and immaturity level was 4.7.

Analysis of the Results

The second hypothesis was proven to be true as well, confirming the important role of prepared leadership in a church's health. The clergy and lay leadership of these churches were generally seen as uneducated, unspiritual, insecure and immature. They did not know what they were doing because they were not educated; they had a

weak spiritual foundation and were inexperienced. As a result, they were reactive to challenges and could not prepare their congregations for positive challenges and growth. In any organization, a lack of education, security and experience leads people to be reactive when put in positions of responsibility. Unprepared leadership is an accident waiting to happen.

Hypothesis #3 -- The first attempt at confronting these unhealthy tendencies even in doctrinally orthodox churches is usually unsuccessful.

Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Confronting Unhealthy Tendencies (Hypothesis #3) -- Confronting Unhealthy Tendencies -- Resistance to Change and Confrontation of Problems

These questions determine the presence and extent of the leaderships' resistance to change and ability to respond well when confronted by problems in the subjects' former churches.

24. Were there any attempts to confront the unhealthy tendencies in the church?
25. Did the confrontation achieve any positive results? (Skip this question if there were no attempts to resolve the unhealthy tendencies.)

The Rationale for this Question Cluster

The purpose for these two questions was to help determine if the leadership of the church was open to change once confronted. Did the people of the church do anything about the unhealthy condition of the church? Were there any positive results due to the unveiling of the dysfunctions? When people raise questions about problems, do they become the problem?

These questions of confrontation (24 and 25) are different from questions 10 and 11 in that they attempt to determine if the leadership will accept positive change once any unhealthy tendencies are pointed out to them. Questions 10 and 11 tried to determine

if specific sin problems of the clergy or lay leadership were addressed and if there was any resolution of those issues.

Results

The results in figure A show the third hypothesis was proven to be true as well. The average for all 13 churches was a moderately high 5.28. The numbers ranged from a low of 4.33 in church 10 to a high of 6.5 in church #13. See appendix B for the charts of all thirteen churches.

The response to question 24 (4.5) showed that a moderate number reported attempts to confront the unhealthy tendencies in the churches. But with the average to the answers to question 25 a high 6.54, it showed that few of the attempts were successful.

Analysis of Results

The third hypothesis showed that the leadership is resistant to dealing with problems and weaknesses. This hypothesis focused on how they handle challenges. The unhealthy church desires to protect itself and its organization because it is insecure and reactive. Its primary interest is survival and to propagate itself to justify its significance and purpose. Therefore, real disciple-making is put in the background. There is little ability or desire to thoroughly resolve conflict or respond positively to constructive confrontation. If people ask a question about a problem, they become a problem. The degree to which reform was attempted was telling as well.

Oftentimes, the first attempt at strengthening a church ends in failure with the usual sacrificial lamb and church split. The subsequent attempts at reform are usually more successful, perhaps because more time has passed and the folks in the “middle” before now see the process happening all over again, so they now discern that something must be broken.

Hypothesis #4 -- Doctrinally orthodox churches have a closed system that is difficult to penetrate

Survey Question Cluster Pertaining to Doctrinally Orthodox Churches' Closed System (Hypothesis #4) -- Closed System Mentality & Tone -- Positive Change Blocked

These questions determine the presence and the extent of the leadership's tendency to block positive change in the subjects' former churches.

26. Did the church have any formal or informal leadership training efforts?

27. Did the church have any rotation of lay leadership?

28. Did the church sincerely consider new ministries, programs or ideas?

29. To what degree was it easy to feel a part of the church?

30. To what degree was it easy to leave the church?

The Rationale for this Question Cluster

The purpose of this series of questions is to help determine if the churches had a closed system mentality. Does it have a negative tone towards positive possible change? What was their view of change in leadership and ministry? Did they encourage it or resist it? Did they group have an enmeshed inner culture? Was it a difficult group to break into? Was it a difficult group to leave for fear of a negative response? Was it a codependent organism?

Results

The results in figure A show the fourth hypothesis was proven to be true as well. The average for all thirteen churches was a moderate 4.19. The numbers ranged from a low of 2.75 in church 9 to a high of 6 in church 8. See appendix B for the charts of all thirteen churches.

The churches were hard places to feel connected. Question 29's responses revealed a moderate 3.97. However, on average, these communities were somewhat hard to leave. The answers to question 30 scored a moderate 3.23.

Averaging the answers to questions 27 and 28 together could be considered a “newness” score. The churches’ combined negative attitude toward anything new was 4.93.

Analysis of the Results

The data revealed that the fourth hypothesis; that the cult-like church has a closed system mentality is true. New ideas are usually discouraged and disregarded. This hypothesis focuses on the community and tone of the church. It was found to be elitist, paranoid and isolationist. The leadership is static. It may be difficult to become enfolded into these churches, but it seems exiting from the congregations is also difficult, possibly due to the fear of negative pressure and reprisal. Some respondents may have misinterpreted the final question of the survey, thinking that it was hard to leave because of positive things about the church rather than believing it was hard to leave due to the fear of potential shunning or slander if they departed.

Conclusion

The research question, “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of selected doctrinally orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?” was found to be true. The descriptive survey showed that the hypotheses were correct.

Based upon the analyzed results of the survey, useful recommendations will be made to help the health of many churches. These recommendations touch on the areas of concern in each hypothesis and deal with the primary cult-like characteristics, unprepared leadership, resistance to change in ministry and confrontation and a closed system mentality in its culture and tone. All anticipated and unexpected results helped to answer the research question and bring needed suggestions to churches to either recover

from cult-like characteristics or prevent said characteristics from developing. These recommendations will be presented in chapter five.

Other observations arose from the survey results. These discoveries open the door for other topics that are worthy for future possible study. They will also be discussed in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS, TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Chapter four laid out the rationale behind each survey question, examined the survey results and analyzed those results. This chapter answers the question, “What do we do with this information?” Or as the research question asks, “Can the use of a descriptive survey with past participants of selected orthodox churches produce helpful recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism?” This chapter is organized to include a summary of the conclusions that offer the basis for recommendations, the specific recommendations, specific suggestions for further study and some concluding remarks.

A Summary of the Conclusions from the Survey

1. All of the hypotheses were proven true, but to varying degrees.
2. Regarding the first hypothesis on primary cult-like characteristics, legalism was the most prevalent of the four, followed by poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and abuse of authority.
3. The survey participants noticed others being abused more than they themselves.
4. Though there was a moderate level of known leadership sin, there was a high level of sin that had unsuccessful resolution.
5. Poor communication was common in the churches. Questions and authoritative input from the congregations were not received well by the leadership.

6. The churches had an overall tendency towards lifestyle legalism. The negative tone of the churches, as associated with the questions on the presence of legalism, was observed by many in the survey.
7. Although not scored as negatively as it could have, the leadership was not viewed as prepared as it could be in the areas of education, spirituality, personal security and maturity.
8. The churches were not that interested in improving. When confronted with the desire for improving the unhealthy conditions of the churches, very few successful attempts were reported.
9. The churches were resistant to things that would be considered new, such as leadership changes, ministries and programs.

Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations that will hopefully assist churches either move away from the realm of the cult-like to a healthier and more effective New Testament model. They are in no particular order.

Accountability for Independent Churches

Many, possibly all, of the surveyed churches were independent. As observed in the literature study, there is the tendency for the pastors in many cultic or cult-like churches to be lone wolves. People in general need some accountability or leadership over them. It does not have to be supervisory leadership, but some internal or external board, committee or authoritative group, is helpful to provide perspective and give broad direction. For many independent churches the idea of a denomination is contrary to what they are all about. But perhaps several professors from the main Bible college or seminary that supplies clergy for the church's leadership ranks could act as consultants or advisors in the event of crisis or regular review of the church.

Another form of accountability are by-laws or a church constitution. It is surprising that many churches do not have one. It would have been a good question to add to the survey. A set of by-laws is good accountability in that it provides a written standard to guide the church. Some simple rules of procedure are very helpful in good and difficult times. They show outsiders and visitors that the leaders are accountable to a pre-decided set of guidelines. Certainly the leadership needs flexibility, but to have a set of procedures can tell everyone that the congregation has some input and the leadership has some limits.

The idea of some outside accountability can be written into the by-laws of a church. This can come in the form of several Bible college or seminary professors who would give binding arbitration in times of church strife or the affiliation to groups like the Independent Fundamental Churches of America or the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches. Formal connection to a loose denomination like the Christian Missionary Alliance or Evangelical Free Churches of America is a greater commitment.

Wariness of Upcoming, Potentially Domineering Leaders

As churches become better affiliated, perhaps even joining loose denominations or associations, church leaders can be better evaluated. If a potential leader of a cult-like church can be prevented from becoming a leader, his impact will be negated. Church leaders must be careful who they recommend. Sometimes the most charismatic young leader is not necessarily the best upcoming pastor or elder. They must not be judged just on their skills or charisma, but on their love for the body and their humility. Are they Christ-like leaders? Do they have character? Are they willing to lead sacrificially or is this a career opportunity for them? Do they attract weak, new believers or do they draw mature believers as well?

Formal Education for Clergy

Although mandatory formal education for pastors is not a biblical command, it is helpful in the potential leaders' discipleship process (which is a biblical command). The value of a Bible college or seminary education is not only in the formal written curriculum, but also in the "unwritten curriculum" that one experiences during the time of that education. There is usually a good deal of stress due to finances, family and health. The Lord uses this adversity to strengthen and test the resolve of the potential pastor. Those years are a proving ground for the ability to withstand the stresses of future full-time ministry.

Of course the main purpose for the seminary experience is the value of learning from more experienced ministry leaders and scholars in their given fields. To have the time to learn, read and interact with such individuals is invaluable. Perhaps standards for graduation should be toughened in hopes that the chances of one who may prey on the flock be weeded out. Character and skill are both needed. The seminary or Bible college needs to see its place in measuring the character of the graduate and then be willing to apply reasonable standards to him. This researcher believes from the basis of this project and personal observation that many individuals going into the ministry are unprepared or unqualified. Most of them are not lacking in intellect, but in good character, godly motivation and work ethics.

Personal Spiritual Preparation for Ministry

This recommendation is directed at those who are considering going into full-time ministry. A good level of involvement in the local church is essential, not just before Bible college or seminary, but during the process as well. Rubbing shoulders with the other saints and fellowshiping with them has no substitute. Asking questions, learning about missions, experiencing worship, Christian education, children's ministries, interviewing pastors and their spouses, helping with the youth, serving the poor, going on

a short term mission trip are all examples of the diverse preparation one can experience in an average local church. Informal internships are helpful structures. An internship could easily be designed with a church staff member to walk through the many various areas of church ministry. Such an broad internship can help with helping the intern better know what area of ministry he or she should pursue.

A vibrant personal walk with the Lord through meaningful prayer and Bible study is absolutely essential. We must experience what we want our people to be developed into. Prayer is necessary to know Christ better and to put away our fears and anxieties. Systematic Bible study is needed to determine His will for our lives and to be the basis for all of our teaching. A simple ability to articulate the gospel message is also foundational.

Valuing Expository Teaching and Systematic Theology

Even though teaching the Bible expositively will not guarantee a healthy church, it will allow truth to be dispensed in the normal way that it was given; book by book, chapter by chapter and verse by verse. His word should be taught in its full counsel, not in just the topics that the one man wants to teach about. Going systematically through the books of the Bible allows the people to hear about the themes that God has revealed in those passages. As the Bible is properly taught, the people see the correct methods of interpretation and can in turn, apply those in their personal study. As this process takes hold in a local church, discernment levels increase and it will be better inoculated against spiritual viruses.

Systematic theology is another area of study that is imperative for congregations to learn. What does the Bible teach on the major themes like the Godhead, scripture, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, sanctification, the Church and future things. A church that hears the accurate teachings of historical and contemporary theologians on these subjects can only be healthier than one that does not. This teaching gives historical

context and provides perspective leading to a better understanding of what is considered “normal” in many areas of the Christian life, including what a local church should be like.

Teaching On Ecclesiology

God’s Word, especially in Acts, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Revelation, teaches about the many dynamics of the universal church. They describe its Head, beginnings, purpose, membership, leadership, responsibilities, functioning and final deliverance. As the pages of those books are examined, the student cannot help but sense the tremendous love that Christ showed the Church and likewise, the great love that we must show one another. Abuse of the members would seem less normal.

She will also see the grace that has been extended to those who embrace Jesus Christ and His salvation for all life. When the subject of the church is biblically studied, it should become apparent that since we are recipients of His grace, we must also live under the grace system and not part from it for life after justification. It is also a vital part of our sanctification. Salvation and lifestyle legalism should decline.

As the scripture reveals that the purpose of biblical leadership is not to be served, but to serve sacrificially, a more accurate form of leadership should be expected. This does mean there will not be the presence of problems, but hopefully, they will not be accepted and will be dealt with in a sooner, more effective manner. Communication between the congregation and leadership should improve because the servant leadership required to fulfill the purpose of the church will see its need to cooperate with the people to accomplish the great calling it has been given.

More and better teaching on ecclesiology will also help increase the discernment level of Christians. They will learn the way the church is supposed to

operate, its tone and purpose. Knowing the truth will help believers discern what a counterfeit looks like.

Teaching on Legalism and Liberty

One of the greatest dangers to the church is legalism. A man-made system of religious external behavior and belief that claims to guide to either salvation or sanctification. As shown in the appendix D chart, one form of legalism attempts to gain or maintain salvation. But the more common form that afflicts evangelical churches is lifestyle legalism. It takes certain behaviors or highlights certain gray area issues like drinking, gambling, etc. and makes them into black/white sins. Our tendency is to try to please God with our behavior and not with the atoning work of Jesus. We make our behavioral choices the center of our faith and not the work of Jesus Christ. To many Christians, legalism is an attempt at a shortcut to spirituality and greater holiness. Most lifestyle legalists are well-intentioned, wanting to be pleasing to God with their behavior. This is admirable, but incomplete. Making proper external, behavioral choices is not the full experience of Christianity. Knowing Christ better, surrendering one's will, active dependence and serving Him to advance His Kingdom are also key aspects to the Christian life. The believer must see that sin is not just the commission of certain acts, but also what we omit that is commanded.

Evangelical churches must teach the distinctions between the authentic Christian life and a lifestyle of legalism. Most churches are still, at least partially, living under the old covenant law. They need to learn about grace and its transforming effects. There cannot be enough leaders to teach and live out these great truths. Due to our natural tendencies to simplify and externalize religion, living out of grace cannot be emphasized enough.

Teaching on the Characteristics of Cult-like Churches

There are topics that prepare churches for health and effectiveness: expositional and theological teaching, teaching on ecclesiology and Christian liberty. They lay the groundwork for churches to be focused in their abilities to make disciples and reach non-believers for Christ. But there is plenty of room for straightforward teaching on the characteristics of cult-like churches. Believers need to know the ideal, but they also need to see what to watch out for. Just about every New Testament church had some problems. The Corinthian church is the most conspicuous example of a dysfunctional church. The seven churches of Revelation 2-3 are other case studies. Apparently the Holy Spirit wanted us to know some examples of unhealthy local churches whether the reason for their lack of health be doctrinal, sinfulness, or wealth.

It is therefore appropriate and beneficial for more teaching on the specific subjects of abuse of authority, unresolved leadership sin, poor communication, legalism, unprepared leadership, confronting unhealthy tendencies, and a closed system mentality. Although almost all of the characteristics discussed in chapter two were categorized and combined to form the characteristics found in the hypotheses, there are several other characteristics of cults that are also possibly found in cult-like churches. These topics can be included to provide a comprehensive picture of the characteristics that can infect an evangelical church. Straightforward teaching on these subjects will expose these tendencies and they will be more likely to be exposed where they are present.

The teaching can be informal and occasional as the subject of spiritual abuse comes up in various passages like Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 34, Matthew 23 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. It can also be addressed more consistently and concentrated through a topical format.

Warning Signs of an Unhealthy Church

As one senses a level of discomfort and begins to discern that something is not “right” in his church, having some objective indicators of church health, or lack of health can be helpful tools.

An immediate indicator is the general lack of love in the church. Do people care about one another in an authentic and unselfish way or is there fear and a guarded attitude in relationships? Are good things done, but are they motivated by guilt or shame? Is there a negative tone? Such an atmosphere can feel oppressive and manifest itself from the pulpit, but also show itself in other teaching venues and one on one relationships. Criticism of each other, outside groups and a lack of forgiveness fosters a negative tone. There are subgroups in every church, but are there schisms in the church over issues that are not that important? Is the leadership open to new ideas and ministries? Is new leadership developed? How does the current leadership respond to questions? Do the wives of the leadership, especially the senior pastor’s wife, seem content? Is there some evidence to show that people are growing in their faith? Are people becoming better students of scripture and prayer? Even though they will always need pastor and teachers, are they more or less dependent upon them after time? Are they taking on positions of leadership? Are new ministries starting? Is there missions activity?

Besides informal factors that might show a lack of health, there are also formal ways or quantitative measurements through simple observation. Are people leaving the fellowship? Does the leadership talk about fulfilling the mission of the church or is time spent on taking care of peripheral problems? Does the church major in the minor aspects of life? Are the by-laws followed? Does the church have fellowship with other congregations and organizations? Are they involved in their communities as servants and participants?

What to Do if You Are in a Cult-like Church

If a believer finds herself in an unhealthy church, there are two main options: fight or flight. Authors Jeff VanVonderen and David Johnson provide excellent advice on what to do in a spiritually abusive church situation. They suggest a series of questions for members of an unhealthy church who notice that somethings are wrong. To the one considering leaving, they ask the following questions: (1) Does grace really have a chance in the system? No, if it is not currently present in the leadership. (2) Are you supporting what you hate? (3) Do you need to be right? (4) Can you stay and stay healthy at the same time? (5) Can you decide your own limits --- and stick with them? (6) Do you believe God cares more about the church than you do? (7) Is it possible the system may need to die? (8) Are you trying to help the system even though you are exhausted? (9) Are you able to listen to the voice of sanity? (10) Do you really know where to sow? (11) If you came today for the first time, knowing what you know about the system, would you stay? To the one considering staying and fighting to change things, they make the following statements: (1) Decide whom you serve. (2) Be ready for resistance (3) Keep telling the truth (4) Know who your enemy is. (5) Hang on to the Shepherd. (6) Confront the leaven (the sin). (7) Know how a healthy spiritual system functions.⁹⁴

Of course, every situation is unique in so many ways. A believer's spiritual maturity must be taken into account. Do they have the strength and wisdom to navigate through a hostile environment? One's family situation must be considered as well. Is possible family disunity a good possibility if one stays or leaves? Lastly, the extent of unhealthiness should be considered in the decision to stay or leave. Is there physical danger? Have laws been broken by the leadership that may implicate members? Many factors need to be considered.

⁹⁴ David Johnson and Jeff VanVondren, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers), 223-231.

Prayer

By far, the most important recommendation for any believer is to pray for the Church. Most Christians have the problem of prayerlessness. We either pray too little or not at all. For most believers, there is a large disconnect between what we say we believe and what we practice. We believe that God exists and that He has communicated to us through His Word, but we seem to have a terribly difficult time with communicating to Him. We have sermons, studies, seminars and discussions on prayer, but we pray much less than we talk about it. We are much like Wills Rogers' famous quote about the weather, "Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it." Christians must pray for their churches; that they remain or become healthy so they can be effective, touch unsaved lives and ultimately glorify Jesus Christ.

The scriptural standard is very high for believers. It tells us that we should "pray unceasingly" (Luke 18:1, Acts 12:5 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Believers should not only not have a prayer deficit, but should be in a spiritual posture to pray at any time. The word used in 1 Thessalonians (*adialeiptos*) can be translated as constantly or unceasingly; a "hacking cough." We should be positioned to pray at the drop of a hat, a moment's notice. Our Father will always listen to us.

Christ gave many calls to prayer. He prayed frequently and often went to another place to communicate with His Father. Jesus encouraged the disciples to be persistent in prayer and to not give up. It is acceptable and good to pray for the same thing repeatedly. The parable of the Persistent Friend (Luke 11:5-8) and the parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) teach that God expects us to continually come to Him with requests and petitions. Our Father has a gracious and giving heart and we must go to Him so He will meet our needs and we will see that He is good and all-powerful. By our continually going to Him, we show our faith in Him and confess our dependence. While these parables do not teach directly about prayerlessness, they, by their very lesson teach and encourage the exact opposite.

The pastor, elder or missionary who does not pray does damage many times over as his ministry becomes powerless and that same weakness spreads into the congregation. The leader must be in constant prayer for his flock. Instead of relying upon God to work, he relies upon his talents and giftedness. Marketing, programs and hype replace prayer as the chosen weapon against the evil one and his minions. We often choose broken cisterns over the overflowing blessedness of God's power. But prayer is how we appeal to God to provide for our personal and ministry needs.

Believers need a proper perspective to prayer. Prayer is more than a responsibility, it is a relief. As we pray more, the more we will realize that prayer gives relief to the burdens that we carry and the loneliness we may feel. God desires to take our burdens and spend time with us. Believers must pray for the universal church and their individual congregations and leadership. Hopefully, we are motivated to go before the throne of grace by more than obligation, but to have true needs met by our Lord who seeks to be with us. The more we realize the true purpose of prayer the greater our prayer life will accelerate.

Intentional Maintenance of Church Health

An environment of health must be cultivated. The following intentional aspects of church health must be fostered: a high percentage of involvement, a positive atmosphere, the reinforcement of productive members, the sharing of core values and not "overselling" the church to people who are searching for a church home. These ideas help insulate a congregation from those who are potential trouble-makers.⁹⁵ Leadership development, authentic worship, the preaching of the word, the presence of small groups,

⁹⁵ Marshall Shelley, *Well-Intentioned Dragons*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Books, 1995), 83-92.

a heart for missions, a climate of discipleship and the continual dynamic of love and forgiveness are all needed to maintain church health.

Other writers give helpful insight to the subject of church health. Having a positive model to copy is a good thing. Author Stephen Macchia lists the ten characteristics of a healthy church. They form a backbone upon which to build a Christ-honoring spiritual community: (1) God's empowering presence. Does God run the church? Are the people looking to Him to lead? Is the church dependent upon the Holy Spirit for its purpose and direction? Is that dependency evidenced in the fruit of the Spirit and the employment of the members' spiritual giftedness?⁹⁶ (2) God-exalting worship. The people gather together regularly to corporately worship in ways that engage the heart, mind, soul and strength of the people.⁹⁷ (3) The Spiritual Disciplines. The healthy church provides training, models, and resources for members of all ages to develop their daily spiritual disciplines.⁹⁸ (4) Learning and Growing In Community. A healthy church encourages believers to grow in their walks with God and one another in the context of a safe, affirming environment.⁹⁹ (5) A Commitment to Loving and Caring Relationships. A strong church is intentional in its efforts to build loving, caring relationships within families, between members, and within the community they serve.¹⁰⁰ (6) Servant-Leadership Development. It identifies and develops individuals whom God has called and given the gift of leadership and challenges them to become servant-leaders.¹⁰¹ (7) An

27. ⁹⁶ Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming A Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999),

⁹⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 115.

Outward Focus. A healthy church places high priority on communicating the truth of Jesus and demonstrating His love to those outside of the faith.¹⁰² (8) Wise Administration and Accountability. It utilizes appropriate facilities, equipment, and systems to provide maximum support for the growth and development of its ministries.¹⁰³ (9) Networking in the Body of Christ. The church reaches out to others in the body of Christ for collaboration, resource sharing, learning opportunities, and united celebrations of worship.¹⁰⁴ (10) Stewardship and Generosity. It teaches its members that they are stewards of God's money and challenges them to give to sacrificial generosity in sharing with others.¹⁰⁵

Author Christian A. Schwarz arrives at a similar list of characteristics. His is from a study of 45,000 churches in 70 countries.¹⁰⁶ His list includes: (1) Empowering leadership that releases believers into service.¹⁰⁷ (2) Gift-based ministry that focuses people into ministries where they can best show their giftedness. When believers serve in areas they are gifted, they tend to rely less on their flesh and more on the Spirit.¹⁰⁸ (3) Passionate spirituality that rejects legalism and embraces prayer and enthusiasm.¹⁰⁹ (4) Effective structures that reflect a non-traditional model. Leaders do not only lead, but

¹⁰² Ibid., 135.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰⁶ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL:ChurchSmart Resources, 2006), 20.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 28-29.

they raise up other leaders as well.¹¹⁰ (5) Inspiring worship services are essential to a church's effectiveness. Worship is a positive and uplifting experience.¹¹¹ (6) Small groups that have the goal of multiplication and where its members feel safe to discuss their problems is a key element of church health.¹¹² (7) Identifying and releasing those who have the gift of evangelism into evangelism.¹¹³ (8) The presence of love, laughter and fellowship.¹¹⁴ Schwarz goes on to explain that all eight characteristics must be present for the church to grow.

It is worthwhile to observe that most of these characteristics involve the opposite approach that many of the cult-like churches in this dissertation's survey have taken. Empowering vs. self-centered leadership, passionate leadership vs. legalism, leadership that raises new leaders vs. static leadership, worship that is positive and uplifting vs. the focus being on the minor issues of the Christian experience (the do's and don't's of the Christian walk), small groups that somewhat decentralize the authority structure of the church vs. focus on the continual control of the central leader and love and joy vs. selfishness and control.

Conclusion for Recommendations

There are many actions believers can take to prevent a church from falling into a cult-like personality or to help it recover from one. But the most effective thing any believer can do is go to the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, in prayer. Greater knowledge, awareness, accountability, education and observations are all helpful

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 32-33.

¹¹² Ibid., 34-35.

¹¹³ Ibid., 36-37.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 38-39.

recommendations so that churches can avoid or recover from cult-like tendencies such as authoritarian leadership, poor communication, unresolved leadership sin and legalism.

Topics For Further Study

In the writing of this dissertation, the following topics for further study came to the mind of the researcher. Of course, they are all related in one form or fashion to the main topic of this project. They expand its boundaries in various ways.

Characteristics Not Tested in this Study

As discussed in chapter two's literature review, there were several other cult-like characteristics that were not tested in the descriptive survey. Many of the characteristics observed by other authors were enfolded into the ones studied in this project. However, a few stood alone because they could not be combined with others and recategorized. The following characteristics would be worthy of future scrutiny to determine if they are present in evangelical, orthodox churches.

Some religious communities have a punitive nature to them. If followers do not follow the rules or expectations or decisions of leadership, they receive a negative response. The punitive leader usually lacks grace and overreacts to others' sin or disobedience. Oftentimes, such leaders are tougher on people than God is.

Some attack those who oppose or simply ask questions. This is called "labeling." This idea is almost a "pre-emptive strike" against those who may cause problems in the organization. Their value is discounted as they are labeled "detractors," "malcontents," or "traitors." As they are devalued, others are less likely to listen to them, and their influence and possible threat to the power of the leadership is diminished.

Some churches foster a performance preoccupation mentality. The focus goes from the process of spiritual growth to "how do things appear" on the outside. A specific

amount of time in Scripture, numbers of people witnessed to, and attendance are all central.

A cult's ultimate goal is to remake members in the image of its leader. An over centralized "cult of personality" is the ideal for a desired Christian model. A follower must become like the leader in order to be considered a success.

The group is so distrusting and paranoid that it seeks to disrupt relationships with outside family. Groups who encourage the severing of ties with their biological families are sick. Families sometimes separate when a member becomes a believer, but this should never be encouraged by a church.

Some groups' paranoia spills over to surveillance. Members are encouraged to report each other's sins to the leadership.

Foreign Churches

Since this is a subject that has not been fully explored even for the American church, there is a lot of room for more investigation and analysis for the national churches of other countries. For example, what is the status of churches in Kenya, Mexico or Ukraine? It is healthier or less so than America? How would the results of a study of foreign churches be different than this limited American study? In informal discussions with missionaries from those nations in particular, this researcher learned that the overwhelming majority of churches in those three sample nations are very cult-like. As many American churches resemble the consumerism, power structure or boardroom mentality of American businesses, it has been said that many Kenyan churches are modeled after the tribal system with a dominate, unaccountable leader. Ukrainian churches can resemble the centralized power of the Soviet system. Mexican churches can reflect the non-chalance and corruption of their society.

Affects of Cult-Like Characteristics on Family Life

How does living and raising a family in a quasi-cult environment affect marriage and family? Does the family take on the same unhealthy characteristics as the church? How does this phenomenon affect marriages? Is there a higher marriage failure rate? Does an oppressive environment breed teen rebellion? Do cult-like characteristics indirectly encourage wife or child abuse? Does the dysfunctional leadership style of cult-like churches spill over into the tone and style of the husband and father of the families that attend such churches?

Fight or Flight?

An additional study topic is to develop more detailed indicators to assist one to know when to stay at a sick church with good doctrine despite the opposition and try to reform it or to leave despite the loss of friendships and commitments? Of course, every circumstance has its own dimensions and aspects to consider, but what are some useful metrics that can be developed and used to make this important decision to “fight or flee?” A study of individuals who have successfully reformed spiritually abusive churches would be very useful so that their patterns of positive change can be duplicated.

Variations of Evangelical Church Types

Evangelicalism has a broad spectrum. It would be interesting to study the possible differences in cult-like characteristics in the various traditions of the conservative Protestant American church. What is the difference, if any, of the presence of cult-like characteristics, for example, between reformed vs. charismatic, lordship salvation vs. free grace churches or denominational vs. non-denominational? Do the variations of emphases in each church type produce any greater or lesser frequency of cult-like characteristics?

Study with a Larger Descriptive Survey Sampling

It was difficult to find thirty-six people to fit the rather narrow profile who were willing to receive the descriptive survey for this study. But a larger survey base would be helpful to better prove the hypotheses and come to helpful recommendations and conclusions. As such a study is conducted, other characteristics may be revealed. A larger study involving more people may encourage a broader reform of unhealthy churches.

Conclusion for Further Study Ideas

The general area of this applied research topic is church health. A great deal can be researched and written on that subject. Many good books have been written on the topic, but it is so important because it affects the ability of the church to carry out its mandate; which is to make disciples. It is worth more study. These additional, suggested topics are just the end of the beginning.

Conclusion

There is a multitude of unhealthy evangelical churches and many of them are cult-like. How can the body of Christ grow and mature if it is sick? There must be reformation. This researcher's hope is that some will read this dissertation and use it as a basis for reforming their church or denomination and free it from legalism or another cult-like characteristic. There are so many splits and many of the offshoots are no better than the "mother" church. Many have researched full-blown cults and others have explored church effectiveness, but it's time to acknowledge the "pink elephant" in the corner of the room and that is that many of our evangelical congregations are ineffective and sick. It never ceases to amaze this researcher that people follow after false leaders, but he did for a number of years. Many of the same forces that held him in that church also keep people in cults.

This researcher hopes that this information and evidence will help the church that he currently serves in a healthy mode. There are warning signs that other leaders and members should aware of. As he ministers to help train pastors in other countries, he will be more helpful and better prepared to equip them.

We hope for the best possible condition for the universal church in this age. We strive to make it strong and pure so that Christ is best glorified and revealed to the world. But we all hope for the day when, “ Christ (who) loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Eph 5:25b-27).”

APPENDIX A

SURVEY DESCRIBING COMMUNITY LIFE IN AN UNHEALTHY EVANGELICAL CHURCH

Demographic Information:

Name (optional) _____

Gender _____

Age _____

Current Occupation _____

Level of Education _____

Date of Birth _____

Age at salvation _____

I desire a copy of the survey results.

Your careful response to this survey is deeply appreciated. Your confidential results will be used to ultimately build up the health of the church as these issues of cult-like characteristics are explored and examined. All questions pertain to the church where you experienced an unhealthy/dysfunctional form of Christianity. Please circle the number that best applies.

1) Did the church have evangelical doctrine in areas such as the Trinity, Christ born of a virgin, 100% God, 100% man, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone and a high view of Scripture?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak			extremely strong			

2) To what degree did you observe any abuse by the authority at your church?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

3) To what degree were you a recipient of this abuse?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

4) To what degree were others recipients of the abuse?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

5) To the best of your knowledge, did the abuse break any federal, state or local laws or regulations?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

6) In your opinion, did the abuse break standard business ethics?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

- 7) As you reflect back on that time, was there any personal pattern of sin in any member(s) of the church leadership (clergy or lay leadership)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
None at all			very much			

- 8) Was the sin of a financial nature? Note: No need to respond if answer to #7 was “none at all”.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
never			rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

- 9) Was the sin of a sexual nature? Note: No need to respond if answer to #7 was “none at all”.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
never			rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

- 10) During your time at the church, were there any attempts to resolve this sin?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
never			rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

- 11) To what degree were the attempt(s) at resolution successful? (If there was no attempt to resolve the sin, please skip this question.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak			extremely strong			

12) Was the leadership's communication effective?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

13) Did the leadership entertain questions from members in a positive manner?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

14) Did the congregation have any opportunity to vote or give authoritative input on big issues facing the church?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

15) To what degree were the "gray areas" (smoking, moderate alcohol usage, gambling, etc.) of the Christian life presented to be "black and white" (wrong in all circumstances)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

16) Was there an under tone of judgment and negativity?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

17) Were certain behavioral sins especially criticized?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

18) Was the clergy well-educated and experienced in Christian leadership?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

19) Did the clergy seem secure?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

20) Was the clergy spiritually mature?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

21) Was the lay leadership well-educated and experienced in Christian leadership?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

22) Did the lay leadership seem secure?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<hr/>						
extremely weak				extremely strong		

23) Was the lay leadership spiritually mature?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak			extremely strong			

24) Were there any attempts to confront the unhealthy tendencies in the church?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

25) Did the confrontation achieve any positive results? (Skip this question if there were no attempts to resolve the unhealthy tendencies.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak			extremely strong			

26) Did the church have any formal or informal leadership training efforts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

27) Did the church have any rotation of lay leadership?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

28) Did the church sincerely consider new ministries, programs or ideas?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
never	rarely	somewhat	moderately	often	usually	always

29) To what degree was it easy to feel a part of the church?

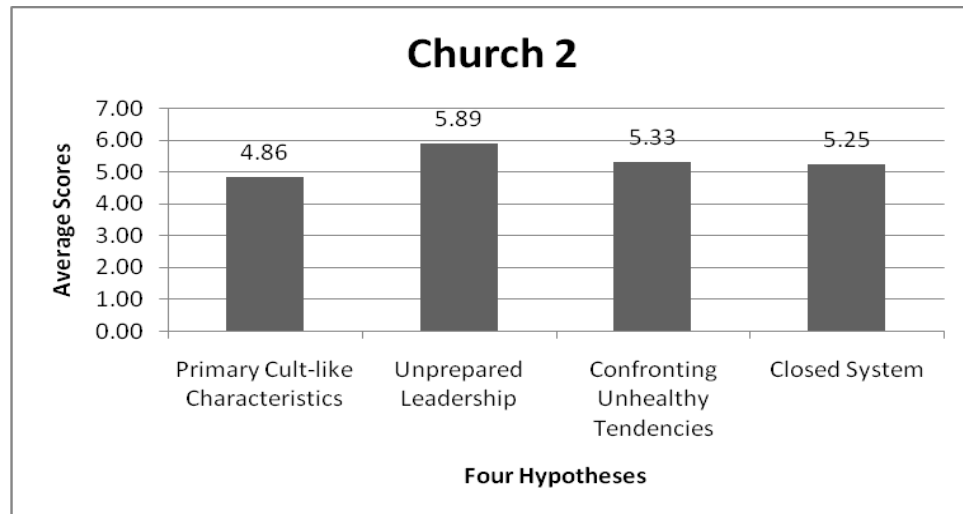
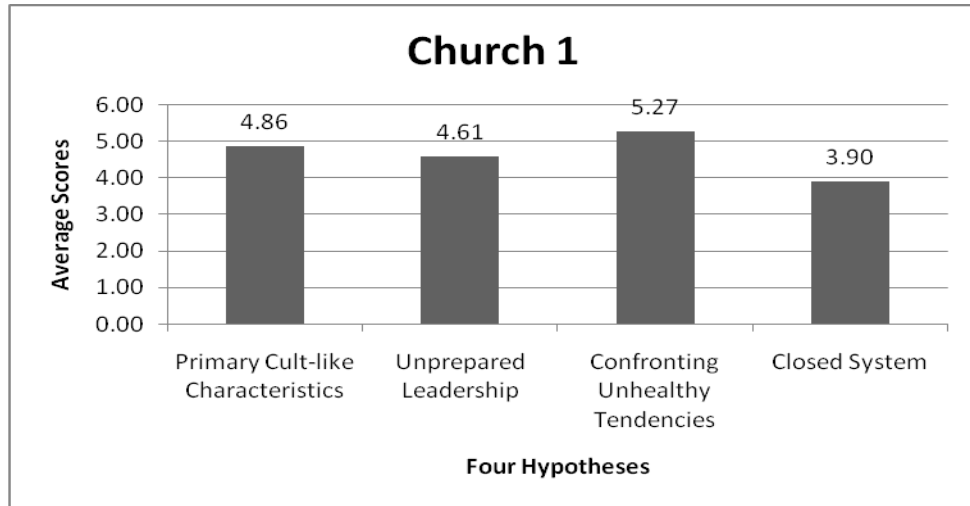
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak						extremely strong

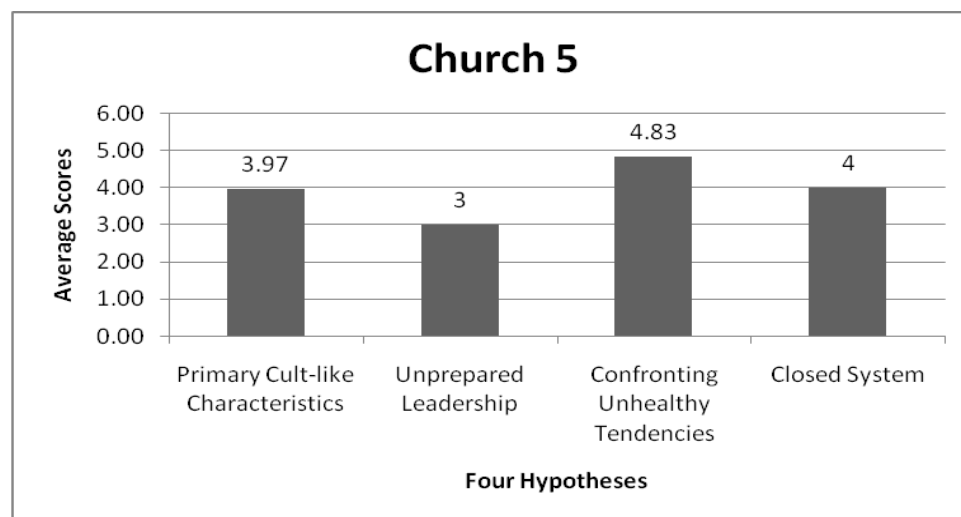
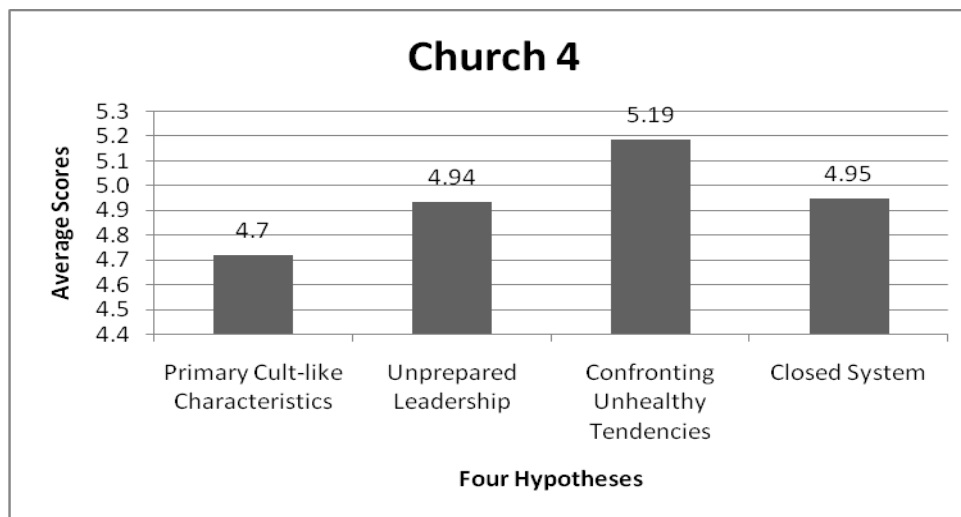
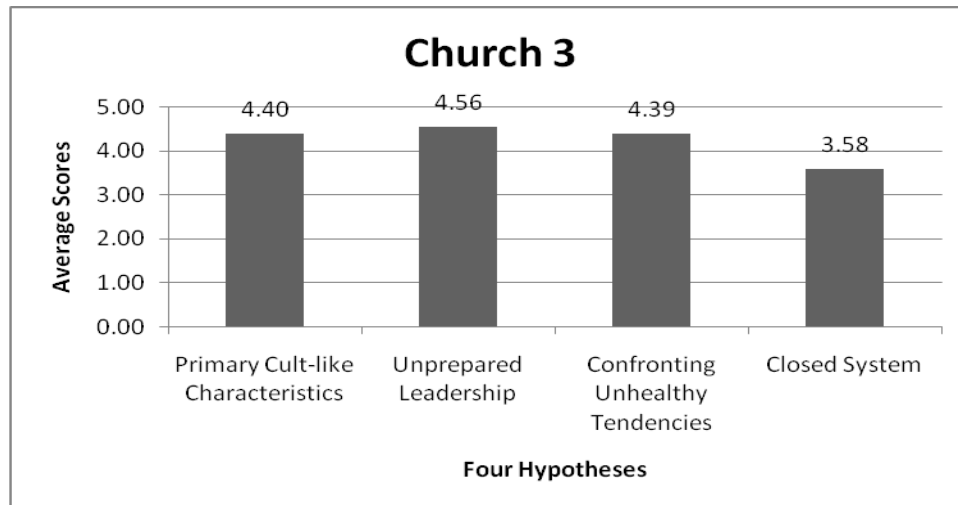
30) To what degree was it easy to leave the church?

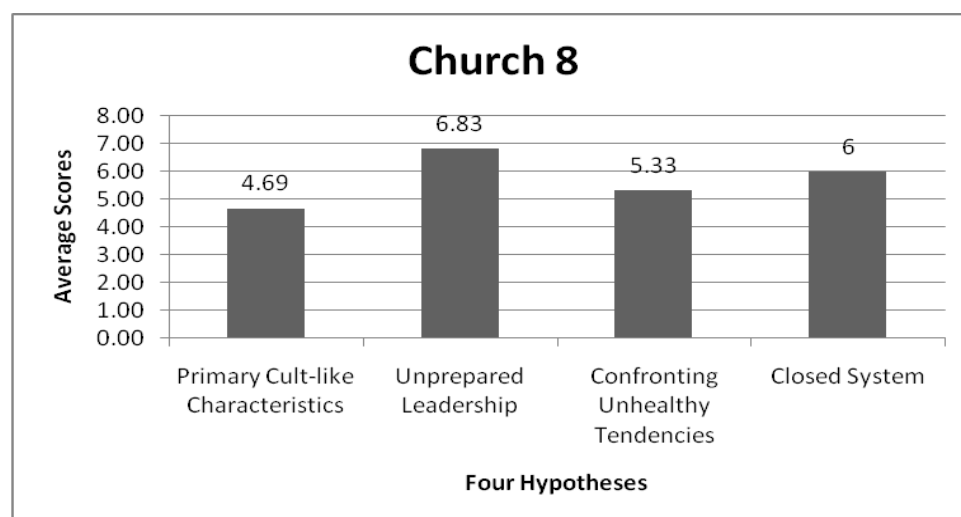
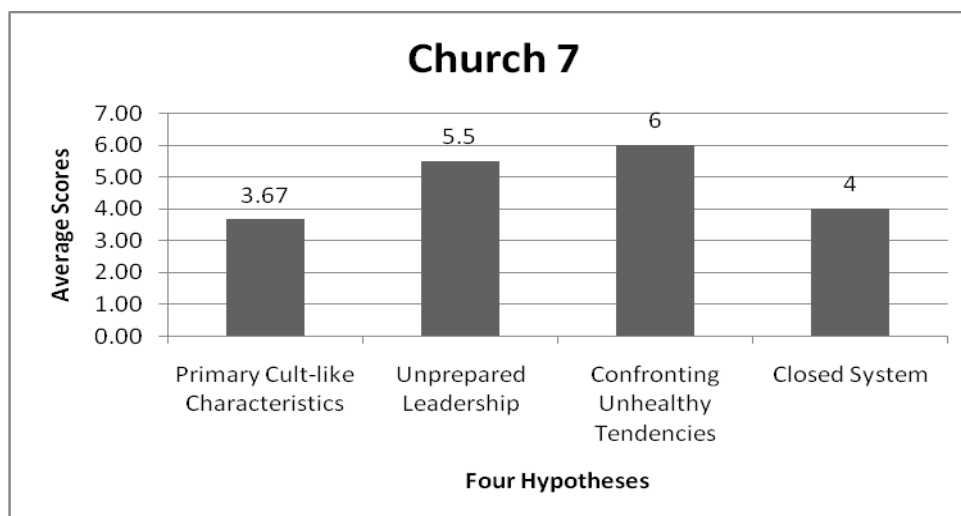
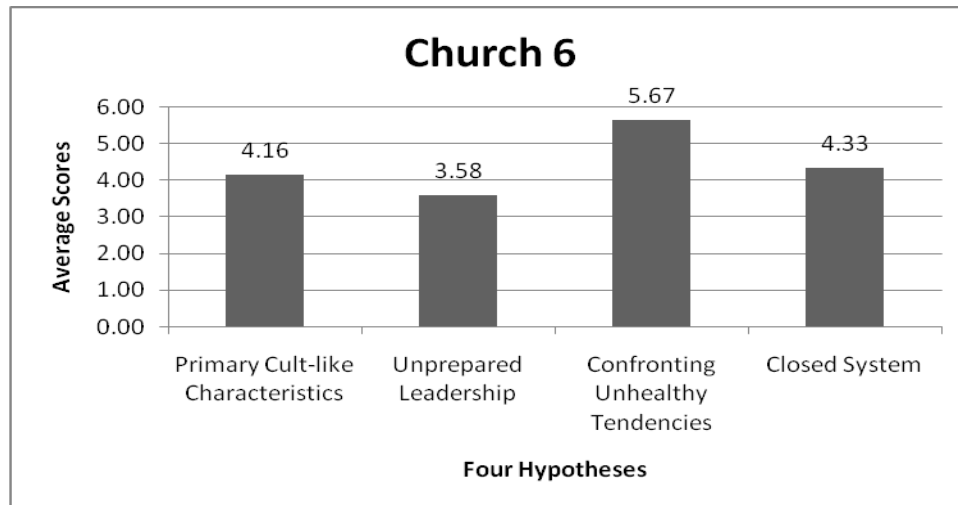
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
extremely weak						extremely strong

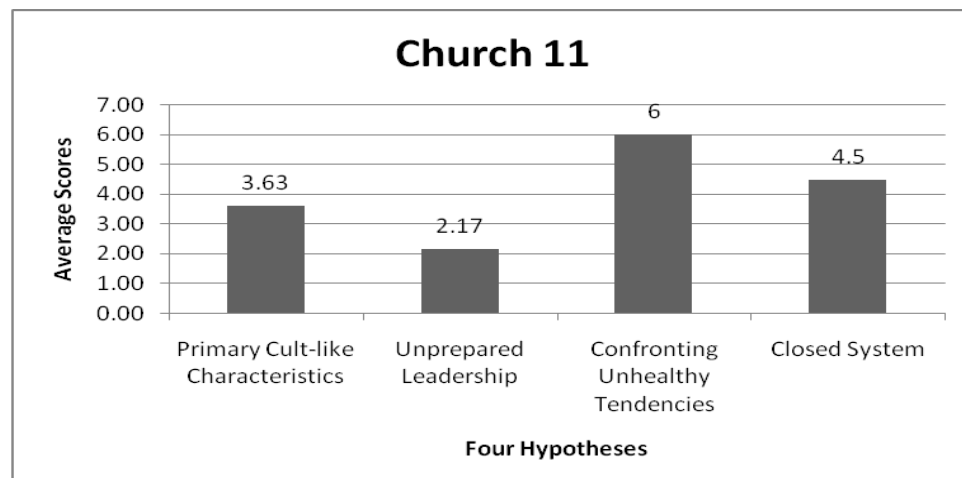
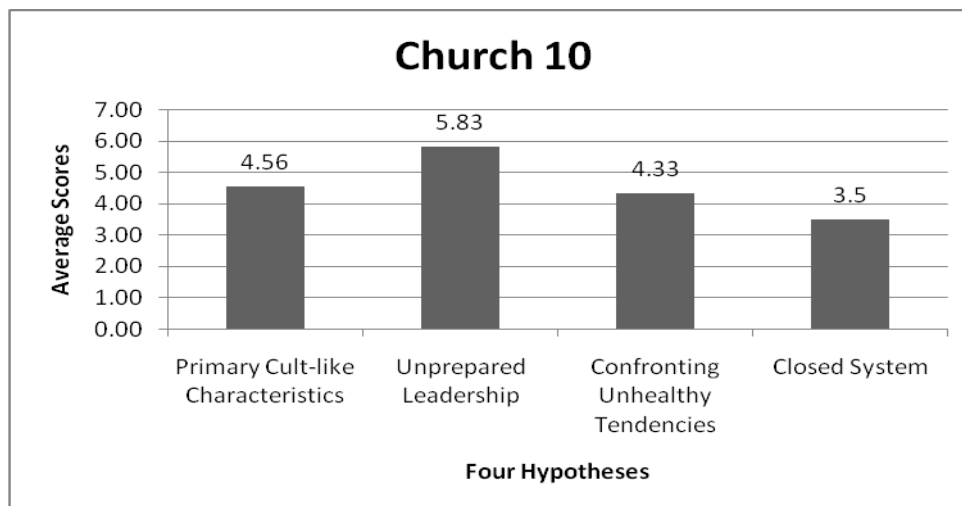
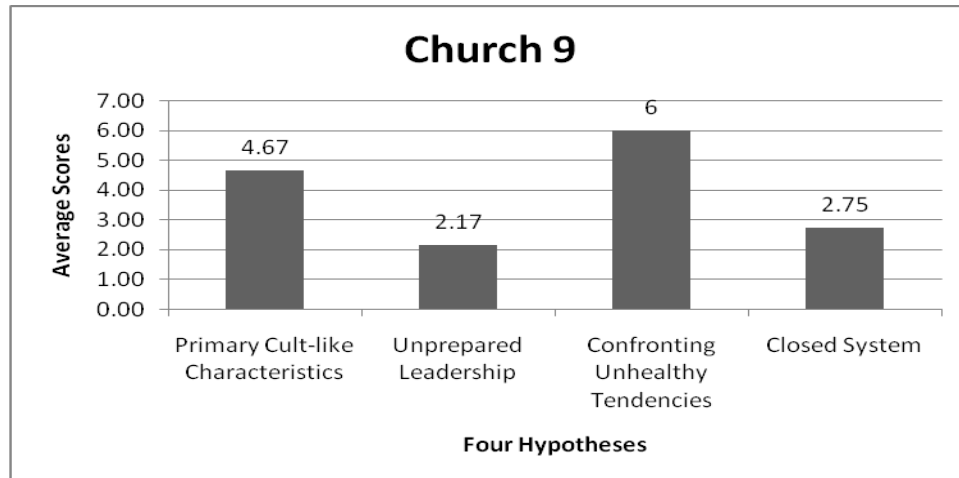
APPENDIX B

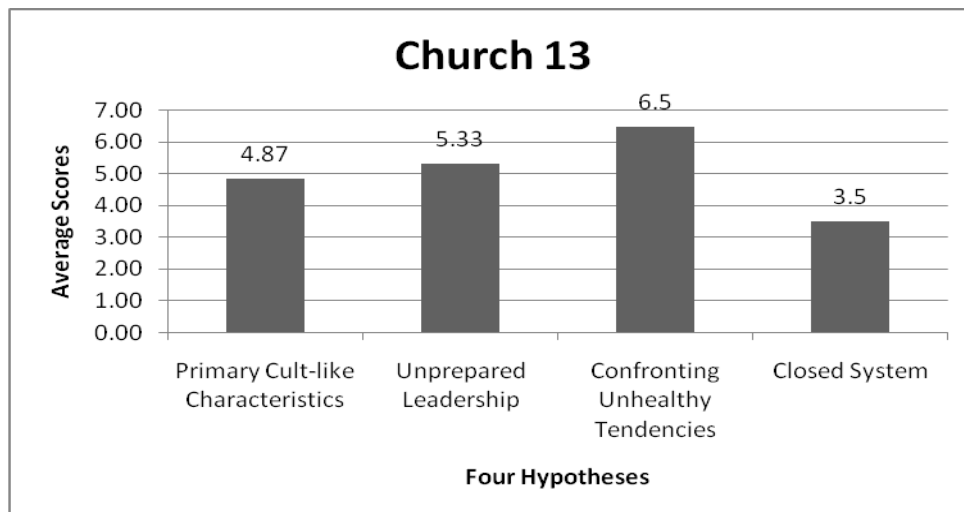
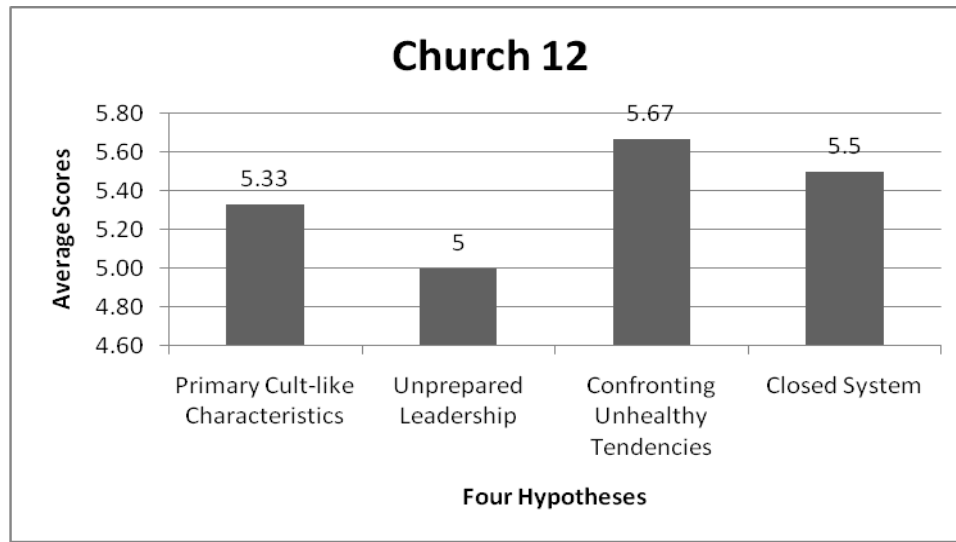
CHARTS OF SURVEY RESULTS OF ALL FOUR HYPOTHESES FROM EACH CHURCH





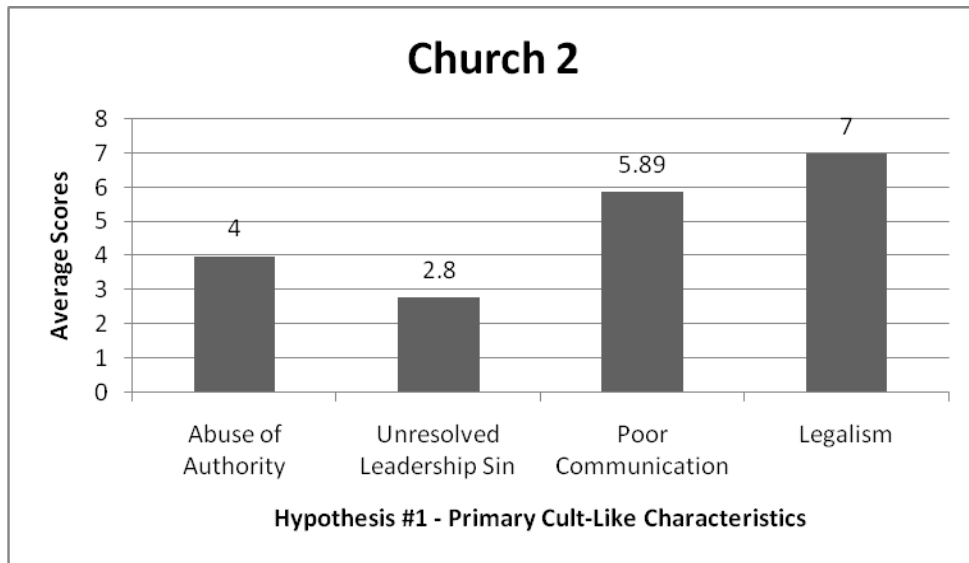
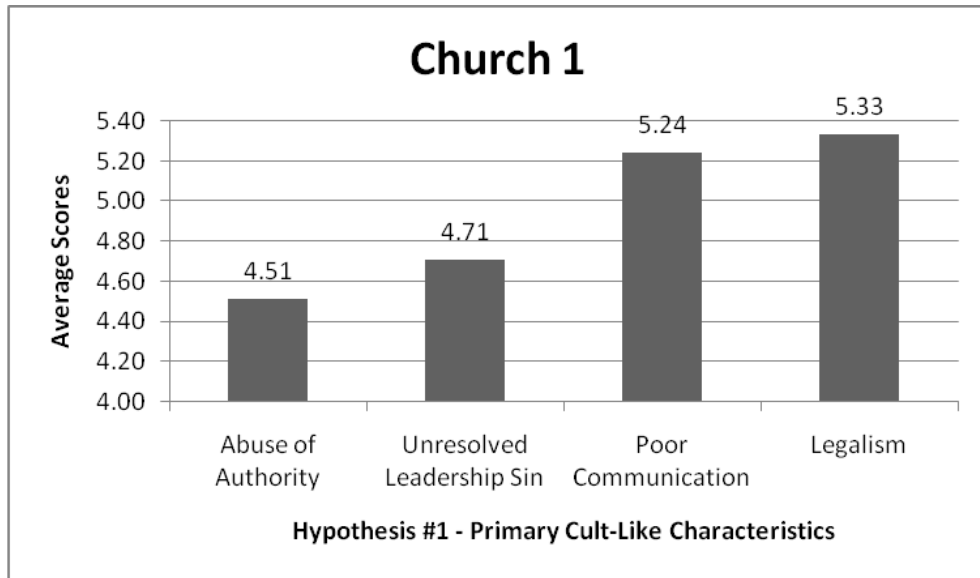


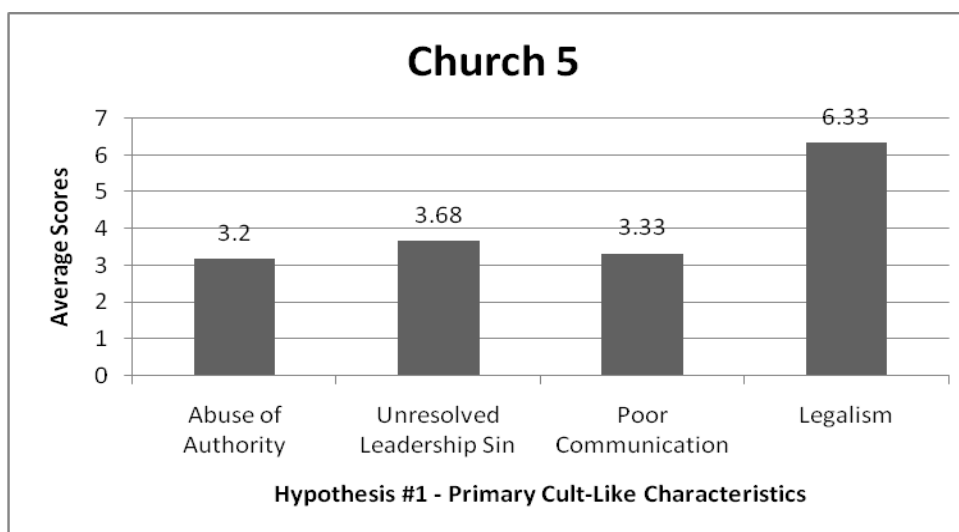
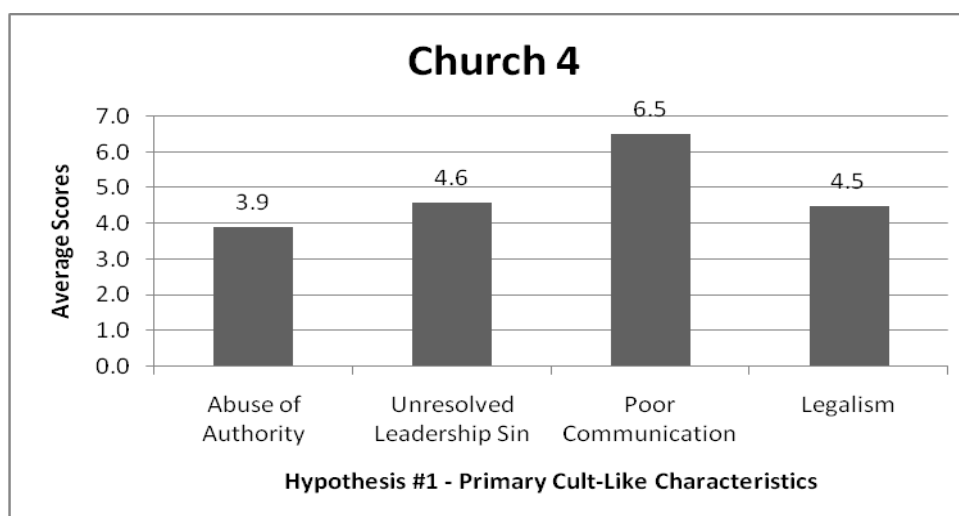
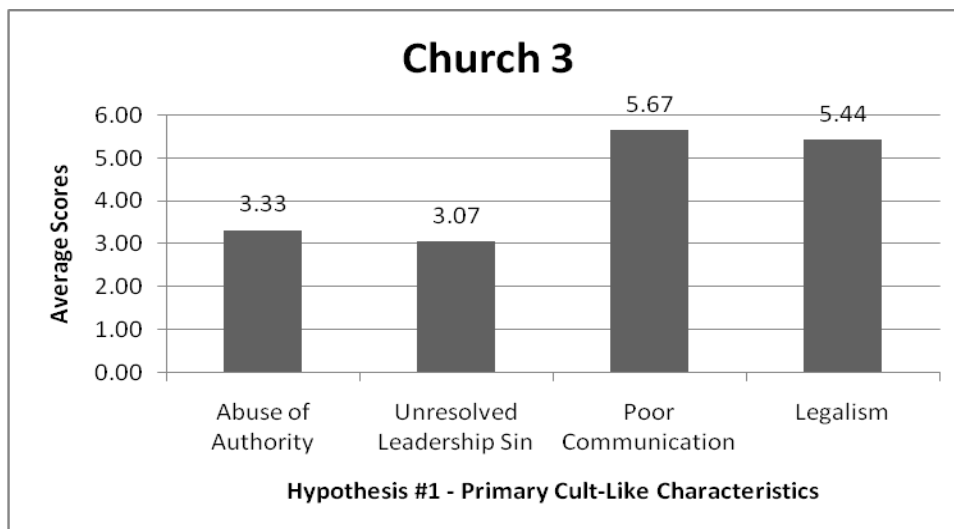


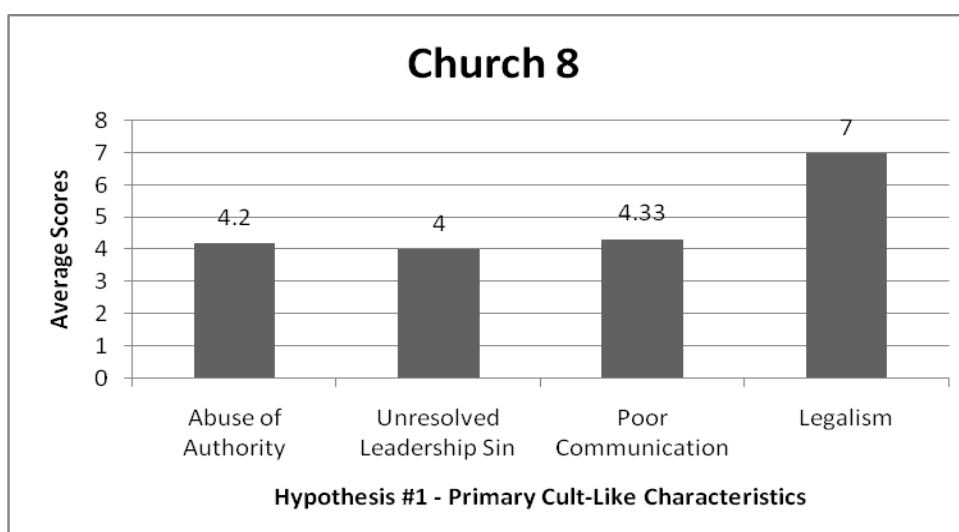
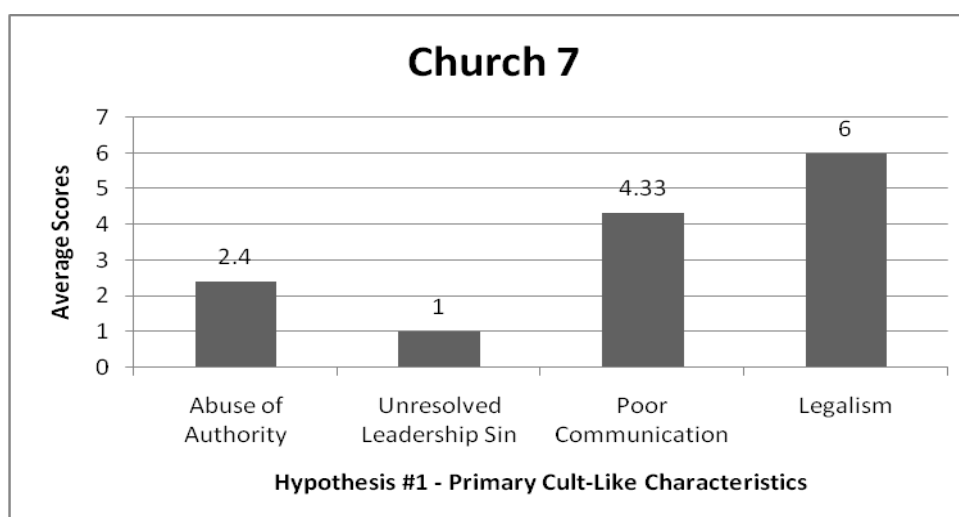
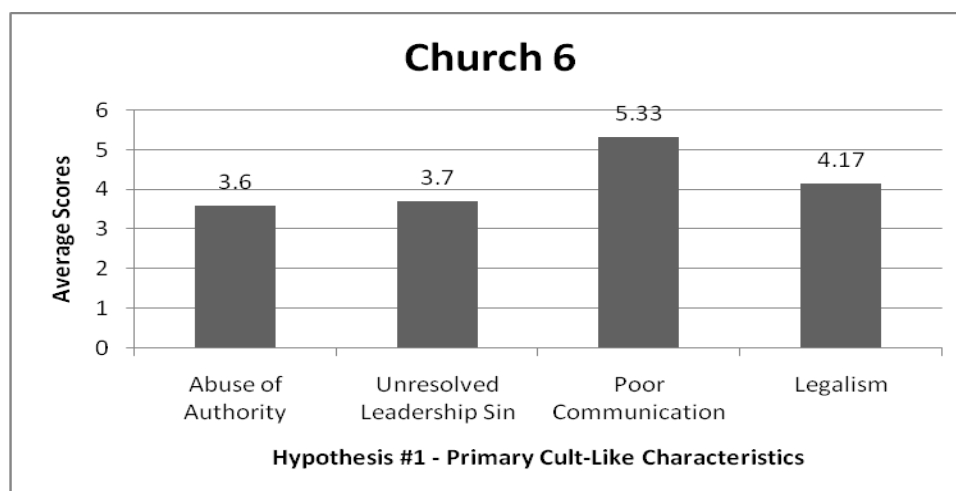


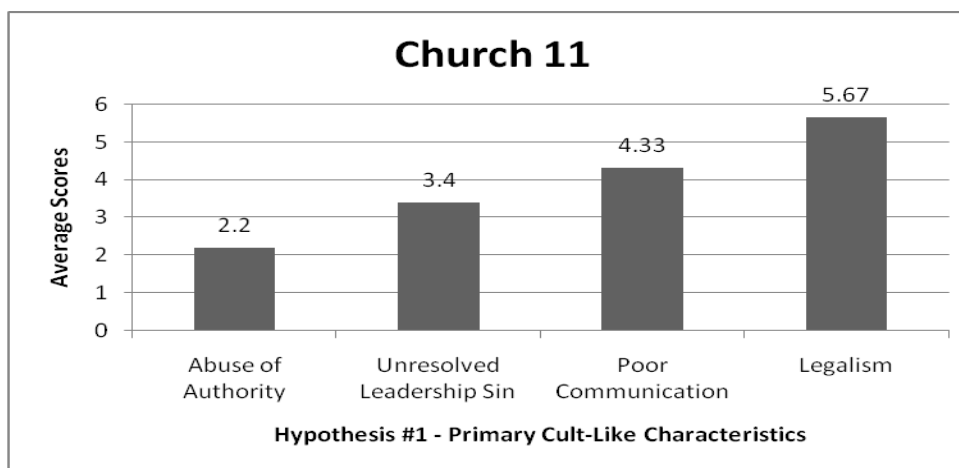
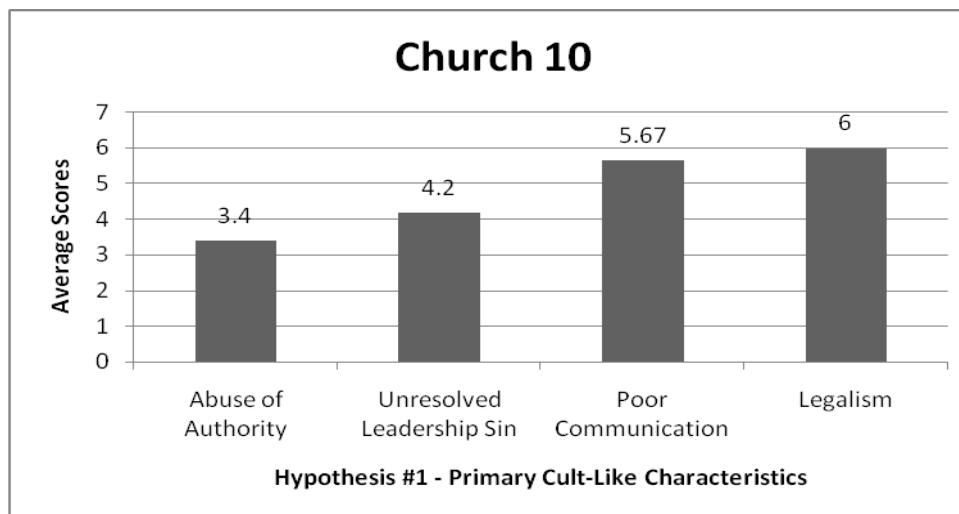
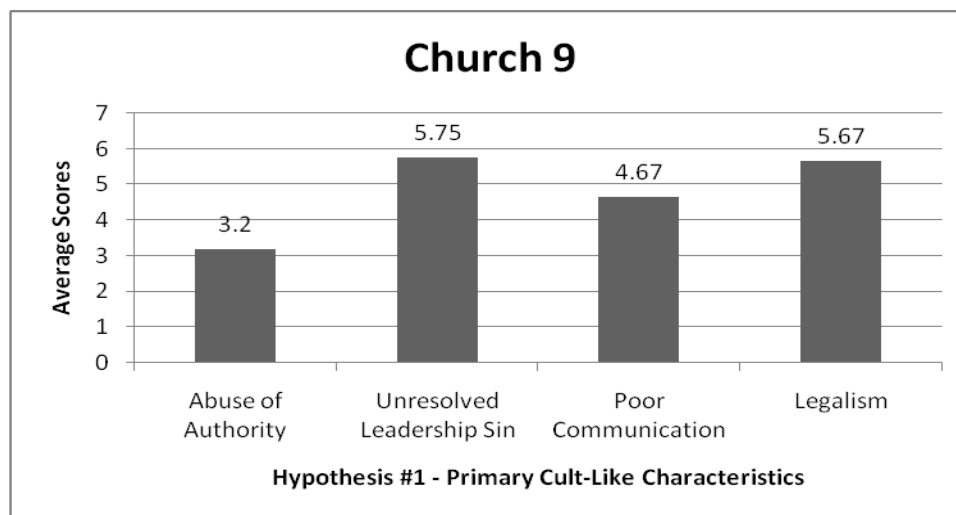
APPENDIX C

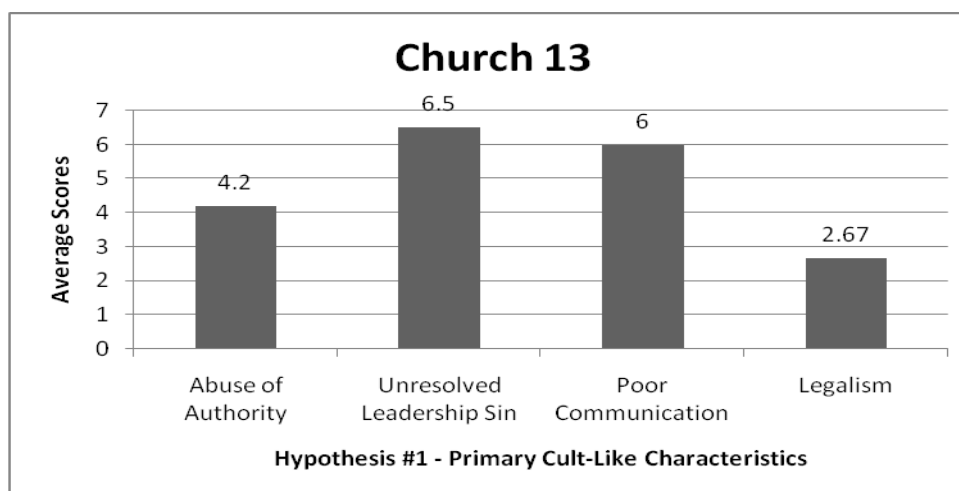
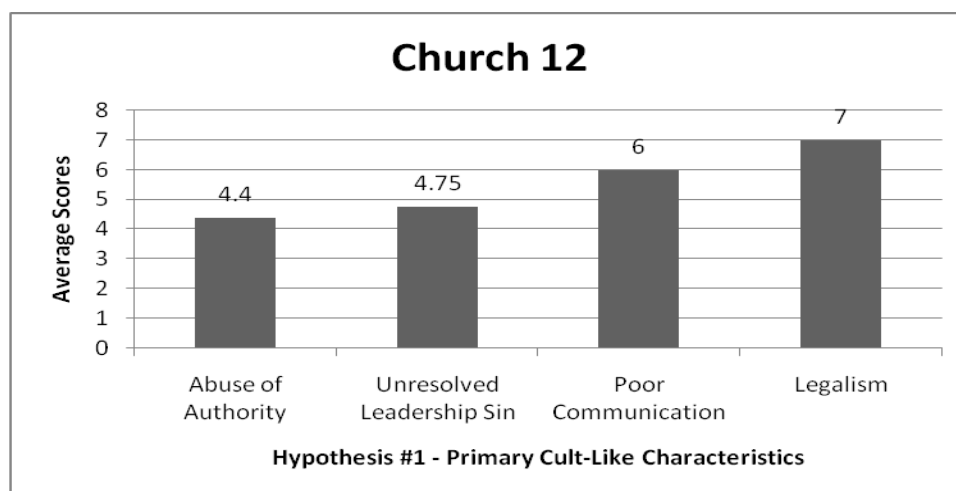
CHARTS OF SURVEY RESULTS OF THE FIRST HYPOTHESIS FROM EACH CHURCH











APPENDIX D

CHART COMPARING SALVATION LEGALISM, LIFESTYLE LEGALISM AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

	Salvation Legalism	Lifestyle Legalism	Christian Liberty
Goals	To gain or maintain salvation/justification	For desired sanctification and obedience	To live the New Covenant, Christian life through the power of the Holy Spirit in obedience to God's glory Romans 8:1-3
How Each Interacts with the Others	Lifestyle Legalism usually accompanies salvation legalism	Can accompany faith alone in Christ alone for salvation or can accompany salvation legalism	Faith in Christ alone Any form of legalism is rejected Ephesians 2:8-9
Eternal Security	Usually believes that salvation can be lost Believes that not meeting certain standards jeopardizes one's salvation	Some groups believe that salvation can be lost, others do not	John 10: 28-29
Assurance	Creates insecure, rigid and uncertain spiritual walk No assurance	Creates insecure, rigid and uncertain spiritual walk No assurance	Should produce secure, gracious, confident and moral spiritual walk 100% assurance of salvation
Place of Ritual, Morality and Preferences	Something added to faith in Christ (Baptism, avoidance of certain behavioral sins, church attendance)	Sees "gray-area" issues as "black & white" sins: moderate drinking, gambling, dancing, etc Believes that certain choices are necessary for all Christians (schooling choices, certain clothing, hairstyles, adornment, or Bible version choice, etc.) to be a sanctified and obedient believer	Romans 14 1 Corinthians 8-10 1 Corinthians 10:23 Colossians 2:18-23 Liberty in "gray areas" is limited when causes a weaker brother to sin.
Law	Enhanced human "Law" should be followed to establish relationship (Basis in the Abrahamic Covenant)	Enhanced human "Law" should be followed to receive blessings & avoid punishment (Basis in the Mosaic Covenant)	Law – Fulfilled in Christ Matthew 22:36-40 (Basis in the New Covenant)
Groups Where Beliefs are Prevalent	Common to belief system of cult groups (Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, etc)	Common to belief system of evangelical, cult-like churches	Biblical Christianity

APPENDIX E

COVER LETTER AND FOLLOW UP REMINDER LETTER FOR RECIPIENTS OF DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY

July 1, 2009

Dear _____,

As you may know, I am working on my Doctor of Ministry degree at Dallas Theological Seminary. I have completed all the class work and have been working on my dissertation for the past ten months. The topic of the project is “Cult-like Characteristics of Doctrinally Orthodox Churches”. These characteristics, such as legalism, autocratic control, etc. are aspects of full-blown cults, but they can also unfortunately, describe churches that are “evangelical” or doctrinally sound. My focus is not cults like Mormonism or Heaven’s Gate, but typical Bible-believing churches that can slide into unbiblical patterns. The overall topic is church health. I want to help churches become healthier so they can more accurately represent Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the Church!

I appreciate your response to the attached survey. The cumulative results will test my hypotheses to see if they are true. Your survey responses will take my preliminary conclusions from the subjective to the objective. Though founded in research, my conclusions will be strengthened by the findings from your answers. I am very grateful for your returned surveys because they will ultimately help edify the Lord’s Church.

If you have any questions about the survey, please call (817-614-5677) or e-mail me (john@bcbc.org). Please return the surveys in the enclosed return envelope or via e-mail by August 1, 2009.

Thank you!

In His Grace,

John Salvesen

Dear Survey Participant,

This is just a reminder to complete your survey and return by August 1, 2009. Thank you for taking the time to be a part of John's dissertation.

Becky Hunt

Secretary

Bear Creek Bible Church

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