Abstract

The new legislation on religious freedom was approved in Finland in 2003. Since then the number of those leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland have been higher than ever before. In 2005 and 2006 those leaving the Church amounted to 0.8% of church members. Why are people resigning from the church? This article scrutinizes the reasons behind leaving. The study is based on nearly 600 letters written by those who have resigned. In addition to the letters, the research is based on survey data. The majority (70%), of those leaving the Church are 18–39 year old young adults. For them the most common reason for leaving is that the Church and faith are not felt to have any personal relevance. However, their resignation often requires an external impulse such as irritation about a position the Church has taken. They typically feel the Church is too intolerant and conservative. Older people often have disappointments in a personally significant situation behind their leaving. About 10% join another religious community.

Key words: leaving the Church, Church membership, religiosity, secularisation, young adults, religious upbringing

Introduction

Leaving the Church became a practical option in Finland when the legislation on freedom of religion came into force in 1923. Before this it had been possible under special legislation of 1889 to leave the Church only if one then joined another Protestant denomination. By the end of 2006 a total of about one million people had left the Church. At the same time some 380,000 people had joined the Church. What caused people to leave the Church?

This article examines the reasons for leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. On the basis of the membership figures of religious organisations, Finland is an exceptionally homogeneous country. In 2006, 4.3 million Finns belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. This corresponds to 82.4% of the population. The proportion of the population of the country that belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church has, however, gradually decreased. Fifty years ago the proportion was ten
percentage points higher. The decrease is due partly to the increased number of those resigning from church membership and partly to the decrease in the number of those baptised in infancy (84.1% in 2006). One per cent of Finns belong to Finland’s other national church, the Orthodox Church. Only one in a hundred belong to other registered religious organisations. In addition, approximately 1% of Finns belong to unregistered religious communities, mainly Pentecostal assemblies. Fifteen per cent of Finns do not belong to any registered religious organisations. Their number has gradually risen. Thus the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is not in competition with any denomination in terms of membership, but only with religious non-commitment both by those actually leaving the Church as well as by those who have practically withdrawn from Church life, but still remain members.

However, for Finns the membership of a religious organisation does not necessarily mean that a person regards himself or herself as religious. In particular, membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is a rather neutral expression of religious belief, as it is in the other Nordic countries. The Nordic church members have often been described as «belonging without believing» (or believing in belonging) (see e.g. Davie 2000:3). According to the World Values 2005 survey, 63% of those who belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church consider themselves religious. Church membership has often been seen as part of national identity in Finland as well as in other Nordic countries, not as an expression of personal faith (see e.g. Davie 2000; Gustafsson and Pettersson 2000; Sundback 2000).

The research began in 2003. August of that same year witnessed the passing of legislation on the freedom of religion according to which leaving the Church became easier. It no longer required a personal visit in order to complete the resignation form. Notice of resignation can also be sent by post to the parish of which the individual was a member or to any registry office. The resignation can be expressed in an individual’s own words and no special form is required. Nor is there any longer a month’s time for reflection. The resignation is valid as soon as the written notification has been submitted or arrived at the registry office or the parish office of the parish of which the individual concerned is a member. That same year a new law on burials came into force, according to which the costs for burial are the same for those belonging to the Church and those not belonging to the Church.

Partly as a consequence of these changes the numbers of those leaving the Church in 2003 rose 67 per cent compared to the previous year. The rise in resignations from the Church seen in 2003 is not, however, a special phenomenon in an historical perspective. In earlier times resignations from the Church have not occurred at a steady rate; as a result of changes occurring in society and in the Church the annual differences in the number of resignations have been great (see Figure 1). Leaving the Church occurred more frequently immediately after the change in the legislation in 1923, in the post-war period from the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, in the 1970s, in specific years in the 1980s (such as after the negative decision on the ordination of women in 1983), the years of economic recession in the 1990s and again in 2003, when the new law on the freedom of religion came into force. An increase in the number of those leaving the Church has often been followed a few years later by an increase in the number of those
received into the Church, although smaller than the number of those leaving the Church.

*Figure 1. Number of those leaving the Church and joining the Church 1923 – 2006 in Finland.*

It is apparent from the changes in the numbers of those leaving the Church that there is frequently a connection to changes occurring in society, or the Church or to legislative changes pertaining to Church membership. These include changes in the economic situation (such as the economic recession and the rise of unemployment in the 1990s, when many people resigned from the Church in order to avoid Church taxes), ecclesiastical decision-making (such as that related to the ordination of women), decision-making on the part of the State (such as the legislative changes in religious freedom of 1923 and 2003) and changes in the general attitudinal atmosphere (such as a critical attitude to the Church in the post-war period).

Nowadays the majority of those leaving the Church are young adults. However, comprehensive statistics on the age structure of those leaving the Church are not available. In 2003 the Church Research Institute gathered data from 80 parishes in order to learn more about the profile of those joining the Church and those resigning from it. The data from these parishes show that young adults are most active in resigning from the Church and in being received into it. The most typical individual resigning from the Church is a man in his twenties or thirties resident in the metropolitan area. Of those leaving the Church in 2002 those aged 18–39 accounted for 66 per cent. Leaving the Church is particularly common between the ages of 20 and 29. Only three per cent of those leaving the Church were over 60 years old. The legislation on freedom of religion which came into force in 2003 made it easier to leave the Church. Since then in many parishes the share of young adults leaving the Church has increased. The share of children has proportionately fallen – under the new legislation children may continue to be members of the Church even if their parents leave it.
Earlier studies show that the reasons for leaving the Church are very complex, and that it is not possible to point to one single reason which causes people to leave the Church (see e.g. Siipi 1965; Sundback 1991, 1995; Aagedal 1995; Aukrust 1995; Lumijärvi 1998; Heino et al. 1997; Richter and Francis 1998; Franciz and Katz 2000). Likewise according to earlier studies the processes of resignation are highly individual, as are the processes by which people seek membership of the Church. Some gradually lose touch with the Church and little is said about it while others wish to publicise their resignation, especially if they want their resignation to be seen as a protest against something they have experienced in the Church (Richter and Francis 1998). Earlier studies also show that young people typically leave the Church for different reasons than do older people. In the study by Richter and Francis, only few of those disillusioned about the operations of the Church or its workers were young. Young people are increasingly reluctant to have religion or the Church as an authority in their lives and want a life course which is independent and personal. People build their world-views and their own conceptions of life increasingly on the basis of their own thinking and are disinclined to accept the ready-made «package» of a religious denomination or tradition (O’Leary 1999). This is linked to a general change in religiosity and attitudes. The religiosity of Finns, like that of many other people in Western countries has in recent decades been characterised above all by a weakened position for religious institutions (Kääriäinen et al. 2005a, 2005b; Heelas and Woodhead 2005:1; Davie 2000; Bruce 2002). It manifests itself in Finland in fewer people belonging to religious organisations, in a diminished doctrinal commitment and a fall in participation in religious activities (Kääriäinen at al. 2005a, 2005b). This, however, has not been seen to lead to the disappearance of the supernatural from people’s lives, but rather to a metamorphosis of religion and to a situation in which the former institutionally distinct form of religion represented at its most typical by the Christian Church, is being replaced by a new, privatised form of religion (Luckman 1967, 1999). In the field of religion this change will inevitably lead to a departure from hierarchical forms of religiosity based on
strong external authority. Likewise it will lead to a situation in which religiosity is increasingly the individual’s own choice. People will not belong to the Church or other religious organisations, or they will not attend because they have grown up with the tradition. Membership and participation will be in line with the individual’s own personal thinking and opinions.

Data

The principle data for the study comprise epistolary information collected from those leaving the Church. At the beginning of December 2003 a request was sent out via the Church Information Centre to be published in the media. People who had resigned from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland were asked to recount the reasons leading to their resignation and their experiences and expectations of the Church. A total of 579 responses was received. Just over half were sent by e-mail and less than half by surface mail. Of the respondents 266 were women and 183 were men, four letters had been written by a man and a woman together and in 126 letters the gender of the writer was not apparent. Clearly more letters were received than had been expected when the research was planned. This is due on the one hand to the fact that the request was publicised in more publications than expected and on the other to the fact that many people who had left the Church were keen to write about it. Numerous writers expressed their particular satisfaction and gratitude for the opportunity to write about their resignation from the Church and also to provide the Church with feedback. The fact that the question was posed by a Church organisation (the Church Research Institute) was deemed extremely good by many:

You want to know why I left the Church. I am grateful for this interest as it felt a little ungracious just to send a bit of paper to the registry office (Letter 136).

This is the first time that I hear that the representatives of the Church are interested in the opinions of those people who have turned their backs on it (Letter 229).

Nice that the Church is interested in what people think (Letter 276).

It is also worthy of note that the greater part of respondents wrote under their own names. All names and references to places, however, were removed when the data were processed.

Data collected in this way are obviously selective. In the research the results from the written data are therefore proportioned to the picture created by statistical data. The following statistical data were used in the study: data from Church Monitor 2004 (N = 2,569) and data from Gallup Ecclesiastica 2003 (N = 1,009), which examined the attitudes and religiosity of all Finns, and as the main statistical data that from the Urban Young Adults 2004 Survey (N = 1,000). The first two sets of data were gathered by personal interview and they constitute a comprehensive sample of Finns. The third corpus was gathered in May 2004 by telephone interview and its target group was
young adults aged 20–39 living in the metropolitan area (Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo). Leaving the Church is particularly common in this age group. Both relatively speaking and in absolute terms the largest number of those leaving the Church is in the metropolitan area. It therefore makes sense to scrutinise leaving the Church and the reasons for it in this particular group. The telephone interviews with young adults included questions on reasons for leaving the Church. Among the telephone interviews with a thousand young adults there are 124 who left the Church (of whom 73 men and 51 women).

The analysis of the data included qualitative and quantitative methods. In the analysis of the letters both qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used. Given the extent of the written data it first made sense to make a quantitative classification. For each letter received the writer’s age, gender, primary reason for leaving the Church, other reasons for leaving the Church, own religious attitude, religious background in the home as far as this could be deduced from the letters were noted. Once these details had been noted the letters were classified according to the primary reason for leaving the Church. The first (or apparent first) reason for leaving the Church could be identified in 538 letters. The primary reason for leaving the Church could not be reliably identified in all the letters. Those cases which were most unclear were excluded from the classification. There were also letters in which it was totally impossible to see the reason for leaving the Church and the letter, for example, only described the writer’s experiences after having left the Church. Some letters gave several reasons and it was impossible to establish which was the main reason. However, these reasons generally came under the same class. For example, the writer of the letter might list seven different reasons for disappointment with the Church which led to resignation. However, in certain cases identifying the primary reason for leaving the Church was up to the discretion of the researcher. The classification was done in a data-based manner, with the reasons originally noted from the letters grouped into main classes emanating from the data.

The point of departure for the qualitative analysis of the data was argumentation analysis, when the primary focus is on how the people justified their resignation from the Church. Argumentation analysis explores the different ways in which claims are substantiated and chains of proof are constructed. Argumentation analysis is concerned with types of justification presented by people in support of their claims or in order to refute claims made by others. The basic unit of argumentation analysis is a delineated opinion on some issue, in this case the Church and resigning from it. Argumentation analysis begins by reading the text with the intention of forming a general impression of it. Next texts are generally classified by subject, since it is assumed that ways of argumentation vary between subjects. Thereafter attention is paid to the main claims and finally comes scrutiny of the different parts of the argument. What is essential in argumentation analysis is to delineate the data according to subjects as it is likely that in discussions held on different subjects the arguments and their justifications will vary. (Fletcher and Sigismund Huff 1994:357–366.) In the scrutiny of the letters the focus was on the justifications for leaving the Church. The data also included a large amount
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of other information such as narratives of experiences of the Church after resignation. These were excluded from the examination.

Resignations from the Church were allocated to two main classes in which there was a fundamental difference in the justifications for resignation. The first class contained resignations where the point of departure for resignation was the individual’s own religious thinking or world view and possible changes occurring therein, whereas the second class included situations in which the point of departure was above all images and experiences of the Church. In such cases the entire justification for leaving the Church is based on fundamentally disparate argumentation. In the letters assigned to the first class the writer typically justified his/her resignation with arguments such as «I think…»,

«I don’t …» or «I believe…», whereas in the latter case resignation was justified specifically by arguments of the type «the Church is…», «in the Church there occurs…» or «the Church is not…». In this case the individual perceives the reason for leaving the Church to be various factors pertaining to the Church such as personal or situation-related disappointments with the Church, conflict with the general line of the Church or general criticism of the Church. This dichotomy dictated the processing of the data.

In the next stage the data were classified on the basis of the most prominent reasons for leaving the Church and the further justifications for resignation were examined separately for each class. The aim was to abstract from the data an outline of the further justifications and their linkage into the most important argument.

Various statistical methods were used with the SPSS statistical program for the analysis of the survey data.

Results

Conflicting world-view and religious expectations

The primary reasons emerging for leaving the Church were classified into six main categories as in Table 1. As the primary reason for leaving the Church the letters mentioned factors pertaining to issues of religion and world-view. Here resignation was typically explained by arguments of the type «I think…», «I do not…» or «I believe…». All in all, one third (31%) of the letters were assigned to this main category. This category also includes those leaving the Church whose resignation was prompted primarily by the individual’s own religious and world-views and possible changes occurring therein. These are the people who have left the Church because they do not believe in its teachings and see a contradiction between their own world-view and that represented by the Church (17%). Such writers were typically young adults. Those leaving the Church primarily for religious reasons were also those who felt that the religion represented by the Church is too mild and who generally feel that some other religious denomination corresponds better to their own religious needs and conceptions (12% of the letters.) This category also includes a small number of leavers
(2%) reporting that they left the Church primarily because they feel that religion needs no institution.

Table 1. Primary reason for leaving the Church among those writing letters. N = 538.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary reason for resignation/person</th>
<th>% of letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Factors pertaining to religion and world view</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not believe (conflict in world view)</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm faith (faith of the Church too mild)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith needs no church/institution</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflicts with general line and positions taken by the church</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Church is too conservative and judgemental</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Church is too liberal, given to reform and lacking in backbone</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Situation-specific and personal disappointments with the church</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Other negative image of the church and generally critical attitude</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Other negative image of the church and generally critical attitude</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Other reasons</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus reasons of religion and world-view may underlie resignation in many ways. Firstly people leave the Church because they find the world-view it represents to be crucially different from their own view, frequently based on a non-religious world-view. When an individual does not believe the teachings of the Church, membership is not felt to make any sense. Such people leaving the Church are generally young adults. Resignation is justified above all by honesty to oneself, others and the Church. In the opinion of many leaving the Church a member should feel able to make a commitment at least to the Creed. Being a member of the Church merely for the sake of habit is felt to be reprehensible. Some of those people experiencing conflicts with the Church regarding world-view left the Church as a part of their own process of becoming independent, when resignation coincided with moving away from home and the start of an independent life.

Arguments for leaving the church and arguments with a non-religious world-view are frequently intellectual: the matters taught by the Church were considered intellectually untenable. Some had had a non-religious world-view right since childhood while others had undergone a major process of change with the decline of their fundamentalist-Christian world-view. Others again had adopted a non-religious world-view as an
outcome of disappointments encountered in life – in the midst of their sufferings God had not made His presence felt.

Conflicts in world-view, however, are seldom sufficient for a person to leave the Church; some precipitating element is required. These are most frequently conflicts with the position taken by the Church, especially the judgemental attitude of the Church decision-makers and employees regarding homosexuality and allowing discrimination against female priests. On the other hand the reason for the activation of conflicting world-views is some kind of pursuit of one’s own interest or benefit, such as the desire to be exempted from religious instruction at school, from Church parade in military service or from Church taxation. Nevertheless the general impression of the Church among those leaving it due to conflicting world-views is often positive. The Church is perceived to do good and necessary work. However, the church is felt to be personally unnecessary and the message of the Church is seen to be at odds with an individual’s own conviction.

In addition to a lack of belief, a religious conviction which is felt very strongly and personally to be very important may also be grounds for leaving the Church. Such people leaving the Church had most frequently joined or were about to join other religious denominations. The reason for resignation was most often religious conversion. This had frequently come about in the sphere of some other religious organisation, when leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and joining another religious organisation seemed natural and obvious. Some people, however, had experienced their religious conversion within the Church, but had not found an adequate response there to their spiritual needs. They felt that there was no place for them in Church circles and that in a spiritual sense the Church could not offer what the individual wanted. In many people’s opinion the Church appeared spiritually cold and distant. Many writers who had joined some other religious organisation were missing stronger emotional sensations for their religious lives. The Church was also perceived to be doctrinally vague, secularised and to have drifted far from the biblical message.

For many people what had been decisive in the process was friends and finding friends in a new organisation and in general a warm welcome to that organisation. However, after the initial enthusiasm some people had increasingly found deficiencies in the other religious organisation and thought that they might rejoin the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

A small part of the writers had left the Church primarily because they took the view that religion needs no institution. The reason for leaving the Church was a strong desire to distance oneself from all religious arrangements which restrict one’s own religion. Religion was radically perceived as a private matter and not something to be dictated by any institution.

Thus leaving the Church may be due equally to the decline in the significance of religion and secularisation on the individual level and experiences that the Church is excessively secularised and focuses too much, from the perspective of religion, on secondary matters (organisational secularisation), and so does not meet the needs of the individual. In the first case the individual perceives the Church as a religious organisation for which s/he does not have the necessary spiritual qualifications (faith). In the
latter case the individual feels that the Church is an excessively secular organisation which does not meet his/her expectations of a religious denomination. Leaving the Church may also be an independent and autonomous expression of faith: because faith is a private matter, religious institutions are unnecessary.

Disappointment in the Church had been experienced on many different levels (Church-centred argumentation). Disappointment in the Church assumes that initially the individual had some expectations of the Church and that the Church has a role in an individual’s life. When the expectations are high, the disappointments may be great if the services anticipated from the Church are not forthcoming or if the Church acts contrary to expectations (see Grönroos 1990).

Too conservative and too liberal Church

The quantitatively second largest group of writers (26%) consisted of those leaving the Church whose reason was conflict or disappointment in the general direction of the Church, its views or decision-making. Such conflicts were generally connected in one way or another to disagreements over the conservative or liberal attitude of the Church. People left the Church both because it was felt to be too intolerant, conservative and failed to implement equality (17% of letters) and also because it was felt to be too liberal, unbiblical, permissive and lacking in backbone (9% of letters).

In disappointment with the Church’s intolerance, judgemental attitude and lack of equality the media and the image it conveyed played a crucial role. Many of those leaving the Church for such reasons reported resigning after reading a newspaper or seeing something on television about decisions revealing the Church’s lack of tolerance or about what some individual worker had done. Most of those leaving the Church because they found it intolerant or conservative were under 30 years old. They felt that the Church did not treat people equally and that this was particularly apparent in its attitude to women and sexual minorities. An unequal attitude to women is seen particularly today in the way it is possible to discriminate against women priests. Female writers in particular expressed disappointment and annoyance at this. Those writing about the rights of sexual minorities are also mostly women.

Those leaving the Church for reasons of intolerance frequently felt that the Church was acting against its own principles and that the actions of the Church are not consistent with its proclamations of love for one’s neighbour. Those people who were personally concerned in the matter, such as sexual minorities, and those people whose life course had not been according to the Church’s ideals felt the Church’s judgemental attitude particularly painful. It was also felt that by being judgemental and intolerant the church was repelling ordinary people (see also Yip 2000).

There were 26 writers belonging to sexual minorities. Many of them raised as their primary reason for leaving the Church their experience that they do not feel they are accepted in the Church as individuals. For many this had been very painful:

The most important reason was the strong feeling that I was not welcome in the Church such as I am (Message 252).
Generally those leaving the Church due to intolerance were people who were already distanced from the Church and for whom the Church had no special personal significance. However, among those leaving the Church due to intolerance towards sexual minorities there were also people for whom faith and the Church were personally extremely significant, especially those whom the Church’s attitude to sexual minorities affected closely.

Those who feel that the Church is excessively tolerant, given to reform, liberal and unbiblical are typically older men. The letters suggest that the threshold for leaving the Church due to excessive permissiveness is high, thus such people tend to remain in the Church in spite of their disappointment.

**Personal and situation-related disappointments with the Church**

The third largest group comprises those letters giving as the primary reason for leaving the Church various personal and situation-related disappointments with the Church. Such letters amounted to one fifth (19%). These included, for example, disappointment with the actions of individual Church workers and the way in which the Church operates in general.

Those experiencing personal and situation-related disappointments with the Church were seldom young people. These disappointments were very often connected with Church rites, especially funerals. They might be disappointments with the actions of individual Church workers or in the mode of action in general. Very many writers had felt that they did not receive help from the Church when in distress or when on a religious quest. Some had left the Church because they were disappointed with the Church as an employer.

For many of these disillusioned people leaving the Church had been personally very difficult and hard. Many stressed that what they had relinquished was the Church and the local parish, not God or faith. They emphasised that resignation from the Church had not altered their relation to God in any way. However, sometimes leaving the Church was also felt to signify parting company with God:

I want to stress that I had resigned from an institution known as Church, not from God or from religion (Letter 304).

I have not lost my faith in God. I have only lost faith in the Church (Letter 143).

I am really disappointed! It really grieved me when I had to resign, but all these things weigh more heavily. I had dreadful pangs of conscience about leaving the Church. It feels as if God Himself has turned His back on me (Letter 145).

**Church taxation and other reasons**

The fourth group consisted of those letters in which the primary reason for leaving the Church was reported to be Church taxation and other economic factors (9% of letters). However, the desire to avoid Church taxation was very seldom the only reason for res-
ignation. Yet among the writers there were those who had resigned particularly at the time of the economic recession, doing so solely because of a desperate economic situation and without any ideological or other reasons. They hoped for understanding from the Church for their resignation and some hoped to return to the Church as their financial situation improved. Nevertheless economic reasons were generally linked to the feeling that the Church had no meaning and that one did not get enough in return for paying one’s Church taxes. The new legislation on burials, according to which the costs of graves for those who do not belong to the Church are the same as for those who do was taken by the writers as an example of how pointless membership was. The new legislation on burials, like the new legislation on freedom of religion, however, was mentioned very seldom as the only reason for leaving the Church.

The fifth group included those letters in which the underlying reason for leaving the Church was some other negative image of the Church, generally overall critical attitude to the Church or factors related to the connection between Church and State (in a total 9% of the letters). Some other reason was evinced in three per cent of the letters.

For some a negative image of the Church or the belief that there is no need for it originated in childhood experiences. A negative image of the Church had been caused by a particularly strict and authoritarian upbringing – either in the home or in the Church. A one-sided religious upbringing leaving no space for the questions of the child or the young person or for discussion has served to create a harsh and judgemental image of God and the Church, where the opinion of the individual does not count and is not respected.

In general those leaving the Church had very seldom grown up in homes with a religious upbringing. Only 13 per cent of those leaving the Church had received religious upbringing from both parents. One quarter had received religious upbringing from one parent or the other and two thirds from neither parent. Of those belonging to the Church one quarter (25%) had received religious upbringing from both parents and every third (31%) from one parent.

**Selective nature of the data**

It should be born in mind while examining the reasons for resignation emanating from the letters that the data is selective, thus it is not justifiable to make reliable statements on the generality of the various reasons. Those responding to the request to write were particularly those leaving the Church for whom resignation was a «big deal». It is more difficult to motivate those indifferent about leaving the Church to write about their own resignation. When comparison is made between the images of those leaving the Church from various research data and the present letters, it appears that those in the letter data are more active in their religious attitudes than those resigning from the Church on average. All in all the various data suggest that those leaving the Church are more «extreme» in their attitudes than are Finns in general. The majority are passive about religion and far from the world-view represented by the Church. On the other hand there are almost as many who are religiously active as there are among Church members. The statistical analyses of the data (Church Monitor 2004; Gallup Ecclesiastica
2003) suggest that of those leaving the Church under the age of 40 about two thirds are religiously totally passive, and of those in older age groups about half. Conversely some 10% are religiously very active.

The age distribution of the writers of the letters likewise does not correspond to the age distribution of those leaving the Church; a much greater share of the writers of the letters are retirees and the share of young adults is correspondingly smaller than those leaving the Church as a whole. In light of the selective nature of the letter data it is appropriate to adjust the letter data vis-à-vis the picture emerging from the survey data.

**Why young adults?**

Most of those leaving the Church – about two thirds – are young adults. In order to create a credible overall picture of reasons for resigning from the Church the reasons why young adults do so merit separate individual examination. In interviews by telephone with young adults aged 20–39 living in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa) what is emphasised among the reasons why young people leave the Church is the conception of the Church as an unnecessary institution. Of the young adults interviewed for the study, for a majority the lack of subjective significance of the Church was at least to some extent behind the reasons for leaving the Church (see Figure 3). The fact that the Church had no personal meaning was a decisive or almost decisive reason for almost two out of three. For only one out of ten did it not underlie one’s resignation at all.

The young adults considered it almost equally important that they did not want to pay Church taxes. For only one in four was this of no significance at all. However, reluctance to pay was closely connected to the fact that they felt the Church was of no significance. In practice there were only few in the data for whom reluctance to pay Church taxes was not connected to perceiving no personal meaning in the Church. Difference of opinion with the Church’s views or decisions had been decisive or almost decisive for 39 per cent of young adults. For half of them it was not important at all.

For only one interviewee in four was there anything slight in the background regarding some other religious organisation being more appropriate for the individual concerned. For every sixth this had been a decisive or fairly decisive reason. One tenth reported that what was decisive was the solution of their own parents or leaving the Church together with their own parents. Personal disappointments were very seldom the reason for young adults leaving the Church. Moving to live in another place underlay leaving the Church for only very few young adults.
Figure 3. Reasons for leaving the Church among young adults (20–39-years) living in Helsinki area. Urban young Adults 2004 Survey. N=124.

To what extent were the following reasons valid for you when you resigned from the Church? (Scale 1–5, 1=not important at all --- 5=very decisive)

Those young adults in the metropolitan area responding to the telephone questionnaire who had resigned from the Church were grouped by cluster analysis on the basis of the reason for leaving the Church into different types of resignations. This also yields an illustrative picture of how the different reasons are connected to one another. It was decided in the clustering to make four groups:

1. The largest group comprised *evaders of Church taxes with an indifferent attitude to the Church*. These are the young adults resigning from the Church primarily because the Church had no significance for them and they did not want to pay Church taxes. A total of 44 per cent of young adults leaving the Church fell into this group. Religiously they are passive and for them faith has little importance.

2. The second largest group consists of young adults who are *disappointed with the views of the Church*. They are notably characterised by opinions at variance with the opinions and decisions of the Church and also by the fact that the Church does not in general have meaning for them. All in all every third (33%) young adult leaving the Church came into this category. They are the people who are most passive regarding religion and typically it has no meaning for them.
3. Every sixth (16%) had left the Church because *some other religious organisation* corresponded better with their way of thinking. They are religiously very active. The actual share in the present data of young adults leaving the Church who had joined some other religious organisation was eleven (9%).

4. The smallest group (7%) consisted of those young adults leaving the Church who did so *with their parents*. Other reasons elicited were typically or little or no significance to them. They include people who are both religiously active and religiously passive.

*Table 2. Types among young adults leaving the Church. Cluster analysis, cluster centres (means) and standardised cluster centers (Z). Urban Young Adults 2004 Survey. N=124.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Those indifferent to the Church</th>
<th>Those disappointed in the Church’s positions</th>
<th>Those interested in other religious organisations</th>
<th>Those leaving the Church with their parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was disappointed in some parish employee</td>
<td>1,08 –0,18</td>
<td>1,28 0,12</td>
<td>1,32 0,17</td>
<td>1,00 –0,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was disappointed in the actions of the parish</td>
<td>1,38 –0,64</td>
<td>3,54 0,81</td>
<td>2,74 0,27</td>
<td>1,00 –0,89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Church has no significance for me</td>
<td>4,06 0,22</td>
<td>3,92 0,13</td>
<td>3,11 –0,44</td>
<td>2,13 –1,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religious organisation corresponds better to my way of thinking</td>
<td>1,19 –0,39</td>
<td>1,05 –0,49</td>
<td>4,42 1,97</td>
<td>1,25 –0,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am reluctant to pay Church taxes</td>
<td>4,44 0,57</td>
<td>3,10 –0,24</td>
<td>2,74 –0,047</td>
<td>1,75 –1,07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disagree with the Church’s decisions and views</td>
<td>1,81 –0,53</td>
<td>4,10 0,86</td>
<td>2,74 0,03</td>
<td>1,00 –1,02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I left the Church with my parents</td>
<td>1,06 –0,34</td>
<td>1,15 –0,26</td>
<td>1,11 –0,30</td>
<td>5,00 2,80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>44 33</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why then it is specifically the young adults who leave the Church? Among young adults, those who could not imagine leaving the Church are fewer than in older age groups. The connection between age and Church membership is clearly linear: the older the individual concerned the more likely they are to consider it important to belong to the Church and conversely, the younger the individual concerned the more tenuous is the commitment to Church membership. According to the interview survey
Gallup Ecclesiastica 2003 among those under 25 years of age only every fifth could not imagine leaving the Church (see Figure 4). Likewise of those over 65 years of age two out of three could not imagine leaving the Church under any circumstances.

*Figure 4. Share of those firmly committed to Church membership and those who have considered leaving the Church in different age groups in Finland. (Gallup Ecclesiastica 2003, N = 847, %)*

It is reasonable also to examine the reasons why young adults leave the Church from the perspective of how young adults as members of the Church differ from older age groups. Examination of the reasons for leaving the Church among different age groups shows that for the older generations belonging to the Church is more important than it is for young people. All the individual reasons (20) elicited in the Gallup Ecclesiastica 2003 survey for belonging to the Church are more important to those over the age of 65 and their importance mostly shows a linear decline the younger the parishioner is concerned.

However, in three factors young adults differ very markedly from older age groups. These are (1) the question to what extent the Church is perceived as a part of the Finnish way of life (F=33.19***), (2) to what extent the Church is perceived to strengthen one’s own faith (F=18.81*** and (3) to what extent it is perceived as important that the Church should maintain churches and churchyards which are of cultural and historical value (F=17.76***).

Among the older generations Lutheranism appears clearly to be a characteristic of Finnish national identity – a proper Finn is also a Lutheran. Among young people and young adults Lutheranism no longer appears to have this association with nationalist feeling. Nor do young people seem to feel they need the Church to strengthen their own faith. For young people, (and partly also people of working age) faith is more a personal matter than something connected to an institution. The same phenomenon is dis-
cernible among young people considering religion more and less important. Young people increasingly take the view that it is possible to have faith just as well independently of the Church institution. Nor do young people appreciate the cultural work of the Church as much as do older people.

The letters and the quantitative data permit the generalisation that young people leave the Church primarily because they cannot commit to the Church’s message and because for them the Church lacks personal meaning. Thus membership of the Church is seen to be at odds with the individual’s own thinking, and leaving the Church is justified above all by honesty: because they cannot make a commitment to the message of the Church, membership is seen as insincerity towards oneself and others. Among older people such reasons for leaving the Church are rare: only one in six of the letter writers leaving the Church for these reasons was over 30 years of age.

Young adults also frequently sense a conflict with some view or decision of the Church. Such a difference of views has frequently precipitated the resignation from the Church of a young person otherwise remote from it. Disappointments with the intolerance and inequality of the Church are very typical for young adults. Older people on the other hand frequently resign because of personal disappointments with the Church. Among young people and young adults such disappointments in both the letters and the telephone data were rare.

The research data indicates that those joining other religious organisations and those in general found that some other religious tradition corresponded better to their own religious view were approximately every tenth of those leaving the Church. Such resignations are particularly common among young adults. This age appears as a time when the individual is at an extremely sensitive point for making decisions on his/her own spiritual life. What underlies joining some other religious organisation is notably that the Church is not felt to meet the individual’s spiritual needs, or doctrinal differences.

Figure 5. The Church resigners in Finland – an overview.
Discussion

The study shows that people leave the Church above all because the Church and its religion are not felt to have sufficient significance. However, those who are fervently religious and consider faith important also leave the Church, feeling that they have no place in the Church and need some other – spiritually stronger – religious organisation. They account for some ten percent of those leaving the Church. Thus both fervently religious people for whom faith is very important and people who do not consider themselves religious enough for Church membership to be meaningful both leave the Church. People moreover leave the Church also because they find it too intolerant, conservative and lacking in equality. Conversely people leave the Church – albeit in smaller numbers – because they find the Church excessively liberal, permissive and lacking in backbone. This being so, whether the line of the Church is liberal or conservative, it is still losing members. The present study suggests that for many resigning from the Church is a protest and statement on the Church’s decision-making and line-drawing – in practice that of individual Church workers. Resignation from the Church is in particular a protest against the attitude of the Church to homosexuality or women priests. Earlier studies on resignation from the Church in Finland have not found such marked reasons for resignation (Siipi 1965; Lumijärvi 1998; Heino et al. 1997: 68–69)

The research shows that older people leave the Church above all due to personal, situation-related disappointments and young people because the Church holds no significance for them and because the Church is felt to be intolerant. In other words: older people resign because they had expectations of the Church which were not fulfilled, and younger people resign because they have no expectations. The disappointments experienced by older people show that the Church originally had some meaning for them – only matters involving strong personal expectations can cause bitter disappointments. On the other hand underlying the «non-disappointment» of younger people is the fact that the Church simply does not play any role in their lives. Since they have no expectations of the Church there can be no personal disappointment.

In earlier studies financial reasons and reluctance to pay Church taxes have appeared among the main reasons leading to resignation from the Church. During the economic recession of the 1990s there were especially large numbers of resignations for economic reasons (Heino et al. 1997; Lumijärvi 1998). The recession gave rise to totally new groups of impoverished people, some of whom left the Church purely and simply because of their financial difficulties. At the turn of the millennium, however, the present study shows that economy as such was an uncommon reason for leaving the Church. Alongside financial reasons there is generally the fact that the Church is not felt to be of personal importance and thus people do not get enough in return for the Church taxes they pay.

The study demonstrated the difficulty of being a folk church. In 2006 the percentage of Finns belonging to the Church was 82.4. Stressing views and presenting opinions with which such a vast majority of Finns could agree is impossible. Some people expect clear views adhering strictly to a traditional interpretation of the Bible. Others expect the Church to move with the times and be tolerant and favour the spirit of the
law with the emphasis on love for one’s neighbour as opposed to the letter of the law. Those making one type of interpretation tend to consider the other extreme as remote from the Bible. It is clear from the research that the Church is unable to respond to the spiritual needs and doctrinal opinions of all its members.

The study provides evidence of the contemporary longing for spiritual sensations. One main problem of the Church is that it does not leave room for spiritual experiences. Religion should be «felt».

The experiences of those leaving the Church show that the Church is equated with its employees. Underlying resignation from the Church there is frequently disappointment with the actions or views of a specific Church employee. The experience may not be personal; opinions voiced by Church employees in the media also cause people to leave the Church. This is especially the case with views expressed by Church employees showing intolerance.

Experiences of the services provided by the Church are subject to the same laws as any other service (see Grönroos 1990). The parishioner, the client, is ultimately the one to decide whether the service received from his/her church is acceptable. Parishioners expect a certain level of quality depending on what they get and how. Disappointments are frequently attributable to the common problems of customer service provision – experiences could frequently be applied to any customer and any service provider. The service offered by the parish has not met the expectations of the parishioner needing that service and the parishioner registers his/her dissatisfaction by voting with his/her feet and leaving the Church, just as might be the case with a hairdresser or a restaurant. However, in the case of the Church the disappointments frequently occur in situations which are of much greater personal significance than in commercial transactions, and are consequently more serious.

The study raises the importance of a Christian upbringing. Most of those leaving the Church had not had a Christian upbringing at home. If they had indeed had a Christian upbringing many people’s experience of it was negative. Religious upbringing – both at home and at school or in church – which is based on one-sided strict instruction and using God as a means of frightening children would appear to do more harm than good. A religious upbringing should leave children and young people space for questions and contemplation and be based above all on a warm and encouraging atmosphere.

One phenomenon thought to be connected with the decline of religion is differentiation. Religion has increasingly divorced itself from other, secular areas of life. This is particularly apparent among young Finns when the reasons for being a member of the Church or leaving the Church are studied. For young people membership of the Church has nothing to do with being a good citizen or a good Finn. For the older generations membership of the Church is an integral part of the Finnish way of life. Young people no longer make this connection. This makes membership of the Church more exclusively a spiritual matter for young people. This way of thinking is apparent in the world-view of many young people leaving the Church for this reason. Even if the Church is perceived as a good organisation necessary in many ways, people feel they cannot belong if they cannot commit to the spiritual message. The young people are no
longer willing to «belong without believing» – the terms in which the Finnish and Nordic religiosity and Church membership are often been described (Davie 2000). The foregoing is particularly crucial if we consider the position of the Lutheran Church as a folk church. For the older generation Church membership was a factor which was part and parcel of being Finnish. The notion of home, faith and fatherland sat firmly. This connection becomes the weaker the younger the generation considered.

The relationship of young adults to the Church also appears in the privatisation of religion. For young people religion is increasingly a private matter and something other than a religious institution. Young people and young adults, and to a great extent people of working age – regardless of the personal significance of religion – feel that they need no church to confirm their own faith. The younger the age group the less they feel the need for the Church for their own faith.

Other studies, too, have noted the differences between generations in how people relate to life, the Church and religion. In her study on Australians who had drifted away from religion Zina O’Leary found that what underlay young people’s alienation from religion was frequently a desire to take distance from religious authority and the desire to construct their own particular life course emanating from their own selves (O’Leary 1999.). Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) mention the same phenomenon as a massive turning point of the subjectivity of modern culture. This refers to withdrawing from a life defined by external or objective roles and obligations and external authorities and reverting to something which is defined above all by the individual’s own subjective experiences and feelings. Living habits are based less and less on external expectations. People’s ambition is to become «their own real selves», to be governed from within and lead their own life, in which the most important value is an authentic connection to one’s own inner self rather than a life on the terms of some external authority. What is crucial from the perspective of the future of the Church is how it can respond to this change in culture and offer individuals what they need for a personal life and take account of how the individual him/herself feels about his/her own life rather than stressing traditions and obligations. The Church is expected to achieve more interface with the concerns people consider most important (Kääriäinen et al. 2005a, 2005b).

The issues raised by both O’Leary and Heelas and Woodhead also emerge in the present study. Situations in which the Church appears strong and as an absolute authority have the effect of alienating young adults in particular from the Church. On the other hand what is desired of the Church is understanding for the individual’s life and its difficulties and encounter on a personal level. In many disappointments it is ultimately a question of the Church appearing a hard and cold possessor of the truth. The experiences of young adults leaving the Church show clearly that the small conservative minority of the Church, regardless of its interests to the contrary, is driving this particular age group farther and farther away from the Church. Few young people feel that they can identify with the views of this conservative minority. Moreover, many of them feel that the view of those representing the conservative side are internally contradictory and run contrary to the essence of the Christian faith.
Notes

1 The criteria for the grouping were the variables presented in Figure 3 and Table 2. The variable *I moved to another town* was excluded from the analysis due to its poor discriminatory power and very skewed distribution.

References


