Conversion and Deconversion among Québécois Mennonites

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Introduction

The history of French Protestant faith practice in Quebec is long and complex. Initially, it was characterized by decades of bare existence, as the overwhelming majority of the French population lived and worshipped entirely under the auspices of the Catholic Church. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was something of a flowering in the French Protestant churches, with growing numbers and burgeoning congregations gaining a more prominent place in both civil and spiritual society. However, since the 1970s, the trend has turned dramatically towards deconversion and secularization. The causes for this movement are still being debated by scholars.

In recent years interest in deconversion has become widespread in Western society.[1] While the phenomenon of conversion has been thoroughly studied for a century, the phenomenon of loss of faith in a given religion picked up attention only at the end of the twentieth century in a new age of secularization.[2] This new field examines

sudden changes in beliefs rather than a more common gradual disinterest. Studies probe internal reasons (feeling that God can't be trusted, church conflicts, etc.) and external reasons (romantic relations with non-believers, moving away from parents, etc.) for change as well as for the patterns in the process of deconversion. Few facts have as yet been established except the growth of the phenomenon. At the same time multiple websites are providing narratives of deconversions and resources for people wishing to deconvert.[3] These narrative accounts of deconversion parallel in many respects Christian conversion accounts. This article represents an initial study of deconversion in the peculiar context of French Protestants in Quebec, focusing in particular on Mennonite members since the 1970s.

The recent religious history of Quebec is quite different from that of the rest of North America. Until 1960 the religious norm for Quebecers was to follow the religion of their parents. These norms tended to develop along linguistic and cultural lines. Catholicism functioned as the *de facto* state church for the vast majority of French-speakers, while the much smaller English-speaking population adhered to the various Protestant denominations. Since the 1830s a small percentage of French speakers have turned from Catholicism, their religion of birth, and chosen Protestantism instead.[4] The children of both Catholic and Protestant parents remained in their parents' faith community, at least nominally. If they were dissatisfied this was only shown through reduced frequency of practice or forgoing active church membership, rather than through a total break.

This practice began to change rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, following the Quiet Revolution and Vatican II. Now, for the first time, there were other culturally acceptable alternatives to the long-standing status quo, resulting in a sharp backlash against tradition and conformity. For a time, almost any option other than traditional Catholicism was celebrated, with new trends in faith practice often mirroring new socio-political trends. French Protestants, for example, flourished for a while alongside the ascent of the Parti Quebecois and Quebecois nationalism, and in the 1970s and early 1980s French Quebec experienced a period of spectacular evangelical church growth. This "revival" helped many evangelical groups, among them the Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church, to solidify their existence in Quebec.[5] Such a period of growth was enough to attract notice from the media, despite the fact that it impacted only about one percent of the population. It was particularly noted for the ways in which it

clashed with a sociological interpretation of increasing secularization.

The subsequent turn in the 1980s to postmodern materialism and pronounced anti-clericalism,[6] reflected the degree to which culture (media, politics and education) in Quebec seemingly had become antithetical to all organized religion. The broad social urban norm in twenty-first century Quebec came to presume no church involvement, and, according to many observers, saw churches as dogmatic, intolerant and oppressive by definition. In this context, church-involved families, either Mennonites or otherwise, could no longer presume that their children would follow them.[7] The result of these two factors was a new paradigm in which children routinely broke with the religion of their parents. Furthermore, the rejection of traditional norms in religious practice resulted in the rejection of traditional ideas on marriage and divorce. "Ex" became the new normal, with couples not getting married or returning to church, even after their children were born. Religious parents were bewildered by this transformation. In Canada these trends occurred the most rapidly in Quebec, British Columbia and large urban centres.

After the mid-1980s, evangelical Protestant growth in Quebec tailed off, attracting few Quebecois youth or other Canadian-born youth converts. The story of evangelical Protestants in Quebec came to reflect the story of Catholics in Quebec. To some extent this development was counterbalanced by immigrant churches that continued to expand.[8] The decline in evangelical appeal within Quebec culture did not surprise experienced local missionaries, who saw the revival of the 1970s as unique. It disappointed them, to be sure, but it fit the experience of French Protestants since the 1830s of a very hard struggle in a society generally hostile to minority religious groups.[9] The loss of youth attendance in church may have been painful, but it was not especially surprising, given Quebec's historic culture and the modern-day desire for youth to be independent of their parents.

What has surprised almost all church leaders[10] in recent years, however, is the deconversion of once very engaged long-time members, and even pastors. A particularly susceptible group to this disengagement consists of home missionaries, often called church planters, seeking to found new churches. While Quebecois evangelical Protestant groups are aware of this trend, to date this group of disaffiliated members has not been studied. Some local leaders estimate that only 20 to 30 percent of evangelical converts are still in congregations, but there is no hard data or study to confirm these numbers.[11] While nominal allegiance has been

widespread within Catholic and mainline Protestant bodies for centuries, it is proving much more serious for French evangelicals, as they are a group that relies heavily on lay activity, and expects and needs growth to survive. Study is long overdue for this situation. Why did once active members leave? Have they abandoned all evangelical Christian faith? Is there any hope of them coming back?[12]

Methodology

This study seeks to answer some of the above questions by focusing on the experiences of a group of eleven former leaders from Mennonite churches in Quebec. It is divided into two observational groups. The first consists of six ex-members (André, Denis, Bernard, Jean, Jacques, and Sam[13]) who were very committed and active in the leadership of Mennonite Brethren (MB) or Mennonite Church (MC) congregations for a lengthy period between 1970 and 1990,[14] but who have attended no church at all since at least 2008.[15] The second group consists of five persons (Marie, Louise, George, Guy, and Rémi) who have returned to church after long absences, including George from a Mennonite church, and the four others from a non-Mennonite evangelical Protestant church. These two groups—similar in their initial theological beliefs and from similar middle-age demographics—offer contrasting views that highlight the nature of deconversion and provide insightful counterpoints to each other. (To avoid complicating factors and to focus the study, I excluded young adults,[16] more casual attenders or those who moved on to another church).

Each of the interviewees began their faith journies as inactive or slightly active Catholics. All but Denis[17] were converted to Protestant Christianity during the revival period of the 1970s, and became heavily involved in evangelical culture in the 1980s. Neither Protestant nor Anabaptist family roots exist in French Quebec; most French Protestants in Quebec are evangelicals who have moved through several congregations and denominations and can easily fit into another evangelical church.[18] Still, the Quebec Mennonites have evolved specific identities within the evangelical community. The Mennonite Brethren, for example, have shifted considerably from being a largely generic fundamentalist group in the 1970s, associated primarily with the Association Baptists and Plymouth Brethren, to perhaps the best-educated and most progressive evangelical group in Quebec by the1990s.[19] For its

views regarding women in church leadership, collaboration with Roman Catholics, and inerrancy, the Mennonite Brethren college in Montreal in particular has been labelled as liberal by some.[20] For their part, the Mennonite Church congregations had never been inclined to exclusivity, but cooperated with other religious groups and adopted a non-aggressive evangelical message from the start.

Initially 60 names that fit the criteria for this study[21] were identified; 56 of these came from pastors or other church leaders. Unfortunately 33 of the names had insufficient contact information, and could not be used; however, that their information was so dated is significant in and of itself, as it is indicative of the degree to which the church had lost contact with its former members over the years. Church leaders reported to me that ex-members have been known to intentionally change phone numbers, e-mail and even street addresses, to avoid being followed by their congregations.[22] Eventually 18 of the remaining persons were contacted by phone or e-mail; even with them the resistance encountered to in-person interviews proved too strong to permit a quantitative study.[23] The majority said they were too busy or uninterested to talk about their experience. None of them mentioned wanting to avoid a traumatic subject, but their curt responses gave that impression. They were unconvinced by assurances of confidentiality, nor were they swayed by personal ties with the interviewer. Parallel studies of Swiss-evangelical youth[24] and American young adults[25] did not encounter the same challenges. In this study, my own involvement in the Mennonite Church did not help convince ex-members to participate because, according to some of the persons contacted, the researcher represented a "church" point of view.

So the study moved inevitably from a quantitative interest to a purely qualitative study with the six leavers.[26] To this were added five more names of ex-members[27] who had subsequently returned to church after long absences, providing an opportunity to fill in some blanks that those outside did not mention. With better understanding of the phenomenon of deconversion gained from the eleven stories presented below, I hope a wider study can eventually be facilitated.

It is important to define the terminology chosen for the following chart: the more neutral term "allegiance" is used to avoid the sorts of overt terms used by the churches themselves (leavers, ex, quit) and to represent more accurately the views of those who have left. Allegiance can range from very strong to very weak and therefore proved an accessible term for interviewees. I use the word "Church" in the broadest possible sense to include those who

consider themselves Christian, rather than only individuals participating in a specific congregation; so those with present church attendance anywhere are excluded by definition from the study. Those who had returned to church activity were thus requested to answer as they would have when they were outside the church.[28]

However, because the chart below (*Figure 1*) was developed after the interviews were completed,[29] interviewees were not asked where they would place themselves. An evaluation of the criteria used to place each person is thereby even more crucial.[30] The basic definition of allegiance to God at one hundred percent retained is that of the Mennonite vision of God,[31] while allegiance to Church at one hundred percent involves weekly attendance at a recognized Christian Church. The criteria for Church allegiance included: financial contributions, attendance, perceived admiration for the local church, accepted regular responsibilities such as assisting in worship or Sunday School teaching, membership (baptism), willingness to recommend others to join.

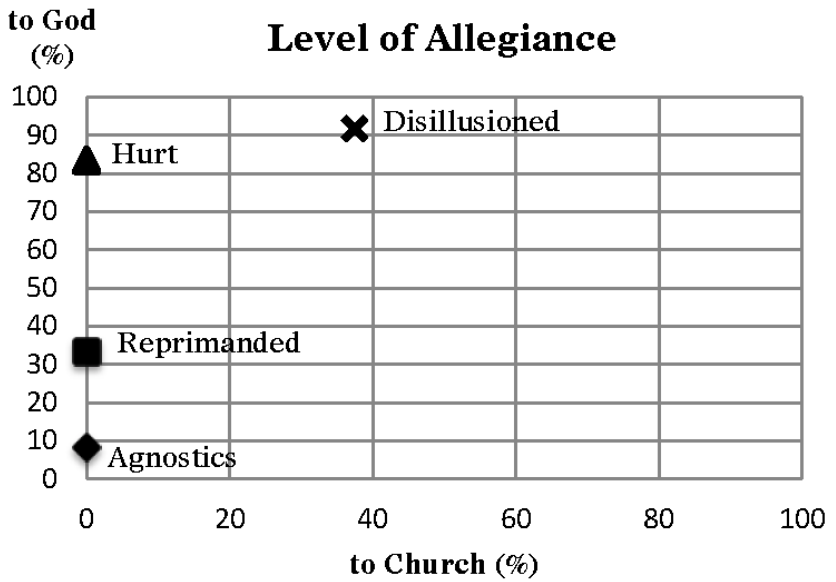

Figure 1

The criteria for God allegiance include: regular Bible reading, prayer, reading other Christian literature, seeking out other Christians, teaching religion to one's children. A range

distinguishes those veering away from the traditional one hundred percent, that is, those who avoid institutional terms and the word "religion" and prefer the terms "tolerance" and "spiritual." All those interviewed stated that they would have at one time fit the one hundred percent criteria for confessional Mennonite allegiance and thus would have been in the upper right hand corner. For Guy, "God and Church were the centre of my life and of all my friends." I next examine the reasons for losing this.

However, the number of responses needs to be set in a wider context. As a former pastor, a teacher in two French theological colleges since 1993, a member of many inter-church coalitions, a leader in two Quebec church-plants, a historian of French Protestantism in Quebec, and long-time chair of the Mennonite Council of Quebec, I have repeatedly witnessed leavers and heard the stories from other church leaders. Anecdotal evidence from this context will also be injected to fill out the picture.

The Results

Despite the small numbers of ex-members interviewed, four distinct trajectories established themselves. The first group consisted of those least alienated from the church but who find its present form irrelevant. Next come those who could not survive conflicts in the church and left for personal reasons. A third trajectory comprised those who could not tolerate the intrusion of the church on their behaviour. The final trajectory reflected those who had simply rejected both the idea of God and the legitimacy of the church.

The first trajectory fit four persons interviewed: André, Jean, Jacques and Sam. They remained relatively positive towards religious faith but nevertheless displayed general frustration or disillusionment with the church. Each had theological training and all but André had served as pastor of a church at one time. They worked very hard within the ecclesiastical system, but found it to be unsustainable. As former leaders they found that there were too few engaged persons in congregations. For Jean, "others did not want to invest themselves enough so I was left to do the work." At the same time they themselves retained high standards and blamed other church members for not making more effort to prevent it from being alienated from society. Three of the four had explored other denominations, but in the end gave up on the traditional evangelical Protestant model of the Church. They were waiting for, but no longer searching for, a new form of church.[32] André, the non-

pastor, however, stood out; he and his wife had recently become more positive and were actively thinking about returning to an evangelical church. Sam was much more sceptical: "I left the outmoded Catholic traditional model and eventually realized that the evangelical Protestants had simply repeated the traditional model of church." These persons admitted to some burnout, but were discouraged by the lack of aid in local churches rather than by God. While Sam was clearly veering away from evangelical orthodoxy in ethics and theology,[33] the other three showed only minor variations from evangelical norms. While two of the four had a church-attending spouse, each retained links to at least a few church-attending persons, meaning they maintained indirect ties to the church. They also spoke of having maintained institutional ties after ceasing to attend church: Jean retained a chaplaincy job but never attended church while André and Jacques held numerous functions on denominational boards for quite a while without attending church. Yet each one also spoke of distancing from the church, by being truly accepted only by ex-members, but feeling a separation from existing church members, both as a result of their own actions and the actions of church friends.

The second trajectory was reflected by Rémi and Marie who, although having returned to a church, had been absent for a long period because they had felt wounded by internal church conflicts. Both of these ex-members had joined an evangelical non-Mennonite church in the past, then left because of conflict with or within the church. They reported being emotionally strained by conflicts in the church, whether they had been directly involved with those conflicts or not. They found their church experience at some point to have been traumatic and did not see the church as a safe place. They felt that conflict should not happen in a church. Marie had taken leadership roles with youth but was put off repeatedly by arguments about wearing slacks and not speaking in tongues. Rémi[34] spoke of being expelled for standing up on principle against the pastor or the leaders in general. Rémi observed, "I had been a trusted leader but suddenly I was a pariah, cut off from all my friends." Because he had not been persuaded of his guilt, he saw this loss as an injustice, and one he resented, rather than as a justified action on the part of the church.

The stories of Marie and especially of Rémi fit widespread stories from my experience in wider evangelical circles in Quebec of resentment to intrusive and domineering pastors, a phenomenon which seems less widespread within the French MC and Mennonite Brethren churches. Nevertheless, stories of sudden loss of status have come to my attention over the years. In some instances, active

members experiencing broken family relations spoke of not being helped by the congregation, especially if their ex-spouse remained in the church. They had expected healing, help, security, and grace in the congregation, but instead their church experience seemed to make it harder to cope. One woman recently confided: "my husband left me and nobody from the congregation came to visit. I found that I could not trust others anymore." Traumatized, such persons slipped away to find healing in another congregation, a difficult step since they were hurting and at the same time required to develop relationships with new persons. In the end they gave up on church, at least for a prolonged period, thus avoiding the need to pick at the scab.

A third trajectory is obvious in anecdotal accounts by persons from multiple denominations, but represented in this study by a single interviewee, George, who returned to church after a twenty-year absence. These are persons who had experienced disapproval or outright discipline by the church for their lifestyles, in particular for sexual activities. In response they gave up first on church discipline but eventually on the church as a whole. Formerly, these persons had been in general agreement about church discipline towards others, but did not agree when it was applied personally to them. With George, a pastor involved in adultery, the precipitating factor was his broken family for which he was held responsible. A growing catalyst appears in the dominant Quebec ethic of personal autonomy and privacy, particularly on sexual issues. Such clashes conflicted with the basic identity of Mennonite churches to "follow Christ in life"[35] and of evangelical Protestant churches "not to be conformed to the world." These persons do not want their privacy invaded or to be judged on matters of sexuality, even if they feel guilty in part. George agreed in one way that he was wrong in his actions. He still wanted to attend church but presumed that he would be pointed at. While some quickly jettisoned all Christian beliefs and practices, others like George maintained individual piety cut off from relationships. George concluded "I had peace with God but not the peace of God, and no fellowship with others." He saw no way back. In general these persons do not attempt to find another church, even churches that no longer practised church discipline,[36] but may sit in the back seat to listen for any pertinent messages before moving on. These persons proved to be the most allergic to be interviewed by anyone representing the church.

The last trajectory is reflected by four interviewees who had become so disillusioned with the traditional idea of God that they had become agnostic or atheist. Although two identified as agnostics (Denis, Guy) and two others as atheists (Bernard,

Louise), the considerable difference between these positions in metaphysics did not seem to reflect on their view of the church or their experience within it. This group was more than willing to be interviewed. For Denis and Bernard, who had left the church permanently, the process was an intellectual venture aided by a break in pastoral work for further theological studies (one in an evangelical setting and the other in a non-evangelical university). For Guy and Louise, who eventually returned to church, no theological study had shaped their experiences. Rather their rapid move to agnosticism resulted from an experience of feeling abandoned by God and burnout. Guy reported: "I immediately stopped reading the Bible and praying. God had not answered my prayers and the Church had not solved the problem. There was an intellectual void as I stopped reading. Meaning in life was absent. Eventually I divorced. My conscience became elastic. I avoided people and invested in things." On the other hand, Denis, who remains agnostic, misses the unity of a community with a common project but does not miss at all the close-mindedness and denigration of reason that he had experienced in churches.

Given the intellectual nature of this experience, these interviewees expressed no problems discussing the issues. They seemed to have no particular anger against the church nor a need to convince it of its error. However, Guy and Louise, for whom agnosticism had resulted as a consequence of burnout or other trauma, did speak of their separation from the church with more emotion and guardednesss. By happenstance, Denis and Bernard, who spoke of their leaving in purely intellectual terms, were members of highly unified families, while Guy and Louise, who spoke of having been burnt-out, also spoke of family divisions. Their respective family lives may well have affected their particular accounts of leaving church.

Discussion

The four trajectories identified above represent distinct experiences. The major question left unanswered is what percentage of the total number of church leavers in Quebec fit in each of these trajectories? And how can one obtain the desired information to answer such a question? In this study, one person declined an interview but took the time to fill out a written survey. The written survey was distributed to all subjects, but returned by only a few. The oral interview was much more helpful in

understanding and going deeper. So methodological questions are crucial for a wider study.

In his survey article of academic studies of deconversion, Bradley Wright noted that "while quantitative studies of deconversion have associated it with personal and demographic characteristics, family background, and religious experiences … qualitative studies have used deconverts' own description and interpretation of their experiences."[37] Wright's article provided three explanations discerned through 50 online narratives of deconversion: of greatest impact were intellectual or theological concerns, followed by God's failures towards the narrators. Of lesser importance were frustrations with other Christians.[38] The narratives were categorically negative towards God and faith. Of particular interest to this study is that Wright found over-representation of computer-savvy youth and that the researchers regretted the impossibility of probing questions as in an interview.[39] Our qualitative study did provide a crucial opportunity for further questioning but we also found that intellectual communicators (such as online bloggers) dominate the responses while emotional responses are much harder to elicit.

Our study invites some general comments. First, like the aforementioned study, this study under-represented women,[40] probably because they had fewer leadership roles in Mennonite churches prior to 2008. Second, of the four trajectories only the first and some of the last group were openly willing to talk, given their more intellectual approach. This again ties in with Wright's article in the fact that an intellectual explanation is the one expressed in online narratives. I found that an interview by a church person is threatening for many traumatized leavers trying to avoid the church. A written survey provided a workable option for some others.

Each of the eleven persons interviewed were given heavy church responsibilities at a very young age (Bernard, Jean, Jacques, George were pastors in their early 20s, and Guy as young as 18) without clear mentors or adequate theological training. They began in revival time and were successful. However, within a decade the revival stopped and the society changed quickly. They had committed everything to this vision but now felt inadequate while expectations in evangelical churches remained high. Their perfectionism and that of the churches resulted in burnout in many cases.[41] André was a little older but stated: "'I needed air with so many tensions and frustrations piling up." Almost any crisis (intellectual, emotional, conflictual) could be the breaking point. The follow-up for all those interviewed was deemed by them to be

inadequate if not non-existent. The sprint of their Christian life proved exhausting while training for a more realistic paced marathon was absent.

Persons represented by the last three trajectories, those most separated from the church, tended to think of those who remained in churches in rather negative terms, as either infantilized, cowards or ignorant. They knew the church thought of them as lost sheep in danger of wolves, but they thought of themselves as clear thinkers whose blinders had been taken off. They had dared to question certain aspects of churches and they felt pushed out. On leaving the cost was high, as they had to reconstitute a network of friends.

Like conversions, these departures were almost always based on individual decisions. In some instances, couples separated over the departure, while in others separated couples were reunited in the long term, not dissimilar to experience arising from conversion. In an era of fragile marriages, a dramatic religious shift threatens the conjugal relationship.[42] However, Jacques and Bernard reported having more time for their couple relationship, especially with less clustered weekends.

Finally, most of the leavers first turned away from the church while preserving a faith in God. With time the spiritual disciplines tended to drop off and clarity about God often became more remote: Bible reading diminished for almost all, prayer was limited to self and family; there was a loss of the communal aspect of spirituality (dialogue, prayer, mutual aid, singing, exhortation, Christian challenges); a reluctance to evangelize developed and traditional evangelical morals relating to controversial issues tend to be gradually abandoned. Those in the first two categories tended to continue to consider themselves evangelicals although their practice and beliefs tended to change gradually with time to more fully resemble the surrounding society. Only the last category, of course, represents true deconversion, rejecting the elements of revelation although even the interviewees in this category wanted to preserve certain values expressed in church, which they saw now as simply human values.

Conclusions

From one point of view one can identify an overall trajectory among all of the interviewees of this study. It is a move from materialist, secular individualism in their youth to a conversion to communal (evangelical) idealism in their 20s, then back via deconversion to a type of postmodern individualism in their 40s and

50s. Still there are important differences in the four trajectories: the first group rejects church as irrelevant, the second group rejects a traumatizing church, the third group rejects an invasive, judging church, while the last group rejects God and the Church. Then, too, the first and last trajectories seem the most stable while the third trajectory the most reactionary, with people likely to end up either in the last category or back in a church of some sort. The second trajectory seems the most vulnerable group, with interviewees voicing a need to be listened to, and even therapy. In one sense the first three trajectories involve indecision, but then consider that half those interviewed in the last trajectory returned to church. In fact, it was those with primarily intellectual problems who left the church and stayed away permanently, while those who returned followed Wright's second explanation, which is that they were frustrated by what they perceived as God's inaction. Like biblical Job, they took time out, expressed their anger, but in the end returned. André, who remains outside the church but with a desire to return, named his one regret: "I spent too much time in the desert."

From a closer range, the interviewees gave highly personal and diverse reasons for both leaving and returning. One universal benefit of leaving, stated by the interviewees, was finding ample free time to interact with family and community. Leisure time is at a premium in modern Quebec society and evangelical Protestant church programs tend to fill any spare time members may have, as well as pressuring members to volunteer and give, contributing in the long run to burnout and more departures. A second identified benefit for leavers was the new freedom to rethink matters in an independent manner, following one's own vision. Guy and George, who returned to church, regretted a heady feeling of freedom that led them far away from Christian values, while Rémi and Marie spoke of becoming more individualistic in their relation to God and wanting to preserve a healthy scepticism, even on returning. They also wanted a less hierarchical church and hesitated to accept responsibilities and bow to communal or pastoral wisdom.

Still, those who returned spoke of the church in positive terms. When asked what they missed about church, the answers diverged. All had missed the close friends and certainty of earlier years. Most wanted singing, communal prayer, mutual aid and serious moral reflection in a common setting. About half had missed the Sunday worship. A few had missed moral exhortations and the communion service, something they noted had not been replaced by tuning into TV worship. And they spoke about being attracted to "Mennonite" teachings. Like ex-Mennonites in other parts of the global

Mennonite community, most of the subjects in this study do not stem from Mennonite homes; nobody in Quebec has Quebec-based Mennonite ancestors dating back to before 1956.[43] Only a few had understood specific Mennonite qualities, and even fewer had integrated them, during their early times in church. Still, both the MC and MB churches share commonalities: both have been less aggressive in church outreach and, in later years, less focused on patrolling the boundaries, than other evangelical bodies, so the gap between them and the wider society is somewhat less pronounced. And most of those interviewed, including the two agnostics, spoke of valuing Anabaptist values, while finding less attraction in evangelical values.

What should the Mennonite churches learn from this study? Some may look at the experience of many leavers as a winnowing process. Nominal Christians in the Church are being sifted out. Yet those interviewed were leaders who had put all their energy and talents for many years into the church project. As they met crises, whether of their making or not, their attachment to the church became fragile. Church members tried to reach out to help[44] but the crises continued and the persons distanced themselves as mutual comprehension diminished. In almost every case, the person in crisis did not clearly state their problem and did not officially leave the church with a declaration or giving reasons.[45] Rather, they gradually attended less often, or moved to another church as a means of leaving altogether. Meanwhile people in the church did not know what to do or, indeed, whether their friends had actually left for good; they also did not want to intrude in the personal lives of their friends. Tentative feelers by either side were not responded to positively, and finally, both sides simply felt more comfortable in not communicating. Then, years passed.

Among the questions and suggestions for the church made by leavers and those who returned were these: doubts should not be a reason to end friendships; the church should keep contact with those who are wandering and truly listen to them; keep praying for them when conversation fails; avoid triumphalism and power of positive thinking and show more transparency in one's own challenges to reassure those who are struggling; try less emphasis on Sunday morning and more on counselling; understand burnout better and intervene sooner.

As someone involved in a church plant aiming to reach such people and believing very strongly in the need for church involvement for Christian survival in postmodernism, four calls to the Church stand out to me: first, mentor young leaders; second, attempt to visit active people who have left the congregation at least

yearly; third, understand that it is very hard after such freedom and having been burned to return to an organized church, even when there is a longing to do so; fourth, consider a radically different form of church that is more transparent, more interactive, more aware of struggling members and of confused seekers, more consensual and less tied to buildings and to Sunday mornings.

Church people see ex-Mennonites as lost sheep in danger of wolves. So they appeal to them to come home to safety. Some will come, but leavers almost always see themselves as understanding better, having their eyes opened and being safer outside. They have been deconverted at least in relation to church, and don't want to be dragged back to a controlling or irrelevant institution. They cannot think of the church as a helpful place. They have been encouraged by their cultural context and their friends to trust only themselves and to protect themselves from the institution and dogma.

There is a unique opportunity in tracking educated, engaged adult church leaders who subsequently leave to reside part-way between church and secular society, as this study has. Following this pilot project a wider study could identify certain obstacles to faith in a more general population. This future study should identify the effects of leaving and deficiencies in the follow-up of such persons. It could improve pastoral care of these and other potential leavers while simultaneously better identifying the pressure points of church involvement in a secular culture. Finally, further study would amplify the voices of church leavers, allowing church leaders to learn from them.

While "ex-member" may be the new norm in Quebec, it is not necessarily a permanent status. Certainly there is no indication that the majority of leavers in Quebec are on the verge of returning, but this study listened to six of the respondents who returned to church, including three to their former congregation. The account of the ex-member is not necessarily the final word on the complex story of crossing church boundaries.

Notes

[1] A good introduction to the subject comes at the beginning of Bradley Wright. "Explaining Deconversion from Christianity: A Study of Online Narratives," *Journal of Religion & Society* 13 (2011).

[2] Among recent articles or books see David Bromiley, *Falling from the Faith* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988); John Barbour. *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994); Philip Harrold, "Deconversion in the Emerging Church," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian*

Church 6, no. 1 (2006): 79-90; Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); James Bielo, "Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among U.S. Emerging Evangelicals," *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 258-76, and many other autobiographical accounts of those who have left churches.

3 Among websites there are Ex-Christian.net and de-conversion.com. The ex-conversion.net website states: "This blog exists for the express purpose of encouraging those who have decided to leave religion (Christianity) behind."

4 Jason Zuidema. *French-Speaking Protestants in Canada: Historical Essays.* Leiden: Brill, 2011; Jean-Louis Lalonde. *Des loups dans la bergerie: Les Protestants de langue française au Québec, 1534-2000.* Montreal: Fides, 2002.

5 Richard Lougheed, Wesley Peach, and Glenn Smith *Histoire du Protestantisme au Québec Depuis 1960: Une Analyse Anthropologique, Culturelle et Historique*, (Québec: Éditions La Clairière, 1999), 104.

6 Richard Lougheed, "The evangelical revivals of the 1960s-1980s," in *French-Speaking Protestants in Canada: Historical Essays*, ed. Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 203-4; and in more detail in Lougheed, Peach, and Smith, chapter 4.

7 This conference has confirmed a common pattern.

8 Glenn Smith, "A brief socio-demographic portrait of French-Speaking Protestantism in Quebec since 1960," in *French-Speaking Protestants in Canada: Historical Essays*, ed. Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 265-283.

9 See Richard Lougheed, "La marginalisation des franco-protestants," in *Le patrimoine des minorités religieuses du Québec: richesse et vulnérabilité*, ed. Marie-Claude Rocher (Québec: PUL, 2006), 25-36.

10 Personal conversations with leaders of Pentecostals, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite since 2005.

11 Personal conversation with Gilles Dextraze, general secretary of the Mennonite Brethren in Quebec after studying with Glenn Smith.

12 Christian Direction, an evangelical clearing house in Montreal, is hoping for a wider study after reviewing this probe.

13 All names are pseudonyms.

14 The growth years when most new members entered the French-speaking churches. See Lougheed, "The evangelical revivals."

15 This gap provides certainty that this is a decisive long-term move while not excluding the chance of later return. Many others moved on to other churches, including some to Catholic or traditional historical churches.

16 Not because they are not of interest but because the issues are very different. This is probably of more urgent interest for parents and congregations. They can consult Caroline Gachet's study of Swiss evangelical leavers: "Quitter le milieu: Une étude sociologique des processus de désaffiliation religieuse du milieu évangélique," (doctoral thesis, University of Lausanne, 2013). Her questionnaire and method were very helpful for us but the cohort was too different to be of explanatory use for our context.

17 Denis is younger, having been converted in his teens in the 1990s.

[18] Cathérine Hinault. "Catholiques et protestants dans le sud-ouest du Québec, des années1830 à 1920," (doctoral thesis, Université de Sorbonne 3, 2011), 97-106.

[19] Richard Lougheed. "Progress of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Quebec," in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections After 150 years*, ed. Bruce Guenther (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2011).

[20] Personal conversations with leaders at the Baptist Fellowship college SEMBEQ and the FTÉ seminary in Montreal.

[21] Active in leadership in Mennonite Churches prior to 1990 and inactive since at least 2008.

[22] This avoidance was confirmed by Guy, who returned after a long period.

[23] There is a likelihood of several more interviews in the future by a researcher who knows them personally. However the majority of the 60 identified leavers were not interviewed.

[24] Gachet.

[25] Thom Rainer, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008).

[26] André, Denis, Bernard, Jacques, and Sam.

[27] Marie, Louise, Georges, Guy, and Rémi.

[28] This is not ideal but the insights derived proved very useful.

[29] Thanks to my colleagues Marc Paré and Jean Biéri for comments that improved it.

[30] Criteria were suggested by the Gachet thesis and a George Rawlyk/Angus Reed study of Canadian evangelicals in 1993 and the followup Ipsos Reed study in Oct. 12, 2003.

[31] For example, *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) or *The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith* (1999).

[32] Jacques and Jean expressed interest in Stuart Murray's novel proposals about church planting (e.g. *Church Planting*, Waterloo: Herald Press, 2001) but were sceptical that there had been any application of these proposals in Quebec to date.

[33] On the reality of the devil, the importance of the Bible, etc. Sam did not consider himself evangelical now.

[34] He began in another French evangelical church but after years away has returned to a Mennonite Brethren congregation.

[35] Hans Denk.

[36] Kevin DeYoung, "Discipline in the Mainline: is it possible or even wise?" *9marks* 25 Feb. 2010, 9marks.org.

[37] Bradley R. E. Wright, et. al., "Explaining Deconversion from Christianity: A Study of Online Narratives," *Journal of Religion & Society* 13 (2011), 3.

[38] *Ibid.*, 12. He expected the influence of non-Christians as a fourth factor but it proved absent in the narratives.

[39] *Ibid.*, 14.

[40] Only Marie and Louise participated fully, with another woman contributing valuable comments. All of these women were still involved in a church but had given it up for a while.

[41] Lougheed, Peach, and Smith, 104.

[42] They tended to marry very young as well. Three of eight eventually divorced including returnees while George remained single.

[43] The first Mennonite workers came to Quebec in 1956 and the first Mennonite Brethren in 1961.

[44] This, however, is not the impression left with those who leave.
[45] Only Denis wrote a resignation to the church and specified the reasons.