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No longer believing in belonging"–A longitudinal study of Generation Y from confirmation experience to church leaving

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ABSTRACT:

Relationship to national churches in the Nordic countries has often been described as "believing in belonging". Based on a longitudinal survey data, I argue in this article that this notion does not apply anymore to the young generation, often referred as Generation Y. Therefore, they are highly challenging traditional reasons for belonging to national churches. The number of church-leavers has been unusually high in Finland since the beginning of 21st century, a vast majority of them young adults. The same young adults were confirmed in the church only a few years earlier. This study aims to give understanding to the high number of young people who leave the Church soon after confirmation. The study shows that for Generation Y, the church-leaving process is linked to beliefs and values. They do not leave the church because they are disappointed with it, but because they do not find it to be in line with their own beliefs. The tradition and culture are not enough to keep them as members.

KEYWORD: Generation Y, religious change, church membership, confirmation work

1. Introduction

Relationship to national churches in the Nordic countries has often been described as "believing in belonging". With this term, researchers have wanted to highlight the special character and the importance of church membership in the Nordic religiosity contra to "believing without belonging" with which British religiosity has been described (Davie, 1994; 2002). For the Nordic people belonging to national churches has been regarded as something special: they do want to belong even if they do not attend and if they do not believe in the teachings of the church. The share of church members is still high in all five Nordic countries (Finland 77 %, Denmark 80 %, Sweden 69 %, Norway 79 %, and Iceland 77 % in 2011), but during the past ten years it been declining in all five countries faster than before.

In Finland, the number of church-leavers has been unusually high since the beginning of 21st century, a vast majority of them young adults. The same young adults were confirmed in the church only a few years earlier. In this article, by using a longitudinal survey data and a large national survey data, I am trying to understand the changes in the relation to the church and the high number of those leaving the church in Finland among the young generation, often referred to as Generation Y. I argue, that the notion "believing in belonging" does not apply anymore to this generation of contemporary young adults. Therefore, they are highly challenging traditional reasons for belonging to national churches. For them church-leaving is not an act of disappointment, but an act where one follows her/his own true self. Neither is church-leaving a sudden act, but linked to one's wider life-course.

2. Background of the study

Generation Y in the midst of religious change

Generation Y refers to the generation born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (if born between 1982-2000, a person would be 13 to 30 years old in 2013). Previous generational studies have distinguished such groups as the Lost Generation, the Greatest Generation, the Silent Generation, the Baby Boom Generation, and Generation X.[1] Such social generations refer to cohorts of people who were born during a certain time frame and who thus share similar cultural experiences.[2]

Generation Y is also called the "Echo Boomers," partly because many of them are children of Baby Boomers and partly because this generation is the next largest generation after the Baby Boomers. In order to understand Generation Y, it is also important to understand their parents' generation, the Baby Boomers and the Generation X. The Baby Boomers were born after the Second World War and are often seen as the first generation that clearly differed from previous generations. The Baby Boomer generation is seen as a generation that tended to think of itself as a special generation and they are generally associated with a rejection of traditional values (Owram, 1997).

The generation preceding Generation Y, Generation X is thought to be the first generation to be raised in an era of postmodernism. Compared to previous generations, this generation is more heterogeneous, and espouses more diverse religious views. Many of these are features are even more characteristic for the Generation Y. They are regarded as confident and tolerant, but also as self-centered and narcissistic compared to the preceding

[1] The Lost Generation refers to those who fought in World War I. The Greatest Generation is the generation that includes the **v**eterans who fought in World War II (born between 1901 and 1924). The Silent Generation includes those who were too young for military service in World War II (born 1925-1945). They are generally recognized as the children of the Great Depression and this event had a profound impact on them. The Baby Boom generation is the generation that was born following World War II (approximately 1946-1964). Generation X is the generation born after the baby boom ended, ranging from 1961 to 1981. Generation Y is the generation born between the early 1980s to the early 2000s. Generation Z is the following generation (earliest birth is generally dated in the early 2000s).

[2] The idea of viewing a population as a generation was promoted in the 19th century. The existence of different generations and gradation into age groups became more and more apparent along with the formation of social classes and as a consequence of the rapid industrialization of Western Europe after 1850 (Jaeger, 1977).

generations in their teens; therefore, they also called “Generation Me” (Twenge, 2006). They are seen as individuals who want to be “something special” and believe they can be anything they wish to be. They tend to extend their youth and delay entering into adulthood. They do not feel approval from the others which has also resulted in a decline in social rules (Twenge, 2006).

Most of the members of Generation Y are young adults at the time of this study. Early adulthood, the period between the adolescence and adulthood, often also called emerging adulthood, is typically seen to cover the years between 18 and 29. The most prominent features of emerging adulthood are self-centeredness, identity exploration, and instability. It is “the age of feeling of in-between” and “the age of possibilities”. During this age young adults experiment with different identities, which contributes to a feeling of instability (Arnett, 2004, 14).

The period of emerging adulthood is a period of great changes. Often these changes involve also religion (Arnett, 2004). For young people, this time of life is frequently accompanied by distancing oneself from religious authority and decreasing religious activity. This may also include resignation from religious institutions (Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola, 2005; Mikkola, Niemelä and Petterson, 2007; Denton, Pearce and Smith, 2008).

Many studies indicate that members of Generation Y are likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. They cast doubt on traditional beliefs and values and do not blindly follow what they have learned in childhood (Mikkola, Niemelä and Petterson 2006). With these attitudes, young adults in this age group represent a challenge for churches and religious organizations.

When studying the young generation and their relation to religion, several key points need to be addressed. Firstly, numerous studies clearly indicate that this generation is less religious than the earlier age cohort (Voas 2012; Niemelä, 2011; Mikkola, Niemelä and Petterson, 2007; Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola, 2005, 141-144). This is the case, especially in highly industrialized countries. It is most evident in the countries where religion in general is not valued highly and where the religiosity of an average citizen is not very high (Bucher, 2009, 625). These differences between younger and older generations today are not only a matter of age–as young people have been less religious than older age groups as long as there has been empirical data available–but there are also clear periodic differences: contemporary young people are less religious today than young people were earlier. One of the key reasons for this decline has been seen in the changes in family settings. Quantitative data (e.g., ISSP2008, Religion Monitor, World Values Survey) show beyond doubt that religious upbringing in homes is declining especially in highly industrialized countries (e.g., Bucher, 2009; 625; Niemelä, 2011). In Finland among the over 65-year-olds, more than two out of three have been brought up religiously at home, while the figure among those under 35 is well below half. The decline has been greatest in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Kääriäinen et al., 2010, 65; Niemelä and Koivula, 2006, 165).

Furthermore, there are also changes in relation to religion that are related to age. There is significant research indicating that religiosity tends to decrease after the teenage years (see e.g., Hoge and Roozen, 1979; Kääriäinen, Niemelä and Ketola, 2005; Mikkola, Niemelä and Petterson, 2007; Denton, Pearce and Smith, 2008). However, the common assumption–that religiosity increases with age–is not supported by recent studies. On the other hand, studies indicate that by age-cohort (or a generation), religiosity seems to remain more stable and not increase with age (Voas, 2012).

From confirmation time to adulthood

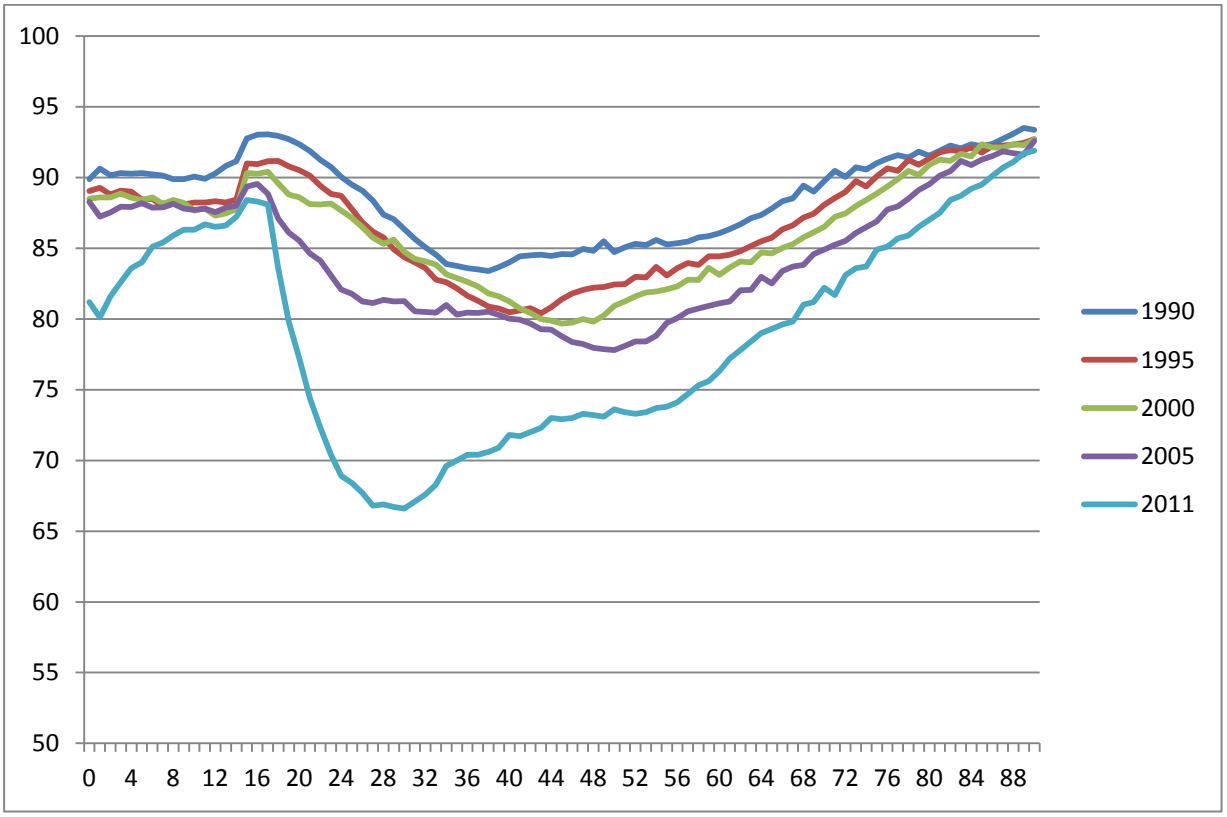
According to earlier studies, the time of church confirmation often marks a turning point in the lives of young people (Niemelä, 2008; 2010; Schweitzer, Ilg and Simojoki, 2010). In Finland, as many as 83 percent of young people are confirmed at the age of 15 (in 2012); a small number are confirmed later in life. The confirmation period is an important part of catechesis (baptismal training) in Protestant churches. Typically, Protestant young people attend confirmation preparation between the ages of 13 and 15. It lasts about one year and ends with a confirmation ceremony. In Finland, confirmation period typically starts in the autumn and consists of several meetings and church visits during the year and includes a fairly long camp (approximately 8 days), most often in a summer time. International comparative research indicates that for many young people in Europe confirmation time is a positive and meaningful experience (Schweitzer, Ilg and Simojoki, 2010). For only a small minority is it a negative experience, which may also have long-lasting influence in the later religious life of an individual (Niemelä, 2006; 2008; Ilg and Schweitzer, 2010). Confirmation time often also changes attitudes towards the church and faith in a more positive direction (Niemelä, 2008; 2010). In an international comparison the results from Finland are very positive (Niemelä, 2010; Schweitzer, Ilg and Simojoki, 2010; Ilg and Schweitzer, 2010). Compared to young people in other countries studied, the confirmands in Finland are more satisfied and there is a more positive attitudinal change. Confirmation time in Finland also activates young people religiously and as many as half of the young people say at the end of the confirmation period that they would be interested in taking part in a Christian youth group. A corresponding figure from Denmark and Switzerland is below 10 percent, and in Germany, Norway and Austria about one fourth or fifth (Niemelä, 2010; Schweitzer, Ilg and Simojoki, 2010).

However, regardless of these positive results from studies related to confirmation experience, something seems to happen in the later teens and early adulthood that changes these religious intentions. A significant number of these same young people in Finland leave the church as they grow older. Emerging adulthood seems to lead many of these young adults to conclude that church membership is not for them. According to church membership statistics in Finland, it can be estimated that in beginning of the 21st century about one-fourth of young adults have resigned from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland when they were between the ages of 18 to 25. Young adults are by far the largest population group resigning from the church. In 2011 of those aged 18 years, nearly 90 per cent belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. However, after the age of 18 the share

declines rapidly. Of men between the ages of 27 and 30, only about 62 percent belong to the Church, and of women about 70 percent.

The dramatic decline in church membership in Finland during emerging adulthood is a relatively new phenomenon. The starting point for this decline can be located to the passing of the new law of religious freedom in 2003. Between 2003 and 2012, more than 400,000 Finns left the church. This amounts to almost 10 percent of the total number of church members; most of them were young adults. Even though the law itself emphasized positive freedom for religion, not from religion, in fact, the practical changes that were made at the same time made church-leaving much easier: a person could resign from the church just simply by an email notice. These changes seem to have attracted the attention of young people and various campaigns and discussions in the social media supported church-leaving (Niemelä, 2007). Figure 1 illustrates the change in the share of those belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in different age groups in 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2011. This figure reveals clearly that some changes have clearly been taking place among Finnish young adults during the 21st century: the whole membership curve has changed dramatically among the young adults in recent years.

Figure 2. Share of those belonging to the Church by age group in 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2011. Statistics Finland (%). (Haastettu kirkko, 2012)



3. Method

3.1. Research questions

In this article, I analyze the relationship to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and changes in it among the members of the Generation Y born in late 1980's. I analyze them during the transition period from adolescence to early adulthood, during the period called emerging adulthood. With this study, I aim to understand something about the high number of young people who leave the Church soon after confirmation. I seek answers to the following questions:

How does the relationship towards the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and church membership change from the time of confirmation to emerging adulthood?

Why do many members of generation Y leave the church soon after the confirmation experience? How do their reasons for leaving differ from the reasons of the older generations?

What link, if any, does the church-leaving have with the confirmation experience?

This research aims to go beyond a simple analysis of the explicit reasons for leaving the church or staying as members, and also aims to analyze the relationship to the church in a wider life perspective. I am trying to determine if there are reasons related to the situation and experiences before, during, or after confirmation that can explain why so many young people tend to leave the church regardless of high confirmation attendance and typically positive experiences related to it. In order to understand the change that has happened in relation to the church, I am also comparing generation Y members and their reasons for church leaving to those of the older generations.

3.2. Data

I base my analysis and argumentation on the analysis of two large data sets. The main data set comprises a10-year follow-up study of young people who went through confirmation preparation and were confirmed in 2002 in the parish of Tampere[3] in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The study covers the years from the ages of 14 to 25 in their lives. It contains four sets of questionnaires: a questionnaire **(A)** at the beginning of confirmation studies in 2001 (at the age of 14/15) (N=1 322; 90% of all confirmands in Tampere); a questionnaire **(B)** at the end of confirmation time in 2001 (at the age of 15) (N=1 159; 79 % confirmands); a questionnaire **(C)** distributed to the subjects five years later, in the spring of 2006 (at the age of 20) (N=416; response rate 30 %), and a questionnaire **(D)** that was completed ten years later, in the fall of 2011 (at the age of 25) (N=276; response rate 21%). As can be expected, the response rate from the participants has declined from the age of 14 to the age of 25. While the response rate at the beginning of confirmation was as high as 90%, it has declined to 21% ten years later. However, when comparing those who responded to the fourth questionnaire compared to those who did not answer, only one clear difference emerges: women are overrepresented among those who replied to the fourth survey round (68% are women, while women amounted to 50%

[3] Tampere is the third largest city in Finland with 200,000 inhabitants. The parish of Tampere includes primarily urban areas, along with some smaller rural population centers.

in the first and second survey round). No other notable differences between the two groups could be found. For example, they were almost equal in their relation to Christianity at the beginning of and after confirmation time. In this article, I will concentrate on the last data set and distinguish between those who have remained as members and those who have left the church ten years after confirmation. By comparing these two groups, I will try to determine if there are experiences or situations related to the confirmation time or something before or after that can explain the church-leaving. Of the respondents of the last round 206 were such that I was able to connect with the questionnaires of the previous rounds and these are the respondents I will concentrate on in this article.

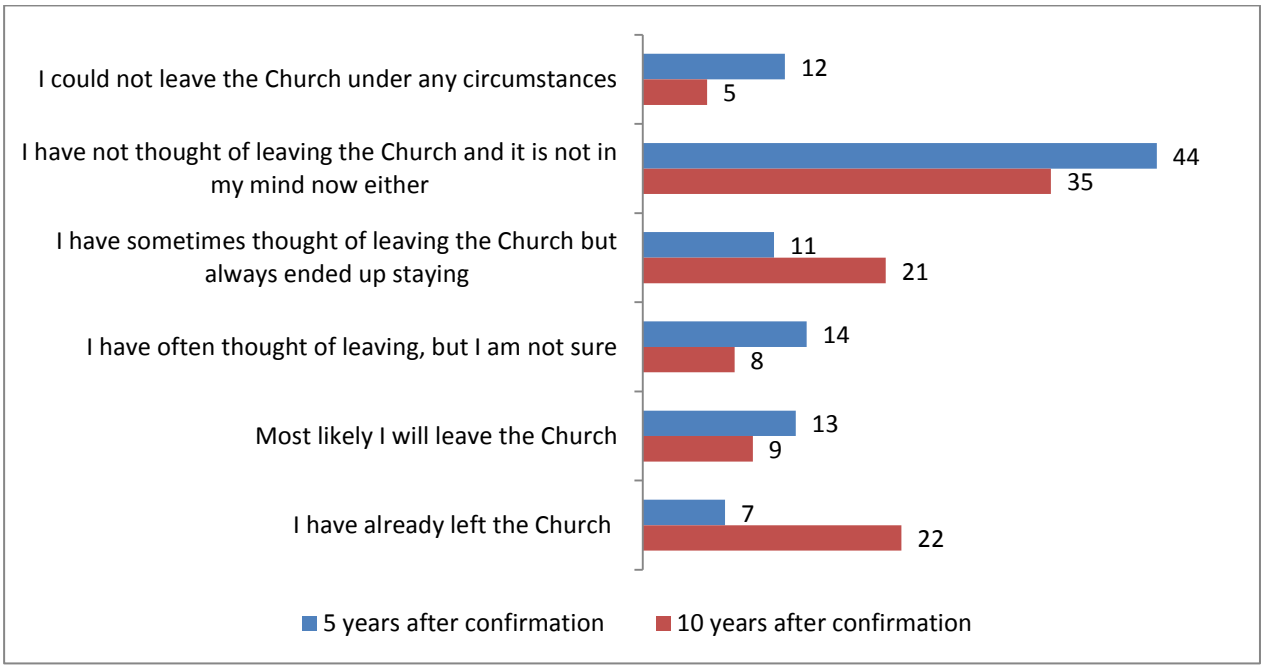
In order to gain a deeper understanding of the distinctive features of the church-leaving process among members of Generation Y, I am using is a large, representative Finnish survey data set called Gallup Ecclesiastica 2011 to compare this generation with older generations. This was a large survey completed by nearly 5,000 Finns in 2011 (N=4930). The survey was conducted on-line by TNS Gallup Finland and it was ordered by the Church Research Institute. This data set contains (among others) questions related to reasons for belonging to the church and reasons for leaving the church. I use this data to compare the basic reasons for church membership and church leaving among the members of the young generation and differences compared to the older generations.

4. Results

4.1. Staying or leaving?

The longitudinal data shows that the question of belonging to or leaving the church becomes vital during emerging adulthood. The data from young adults who were confirmed ten years earlier in the parish of Tampere show that at the age of 20 as many as seven per cent of them had left the church and five years later a total of 22 per cent (24 percent of men and 20 percent of women) had left. This corresponds with the estimates that can be drawn from the church statistics. The longitudinal data also shows that the general attitude towards church membership has turned notably more critical and also more decisive after the age of 20 (see Figure 2). At the age of 25 only five percent of those who were confirmed 10 years earlier thought that they could not think of leaving the church under any circumstances. However, while the share of those who think that they could not think of leaving the church had declined and the share of those who had already left had increased, the share of those who had thought of leaving but decided to stay as members had also increased (from 11 to 21). At the same time, the share of those who had not thought of leaving at all or were unsure had declined. This means that between the ages of 20 and 25 these young adults had increasingly taken clear stands and decided on their church membership status.

Figure 2. Attitudes towards Church membership 5 and 10 years after confirmation (at the age of 20 and 25) among those who were confirmed in Tampere in 2001. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2011. N=349 (2006); N=225 (2011)



Furthermore, the data shows not only that the share of those who consider leaving or have already left the church has increased between the ages of 20 and 25, but also that the share of those who felt that the Church and parish had become more remote from their own lives than it was when they were confirmed has also increased. At the age of 20, one-fourth (28%) of young people responded that they experienced the church and parish as more remote from their lives than they had during confirmation. At the age of 25, the share had increased to 42 percent. This is notably higher than the share of those who experienced God and faith as more remote in their life than during confirmation (27 percent at the age of 25). Furthermore, it is especially the local parish from which they feel especially estranged. While 43 percent felt that the affairs of the Church were very or fairly distant from them, 59 percent felt that their local parish was also distant. For young people, this distance is partly linked to moving away from home. Those who had moved away from their home town (Tampere) experienced their parish as notably more distant than those who were still living there ($p<.001$). At the same time, there was no statistically significant difference in the closeness to the church in general between those who had moved away from their home town and those who still lived there.

Table 1. Estimate of the change in relationship towards the church and parish and God and faith at the age of 20 and 25 among those who were confirmed in Tampere in 2001. ***How has your relationship to the Church and parish/God and faith changed since confirmation?*** **%**

	Church and parish		God and faith	
	At the age of 20	At the age of 25	At the age of 20	At the age of 25
Not at all	62	50	64	56
...are more important and closer to me than during confirmation	10	8	20	17
...are less important and more remote than during confirmation	28	42	16	27
Total	100	100	100	100

Reasons for leaving the Church among the members of Generation Y

When those who had left the church were asked to describe openly their reasons for leaving the church, they gave several reasons. The lack of faith was mentioned most often and often with a link to failing to find the church as meaningful. The responses to a question about belief in God in the same data set support this: 79 per cent of the young adults who had left the church by the age of 25 said that they did not believe in God. Other reasons that were mentioned regarding church-leaving frequently included the church tax, a lack of need to believe, no need for church services, and the intolerance or tolerance of the church. In the case of the latter reason, some felt that the church was too tolerant regarding issues like which stand the church should take on same-sex relationships, while others felt that the church was not tolerant enough regarding these issues. The latter was more common.

The results based on the Gallup Ecclesiastica 2011 survey analyzing the differences in reasons for leaving the church between the Generation Y and the older generations support the results of the longitudinal study. Generation Y young adults emphasize 'lack of belief' as a reason for leaving the church, while the older generation adults tend to highlight disappointments in the church more, compared to younger people. Among the 16 possible reasons for leaving that were asked in the survey, the key reasons Generation Y members gave for leaving the church are the following: "I am not a religious person" (difference between generations, $F=23.74$, $p<.001$); "I do not believe in the teachings of the church ($F=21.83$, $p<.001$), and "The church as an institution does not mean anything to me" ($F=19.34$, $p<.001$). These stand out as by far the most important responses among Generation Y. The average ratings among the Generation Y were between 4.11-4.30 and among the Silent Generation born before the end of the Second World War between 2.70-2.92 (on a scale 1 to 5 where 1=not at all, 5=very meaningful reason for leaving the church). Disappointment as a reason for leaving is very rare among Generation Y, and most common among the Silent Generation. Another reason that the young generation highlights (but to a much lesser degree than non-believing) is that the church is too intolerant of sexual minorities ($F=8.60$, $p<.001$, mean value 2.92 among the Gen Y compared to 2.12-2.14

among the Silent and Baby Boom generations). However, the members of the Generation Y do not emphasize an unwillingness to pay church taxes; this is a typical reason for church leaving among the Gen X and early Baby Boomers ($F=4.67$, $p<.001$).

Before, during and after confirmation

Having looked at the primary reasons for church leaving in the data, I will now move on to analyzing the role of confirmation time in the leaving process. Can we find reasons related to the situation and experiences before, during, or after confirmation that can explain why so many young people tend to leave the church so soon after it? I will begin by analyzing the starting point for confirmation period. How did that differ among those who have remained as members compared to those who have left the church? The comparison of the beginning attitude among those who had remained as members and those who had left the church reveals that already in the beginning, their attitudes were different (see Table 1). Those who had a more positive attitude towards attending and who were excited about attending in the beginning were far more likely to remain members than those who were not very interested at the beginning either.

Table 1. Confirmation attendance beginning attitude (*What is your basic attitude towards attending confirmation?)* and the share of those who have remained members of the church and those who have left the church by the age of 25. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2012. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2012. N=206.

	Has remained a member %	Has left the church by the age of 25 %	Total %
I am very excited	88	12	100
I am fairly excited	82	18	100
In between	77	23	100
Very bored; I am not interested at all	0	100	100
Total	78	22	100
$X^2=17.32$, p=001			

I will next analyze the expectations and experiences related to confirmation period among those who have remained as members and those who have left the church. The analysis shows the same as the analysis above: those who later left the church had a less active orientation towards confirmation.

I am using the sum variables that I have formed in my former publications of this longitudinal study (see more Niemelä, 2006; 2008). Based on a factor analysis (of a 19-item instrument), three sum variables were formed: *Religion* (religious expectations),[4] Fun (Social and functional expectations),[5] and *Growing up* (Expectations related to growing

[4] The sum variable includes such items as, "Strengthening my faith," "Increasing my knowledge of the Bible," and "Learning to pray."

[5] The sum variable includes such items as, "Nice things to do;" "Good team spirit;" Nice leisure activities," and "New friends."

up).[6] Cronbach's alpha for these were: .94, .84, and .88. Corresponding sum variables were formed from the items measuring experiences of confirmation period. The greatest differences among those who have remained as members and those who have left the church are found in religious expectations and experiences (see Table 2). Those who later ended up leaving the church had only low expectations related to religious and faith issues, they simply did not look forward to any religious learning or growing in faith. Neither did they experience such. Their religious experiences were notably lower than those who had remained as members of the church. In addition, the expectations and experiences related to growing up were lower. In terms of experiences related to "fun," there was no statistically significant difference between those who have remained and those who have left the church. This means that those who later tend to leave the church do experience confirmation period as socially and functionally rewarding, but the experience does not tend to have any deeper meaning for them.

Table 2. Confirmation expectations and experiences among those who had remained church members and those who left the church by the age 25. Mean values for sum variables on a scale of 1-5 where 1=no meaning and 5=very meaningful. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2012. N=206.

	Has remained a member by the age of 25	Has left the church by the age of 25	t-test	p
RELIGION				
Religious expectations (sum variable)	2.61	2.17	3.66	.000
Religious experiences (sum variable)	3.01	2.49	4.24	.000
GROWING UP				
Expectations related to growing up (sum variable)	3.11	2.71	2.72	.007
Experiences related to growing up (sum variable)	2.94	2.67	1.77	.077
FUN				
Social and functional expectations (sum variable)	3.54	3.15	2.73	.007
Social and functional experiences (sum variable)	3.98	3.85	.90	.369

Those who had left the church 10 years later, also obviously received less positive support for their confirmation attendance from their home when they were young. They seldom had a religious upbringing: 17 percent of those who had left the church reported having a religious up-bringing at home, while 33 per cent of those who had remained as members mentioned having had a religious upbringing.

[6] The sum variable includes such items as ""Becoming independent," "Growing up," and "Increasing and strengthening my self-knowledge."

Also the general satisfaction at the end of confirmation is linked with staying or leaving. Those who were satisfied were more likely to remain members. Of those who were very satisfied with their confirmation studies, only nine percent had left the church by the age of 25 compared to 33 percent of those who were fairly dissatisfied (see Table 3). However, it is important to point out that even though confirmation dissatisfaction increases the likelihood of leaving the church, for most of those who left the church, the confirmation period had been a positive experience (see Table 4).

Table 3. Share of church members at the age of 25 and general satisfaction towards confirmation period after participating. N=198. %

	Share of church members at the age of 25	Share of those who had left the church by the age of 25	Total
Very satisfied (5)	91	9	100
Fairly satisfied (4)	72	28	100
In-between (3)	72	28	100
Fairly dissatisfied (2)	67	33	100
Total	78	22	100
X^2=6.75, p=.080			

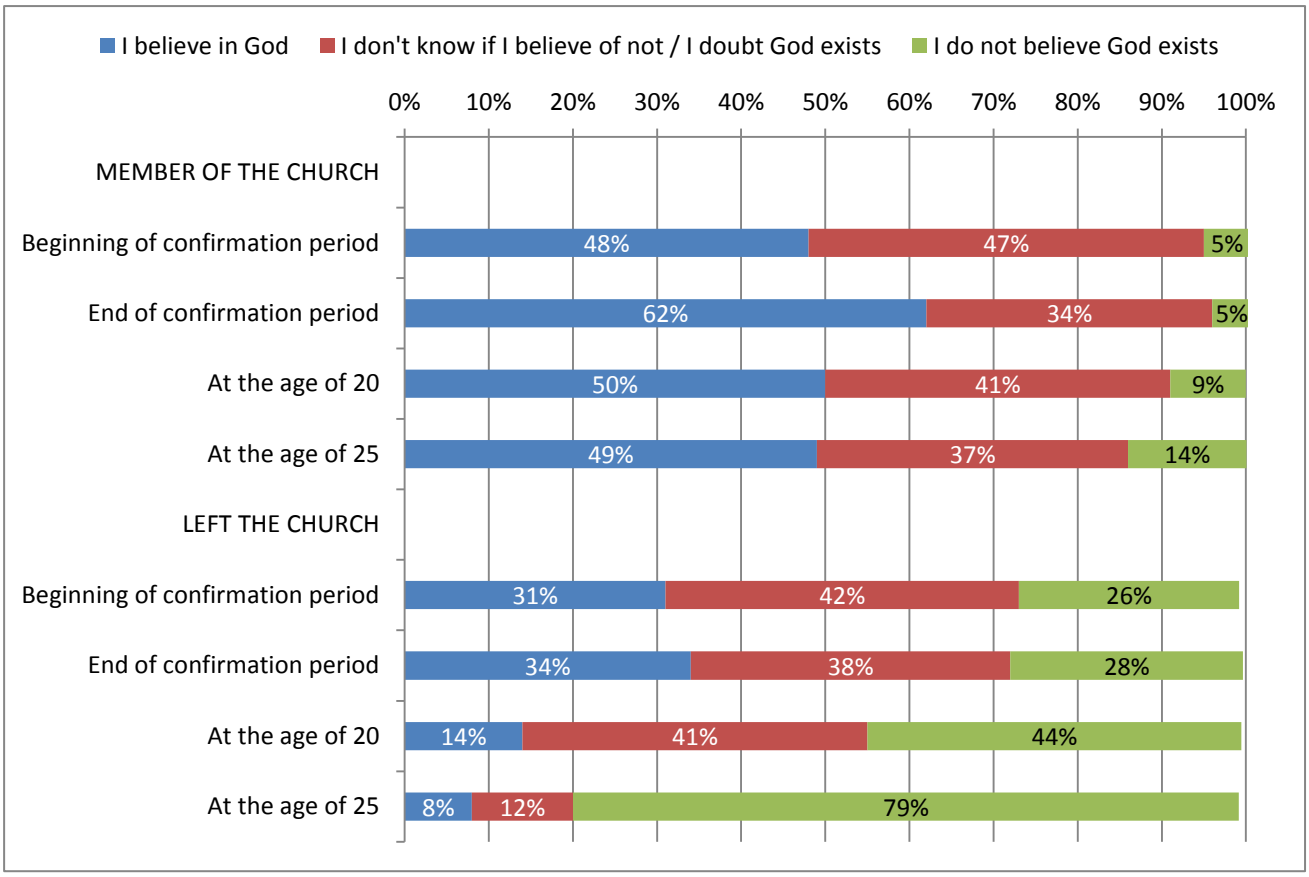
Table 5. General satisfaction ratings at the end of confirmation period among those who have remained members and those who have left the church. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2012. %

	Has remained a member (N=163)	Has left the church (N=42)	Total
Very satisfied (5)	30	10	25
Fairly satisfied (4)	50	68	54
In-between (3)	19	20	19
Fairly dissatisfied (2)	1	3	2
Very dissatisfied (1)	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100
X^2=6.75, p=.080			
Mean (t=1.79, p=.076)	4.08	3,85	

The comparison of answers to a question about belief in God before confirmation, after it and five and ten years later among those who have left the church and those who have remained as members supports the findings above. It supports the strong role of non-believing in the whole life-course of those young adults who end up leaving the church (see Figure 3). First, those who have left the church were more skeptical towards the existence of God already when they began confirmation preparation. Only one-third of them had believed in God at the beginning of confirmation, while half of those who still were members at the age of 25 did believe in God at the beginning of confirmation. Secondly, even though confirmation experience typically tends to change attitudes toward Christianity and belief in a positive direction, this does not seem to apply to those who later decide to leave the church. There is very little change in attitudes during confirmation period among them, while among those who were still members the share of those who believed increased clearly during confirmation period. This means that for those who had

ended up leaving the Church, confirmation experience did not appear to strengthen religious aspects of their life. Among those who end up leaving the church, non-believing has increased dramatically after confirmation, and the most dramatic changes in belief have taken place in early adulthood. Between the age of 20 and 25 the share of those who did not believe in God increased strongly (28% after confirmation time, 44% at the age of 20, and 79% at the age 25).

Figure 3. Change in belief in God among those who have remained members and those who have left the Church among those who were confirmed in Tampere in 2001. Data: Longitudinal data of confirmands 2001-2012. N=202.



5. Discussion

In this article, I have analyzed the changes in the relation to the church among the young generation from adolescence to early adulthood and tried to understand the reasons why a high number of young people leave the church soon after confirmation. The young people that I have been analyzing belong to a generation often referred as Generation Y. The results show that this generation has in many ways a different relation to church membership than older generations: they obviously do not want to belong to the church if they do not believe. This is contradictory to the former understanding of the role of the church membership in the Nordic countries. For the Nordic people belonging to national churches has been regarded as something special and their relationship to national

churches has often been described as “believing in belonging”. However, generation Y is actively challenging this notion.

The study shows that for Generation Y, the church-leaving process is highly linked to beliefs and values. They do not leave the church because they are disappointed with it, but because they do not find it to be in line with their own beliefs. The tradition and culture are not enough to keep them as members.

The study shows that leaving the Church is seldom a sudden decision, but deeply linked to an individual’s life-course. It is linked to childhood religious upbringing, which has often been absent and their basic attitude towards religion and attending confirmation. They were not so excited and not so very actively oriented. It is also linked to their confirmation experiences, which did not make much of difference. Those who end up leaving the church are not typically especially dissatisfied with their confirmation or the church in general, but confirmation experience just did not have any deeper meaning for them. They often did have fun at confirmation camp, but on a more personal level it did not give them that much. It did not typically strengthen their faith or make them feel more grown up.

It is clear that negative confirmation experiences also increase the likelihood of leaving the church. However, this is a limited view and can be partly misleading reasoning. Relationship to church membership and confirmation experiences are both linked to experiences before confirmation, home religious background, and expectations attached to confirmation attendance. Those with a weaker relationship to the church and its faith when beginning confirmation preparation tend to experience confirmation time more critically. Religious upbringing at home is one key factor that explains both how confirmation period is experienced as well as how young adults describe their relationship to the church (see Niemelä, 2008). Those with a religious upbringing tend to experience confirmation time more positively, regard it as spiritually more rewarding, see church membership in a more positive light, and are also more likely to remain church members.

This study supports the understanding that Generation Y is different from previous generations. For members of Generation Y, their relationship to religion and the church follows a different pattern than that of the older generations. They primarily make individual decisions based on their own beliefs and life-view and no longer belong to religious institutions because of tradition. The generation studied here is also called the “Generation Me” which highlights the self-centered focus that is typical of this generation. These young people want to be something special and something different. In their understanding, church membership does not seem to be something special, but something to be avoided if it does not fit into their values and wider understanding of life. With these attitudes, the young people are challenging to religious institutions. They search for deeper personal meaning and if they do not experience it, they are likely the leave the institutions even if they do not have anything specific against them. Contrary to the older generations, they do not need disappointment to leave the church; they often simply lack faith.

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