

Generations of Women in the Church

Cynthia A. Woolever

Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary

woolever@hartsem.edu

Abstract

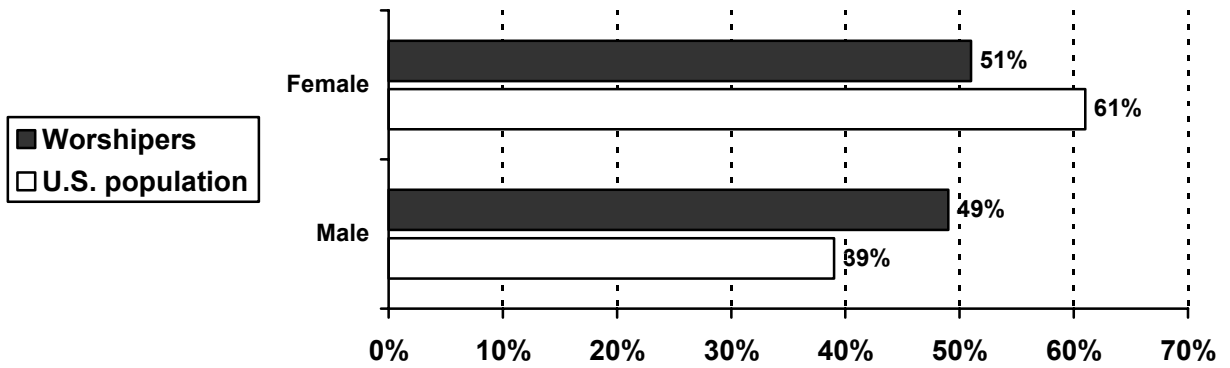
Female worshipers are described by their demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, marital status), participation patterns in congregational life, worship preferences and experiences, and most valued aspects of the congregation. The profile of women in congregations is presented in terms of congregational size and denomination or faith group. Finally, it is hypothesized that the gender ratio in congregations (i.e., percentage of female worshipers) is related to 10 indicators of congregational vitality and numerical growth. Women worshipers are demographically different from male worshipers. Women have higher levels of participation in congregational activities and tend to get more out of their worship experiences. However, men and women hold similar values about congregational life. Higher percentages of female worshipers in congregations are associated with lower levels of feelings of belonging, caring for young people, sharing faith, and welcoming new worshipers. While larger proportions of women worshipers are positively related to a greater focus on the local community, the gender ratio of congregational worshipers is unrelated to numerical growth.

These findings are based on 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations that participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a project conducted by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April 2001. Congregations were selected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to be representative of congregations of all denominations and faith groups across the country. All worshipers in each participating congregation completed a survey in worship, providing extensive data about individuals actively involved in religious life in America. Survey topics included worshipers' faith background and current membership, their participation in activities of the congregation, and their values regarding congregational life.

The Sample

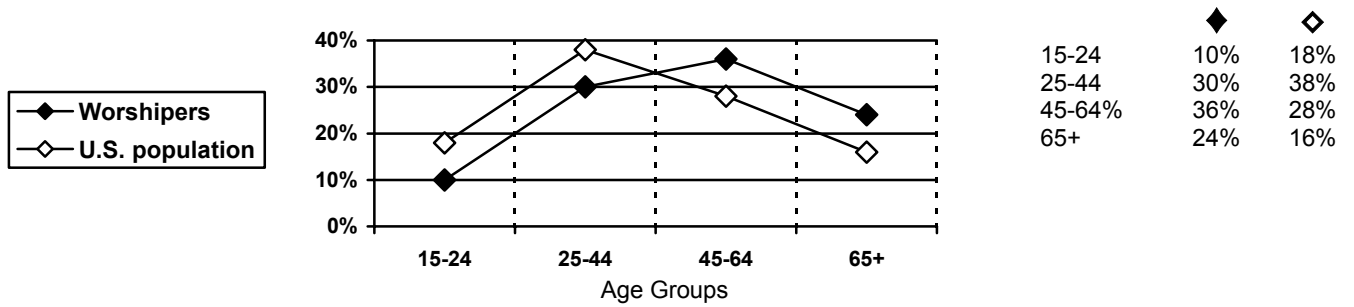
The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago identified a random sample of U.S. congregations attended by individuals who participated in the General Social Survey (GSS) in the year 2000. All GSS participants who reported that they attended worship at least once in the prior year were asked to name the place where they worshiped. Since the GSS involves a national random sample of individuals, congregations identified by GSS participants comprise a national random sample of congregations. NORC researchers verified that each nominated congregation was an actual congregation and then invited each congregation to participate in the project. Of 1,214 nominated and verified congregations, 807 agreed to participate (66%), and 434 returned completed surveys from their worshipers (36%). (A wide variety of reasons were given by congregations that chose not to participate.) Surveys were given in worship at the end of April 2001. Worshipers in these congregations, representing all 50 states, completed 122,287 attendee surveys which are the primary source of the findings reported here.

MEN OR WOMEN?



Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001
2000 U.S. Census

HOW OLD ARE THEY?



Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001
2000 U. S. Census

**Profile of Women Worshipers:
Fewer Gen Y; Less Education; More Likely to be Single**

	Total	Female	Male	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
Gender:							
Female		61%		58%	62%	61%	62%
Male			39%	42%	38%	39%	38%
Education:							
Not a college graduate	63%	65%	56%				
College graduate	23%	23%	26%				
Graduate degree	14%	12%	18%				
Marital Status:							
First marriage	55%	51%	60%				
Remarried	11%	10%	12%				
Separated/divorced	8%	10%	5%				
Widowed	8%	11%	3%				
Cohabitation	2%	2%	2%				
Never married	16%	11%	3%				

**Profile of Women Worshipers:
Higher Levels of Participation**

	Total	Female	Male
Time attending current congregation:			
Visiting	6%	6%	5%
5 years or less	34%	34%	36%
6-20 years	32%	32%	33%
More than 20 years	28%	29%	26%
Previous congregation (those attending 5 years or less):			
First-timer	7%	7%	8%
Returnee	18%	18%	18%
Switcher	17%	17%	17%
Transfer	58%	58%	58%
Worship attendance:			
Weekly	79%	80%	78%
One to three times a month	14%	14%	15%
Less often	7%	6%	7%
Participation in small groups:			
Sunday school, religious education	21%	23%	20%
Prayer groups, Bible study	18%	21%	16%
Social groups, fellowships	26%	28%	24%
Participation in outreach/service activities:			
Community service	18%	19%	17%
Evangelization	12%	13%	11%
Neither	70%	69%	76%

Profile of Women Worshipers: (Cont)

Leadership roles:	Total	Female	Male
Committee or task force	7%	7%	7%
Lead or assist in worship	12%	12%	13%
Choir member, leader, musician	7%	8%	6%
Any leadership role	38%	39%	37%
Giving to the congregation:			
5% or more	46%	48%	44%
Less than 5%	47%	46%	50%
Do not contribute	7%	7%	7%
Membership in congregation:			
Yes	77%	78%	71%
No, but in process of joining	3%	3%	3%
No, but regularly participate	11%	10%	11%
No	10%	9%	10%
Change in congregational participation:			
Participate more in last 2 years	27%	28%	27%
Participate the same	49%	47%	52%
Participate less in last 2 years	12%	13%	11%
Not applicable (coming less than 2 yrs.)	12%	12%	11%

**Profile of Women Worshipers:
Experience More During Worship**

During worship always or usually experience:	Total	Female	Male
God's presence	82%	84%	77%
Inspiration	75%	78%	70%
Joy	75%	78%	70%
Sense of fulfilling obligations	73%	74%	71%
Awe or mystery	29%	30%	26%
Spontaneity	28%	30%	25%
Frustration	5%	4%	5%
Boredom	6%	5%	7%
Music preferences (mark two):			
Traditional hymns	61%	61%	60%
Praise music or choruses	33%	34%	31%
Contemporary hymns	25%	27%	24%
Other contemporary music or songs (not hymns)	13%	14%	12%
Sung responsorial psalms	11%	11%	9%
Classical music or chorales	9%	9%	11%
Music from a variety of cultures	9%	10%	8%
African-American gospel music	5%	6%	5%

**Profile of Women Worshipers:
Similar Values**

	Total	Female	Male
Satisfaction with what is offered for children and youth:			
Satisfied or very satisfied	62%	61%	63%
Most valued aspects of the congregation (mark three):			
Holy Communion/Eucharist	49%	50%	47%
Sermons and preaching	40%	40%	41%
Traditional style of worship or music	32%	30%	34%
Contemporary style of worship or music	17%	17%	17%
Ministry for children	16%	17%	15%
Reaching the “unchurched”	16%	15%	16%
Wider community care; social justice emphasis	15%	15%	15%
Bible study, prayer groups, discussion groups	14%	15%	13%
Practical care for one another in times of need	13%	15%	11%
Social activities; meeting new people	13%	13%	13%
Openness to social diversity	10%	10%	11%
Prayer ministry for one another	9%	10%	8%
Congregation’s school or preschool	9%	8%	9%
Adult church school	6%	6%	7%
Good match between pastor/priest and congregation:			
Agree or strongly agree	84%	85%	84%

**Profile of Women in Congregations:
Percentage Unrelated to Size**

	< 100 in Worship	100-350 in Worship	More than 350 in Worship
Female	63%	63%	62%
Male	37%	37%	38%

**Profile of Women in Congregations:
Largest Percentage in Historically Black
Smallest Percentage in Conservative Protestant Churches**

	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Historically Black	Other
Female	65%	64%	61%	71%	65%
Male	35%	36%	39%	29%	35%

**Profile of Women in Congregations:
Gender Ratio and Congregational Vitality**

	Correlation	Significance
Congregational Strength Index:		
Growing Spiritually	-.07	n.s.
Meaningful Worship	-.04	n.s.
Participating in the Congregation	-.04	n.s.
Having a Sense of Belonging	-.15	**
Caring for Young People	-.10	*
Focusing on the Community	.11	*
Sharing Faith	-.11	*
Welcoming New Worshipers	-.37	***
Empowering Leadership	-.01	n.s.
Looking to the Future	-.06	n.s.
Numerical Growth	.01	n.s.