

An Analysis of the Church Attendance in the General Population

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Overview

Since the beginning of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Department for Research and Evaluation has conducted and participated with other investigators in trying to better understand congregations in the ELCA and, to a lesser extent, the members of congregations.¹ On occasion, questions have arisen about persons who are not members or who are infrequent church attenders. What are they like? Are they significantly different than frequent church attenders? Are they significantly different than members of Lutheran congregations?²

Because of costs, it is impossible for the Department for Research and Evaluation to conduct a survey of the general population, but survey data is available from the General Social Survey (GSS). “The GSS is an almost annual, ‘omnibus,’ personal interview survey of U.S. households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The first survey took place in 1972 and since then more than 35,000 respondents have answered over 2500 different questions. The GSS tries to follow the highest survey standards in design, sampling, interviewing, processing, and documentation. Items are designed by leading specialists in their field and then pretested, full-probability sampling is used, a high response rate is obtained, and many data quality checks from validation to verification are employed.”³

Data for the years 1986 to 1996 (the last year available) were downloaded from the GSS site at the University of California, Berkeley.⁴ Information was available about the frequency of church attendance from hardly ever (seldom or never), to a few times a year, to monthly (once or twice a month), to weekly (weekly or more). From the analysis of GSS data, a distinct picture of infrequent church attenders emerges.¹

- Persons who are younger, less educated, and more likely to be divorce or separated or to have never been married younger are more infrequent church attenders (hardly ever or a few times a year) than those who are older, have more education and married or widowed. Persons with no one in their household

¹ For information about specific studies, contact the Department for Research and Evaluation at 1/800 638-3522.

² Church attenders are not significantly different from one denomination to another at least with regard to the characteristics and issues examined here. As a result, I will not return to the question of how Lutherans are different, because the generally are not.

³ For more information on the General Social Survey, see <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS99/>

⁴ http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin/11/hsda?harc_sda.5+gss96

between the ages of six and 12 are less likely to attend church. Widowers are very frequent attenders and a majority of families with children between the ages of 6 and 12 attend church services frequently.

- Persons who tend to watch a lot of TV are infrequent attenders. Persons who tend to read a newspaper every day are more frequent attenders.
- Those person who attend an auto race or go camping are more likely infrequent church attenders, while those who attend a performance of opera or classical music are more likely frequent attenders. Those persons who are more likely to go hunting and fishing are infrequent attenders as opposed to those who play an instrument or go to a dance performance who tend to be frequent church attenders.

In general, less active persons (at least in the ways noted in this analysis) are more infrequent church attenders. A majority of those who attended a classical/opera performance, performed music, attended a dance performance, grew vegetables/ flowers, played a musical instrument, attended a sporting event, played sports, made a art/craft object and went to a movie were frequent church attenders. Infrequent church attenders are also more likely than frequent church attenders to say that life is dull.

- Those persons like new age music or heavy metal are more likely to be infrequent church service attenders. Those who prefer classical music or easy listening are more likely to be frequent attenders.
- Those who are politically liberal or to take more liberal views on issues like premarital sex are also much more likely to be infrequent church attenders
- Infrequent church attenders are not significantly more or less likely to say they were very successful in life than those who are frequent church attenders and the majority in all church attendance groups indicated that they were very happy or at least pretty happy.
- Infrequent church attenders are only slightly more likely to report feelings of loneliness than those who attend church frequently.
- Infrequent church attenders are less likely to say they feel close to God (though almost a quarter say they free extremely close to God) and they are much less likely to pray frequently.

More Detail

The Impact on Church Attendance

Age

Church attendance varies dramatically by age. Persons who are between the ages of 18 and 24 are much less likely to attend church services than are persons who are 65 or older and the frequency of attendance increases from age group to age group. The majority of people between the ages of 18 and 34 do not attend church services frequently.

Children

Having a household member under the age of six has little impact on the frequency of church attendance.

Having a household member between the ages of 6 and 12 does impact the frequency of attendance. A majority of households with members from 6 to 12 years old attend church services at least monthly.

Marital Status

Marital status has a very significant impact on church attendance. The majority of those persons who attend church services infrequently have never been married or they are divorced or separated. Widowed persons are very likely to attend church services frequently.

Education

Education is also related to church attendance but not as dramatically as age or marital status. Persons with college degrees are the most likely to attend church services frequently followed by those persons with some graduate school or graduate school degrees. A majority of persons who have not complete high school or who have graduated from high school but not attended college do attend church services only a few times a year.

Reading a Newspaper and Watching TV

A majority of the persons never read a newspaper are infrequent church attenders while a majority of those who read a paper every day are frequent attenders. Also, a majority of respondents who watch less than an hour of TV per day are frequent church attenders while those who tend to watch 5 or more hours of TV a day are infrequent church attenders.

Other Activities

The majority of the respondents who indicated that they had attended an auto race in the last year and a majority of those who went camping or hunting or fishing in the last year were infrequent church attenders. A majority also used a VCR.

In general, less active persons (at least in these ways) tend to be more infrequent church attenders. While a majority of those respondents who indicated that they attended an auto race or went camping or hunting or fishing in the last year were infrequent attenders, a majority of those who attended a classical/opera performance, performed music, attended a dance performance, grew vegetables/ flowers, played a musical instrument, attended a sporting event, played sports, made a art/craft object and went to a movie were frequent church attenders. The only activities that frequent attenders were less likely to do than those who were infrequent attenders were attending an auto race, going camping or hunting or fishing.

Musical Preferences

The vast majority of those respondents who indicated that they liked heavy metal rock music were infrequent church attenders. Also, the majority of those who said they liked new age, rock, oldies, and rhythm and blues were infrequent attenders. The only musical formats that a majority of frequent attenders said they liked were classical and easy listening—again, the two formats liked least by infrequent attenders.

Political Views

Political views, like age and marital status, separates frequent and infrequent church attenders. Those persons who consider themselves extremely liberal are infrequent attenders while those who consider themselves extremely conservative are frequent attenders. In general, church attendance is inversely correlated with a political view—as liberalness increases, church attendance decreases. There is, however, a core of extreme conservatives that do not attend church services regularly.

Sex Before Marriage

Given the relationship between age, marital status, and political views, it is not surprising that persons who believe that sex before marriage is only some times wrong or not wrong at all are infrequent church attenders. In fact, in terms of statistical predictive power, knowing a persons views of about sex before marriage enables one to predict church attendance most accurately.

The Impact of Church Attendance

The data presented in the following charts are organized differently than those presented above. In the following set of charts church attendance is NOT the as the variable that is being explained but we are assuming that church attendance is the variable that is explaining the views of successfulness in life, general happiness and so forth. This means that the percentages total 100 percent within the categories presented at the bottom (x-axis) of the chart. For example, in *Church Attendance by Successfulness in Life* the percent of those responding about how successful they were in life equals 100 percent within each category of church attendance. In the case of successfulness in life, 12 percent of those who hardly ever attend church services indicated they were not very successful, 45 percent indicated they were somewhat successful and 43 percent said they were very successful.

Successfulness in Life

Those persons who infrequently attend church services are slightly less likely to say they were very successful than those persons who attend frequently, but the differences are not significant.

General Happiness

Those persons who are infrequently church attenders are less likely to indicate they are very happy than those who are frequent church attenders, but again, the vast majority in all the attendance groups indicated that they are either very happy or pretty happy.

Excitement in Life

Those persons who infrequently attend church services are more likely than frequent church attenders to say that life is dull. This may be related to activities levels. As noted earlier, persons who are more active in general tend to be frequent church attenders.

Loneliness

A majority of all respondents reported that they did not experience feelings of loneliness on any day in the week prior to the GSS interview, but those persons who attend church services infrequently were slightly more likely to report feeling lonely on each day of the week before the interview than were those who attend church services frequently.

Feeling Close to God

Attending church services has a major impact of how close a person feels to God, but again, a majority of infrequent church attenders said they felt at least somewhat close to God and 22 percent of those who said they hardly ever attended church services said they felt extremely close to God.

Frequency of Prayer

Those persons who are infrequent church attenders are also infrequent prayers though 11 percent of persons who hardly every attend church said they prayed several times a day.