

Part Three

INDIVIDUALS AND THE CHURCH CHOICE

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Denominations grow as individuals join local congregations. All three levels of initiative and response are linked in the overall growth equation, such that a change in any one has implications for the other two. The previous sections of the book approached the growth equation from the perspective of the denomination and the congregation. In the current section we look at the meaning and motivations of individual church involvement. For readers whose everyday interests in the dynamics of growth direct their primary attention to denominations or congregations, let two reminders suffice to suggest the peril of ignoring the individual. First, it was social and value changes in individuals that drove the church declines of the 1960s—declines that previous chapters have shown affected all streams of American denominationalism. Second, there is a consensus in the practical literature on church growth that different kinds of individuals approach the church differently, and that effective growth strategies must be sensitive to these differences.

Social research is often frustrating for practitioners. In part, this is because scholars seldom reach a common conclusion. However, such was not the case in regard to the causes of the church membership and participation declines of the 1960s. With a rare degree of unanimity, the research of the late 1970s pointed directly to the then young adult baby boom generation as the major source of the downturn. Wuthnow's (1978:143) conclusion is typical:

[The] losses can be explained to a significant degree as the result of young people being thrust together by a variety of historical events into a countercultural generation unit whose values and lifestyles did not include, and were often in active opposition to, participation in organized religion.

As Hoge and Roozen (1979:328) put it in slightly broader perspective:

A broad cultural shift has occurred that has hit the churches from the outside, and it has hit the affluent, educated, individualistic, culture-affirming denominations hardest. The shift occurred much more among the youth than the older adults. It was most visible among the affluent young people, especially those on college campuses. It began in the early 1960s and achieved momentum during the middle and late 1960s.

That the changes "hit the churches from the outside" should not be read to imply that the churches were powerless to respond. Rather, it should be read in the context of Inskeep's prior chapter in this book: that during the 1960s the "outside" changed, and churches did not respond to this change in ways conducive to membership growth.

The "new" values emerging with the baby boom generation included three interrelated dimensions according to Yankelovich's (1974) *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70's*. The first was a set of "new moral norms" including changes in sexual morality in a liberal direction and a lessening of automatic respect for and obedience to established institutional authority. The second dimension relates to social values, including a decreasing affirmation of the work ethic, marriage and family, and the importance of money in defining success. The third dimension concerns a change in the meaning of "freedom." Once tied primarily to more utilitarian concerns of economic security and upward mobility, the baby boom generation gave it an expressive twist, redefining freedom as choice and self-fulfillment.

In summary, the value changes of the 1960s were in the direction of individualism, personal freedom as self-fulfillment, and tolerance of diversity. And the effect of the changes on church participation was highly predictable, at least for those with a historical sensitivity. Since at least the turn of the century the ascendance of traditional sexual and family values and traditional free-enterprise values have been associated with high church participation, and the ascendance of "new morality" and civil libertarian values associated with marginal participation (Hoge, 1974).

The research of the 1970s also indicated that the depressing effect of value changes on the church participation of the baby boomers was strengthened by at least two other characteristics of this generation. First, their "postponement" of marriage and family formation, and relatedly low birthrates cut deeply into the historically strong connection between church and family. Second, their high geographic mobility severed connections to the local church in which they were raised (over 90% of boomers were raised with some connection to the church).

With the baby boom generation clearly established as the major source of the church declines of the 1960s and early 1970s, recent research on trends in individual church participation has focused on a new set of questions, including:

1. Whether the boomer's young adult marginality from organized religion would continue as the generation continued through the life cycle, or whether it was "typical" young adult rebellion to be followed by a return to the church as the generation matured; and
2. Whether the value changes so prominent among the boomers were unique to that generation, or whether the value changes were reflective of pervasive cultural changes that would be passed on to future generations.

Unlike the scholarly consensus about boomers' role in the declines of the 1960s and early 1970s, this new set of questions has generated considerable, and at times heated, disagreement (e.g., Hout and Greeley, 1990; Chaves, 1990). Given the centrality of the questions for an understanding of current trends in church participation, they are addressed to varying degrees in each of the five chapters in this section. Indeed, the research reported here suggests that all of the conflicting viewpoints contain a kernel of truth. The "big chill" generation did warm to worship as it moved into mid-life. Nevertheless, the generation's young adult drop-off was more severe than previous generations, and its mid-life return less pronounced. Not only has its mid-life return been less pronounced, but also it has been on different terms. All of the evidence suggests that the boomers' relationship to the church is fundamentally different from that of previous generations of Americans—that it is, to use the varied terminology of recent scholarly discussion, more "voluntaristic," consumer-oriented, and captive to the subjective, expressive dimensions of cultural individualism.

Finally, while the value orientation of the post-boomer generation now in their twenties appears to be somewhat different from that of the boomers (the post-boomers being a bit less anti-institutional; a bit more economically conservative, but equally liberal socially); their church participation patterns are identical to those of the boomers when they were in their twenties. Implication: the boomer legacy of church voluntarism has been passed down to the next generation.

While investing a great deal of energy in the relationship between sociocultural change and religious change, the 1970s' research on religious participation paid scant attention to the relationship between church involvement and religious belief. It assumed that the two were too

strongly related and mutually reinforcing to change independently. For a variety of reasons, not the least of them being an increasing diversity in belief and an increasing concern over the potential anti-institutional effects of cultural individualism, research in the 1980s began including personal religiosity in its causal models of church participation (e.g., Hoge and Polk, 1980; Cornwall, 1989; Willits and Crider, 1989; Lee, 1992). Several of the following chapters continue this emerging practice. They show that the relationship is not as strong as traditionally assumed, and that the relationship differs over time and by denominational family. Similar findings are reported for the relationship between one's religious upbringing and one's adult church involvement.

The vast majority of empirical research on religious participation, including most of that reported in the following chapters, uses national survey data and the interpretive techniques of multivariate, statistical inference. It is a powerful combination for examining the relative and changing influence of the diverse motivations and forces that lead different kinds of people into or away from the church. The strengths of such research include: its reliable gauge of the national situation; its ability to identify influences that, if asked about directly, an individual may not be able to articulate; and, particularly for trend studies, its ability to tap into an increasing archive of national surveys. However, because of its broad scope and the quantifiable format of questions used in most large-scale surveys, it misses some of the nuances of particular individual biography. Fortunately, concern about membership declines during the 1970s produced a flurry of more qualitative studies specifically directed at why church dropouts felt they had dropped out, and why recent returnees felt they had returned. Such studies provide rich, narrative detail.

In Hale's pioneering *Who Are the Unchurched?* (1977), for example, we hear over 160 persons living in six diverse counties in the United States talk about why they are unchurched. Hale artfully winds his anecdotal material around a framework of over twenty reasons given by his interviewees for their current location outside the church. Hale's unchurched range all the way from the "burned-out" to the "cop-outs"; and from the "pilgrims" to the "publicans." Hale says he met few "true unbelievers." In Rauff's *Why People Join the Church* (1979) we hear the voices of 180 men and women recall their journeys from outside to inside the doors of the church. Rauff blends the diverse voices around a framework of twelve major themes—ranging from a vague feeling of emptiness to a specific invitation from a relative or church evangelism program. And in Hoge's *Converts Dropouts Returnees* (1981) we are presented with an in-depth examination of religious mobility among Roman Catholics.

Each of these works is a rich complement to the broad sweep of inferential, national survey research. However, one limitation readily acknowledged by the

authors of the narrative studies is that such studies do not provide a reliable portrait of the prevalence of the reasons given for or against church involvement. *The Unchurched American* (Princeton Religion Research Center, 1988) fills this void, to some extent, with its blending of national survey scope and qualitative probing. It provided a national sample of 1,027 persons who had stopped attending church or synagogue for two years with a detailed list of possible reasons why, and asked them to note all that applied to them. The list of reasons and distribution of responses is contained in the right column of Table P3.1. It is interesting to note that three of the four most frequently given answers are more indicative of indifference toward the church than of direct confrontation with it. It appears that for the most part, people don't go away angry; rather, they drift away as other things become more important, and/or as one moves through a natural life transition that breaks one's previous connection to a particular local church. If anything, such drift causes one to wonder more about why they attended than to wonder about why they left.

Its name notwithstanding, the "Unchurched American" study surveyed both active and inactive church people, including 1,512 persons who at some time during their life had been unchurched, but were now regular attenders. It asked this large national sample of "returnees" why they decided to attend again. The list of reasons provided and the distribution of responses is presented in the left column of Table P3.1. It is interesting to note that none of the six most frequently cited reasons involve the proactive outreach of the church. Rather, at least as articulated by the returnees, they involve changes in one's "inner" feelings, and/or changes in one's family situation. The church may have been critical for planting the seeds of "inner needs" some time in these returnees' past; and certainly the church was receptive to those returnees who sought it out and continue their involvement. But in terms of both reasons given for involvement and reasons given for noninvolvement, Americans are more likely to locate the initiative for their church involvement (or lack thereof) in self and family than they are to locate it with the church.

Against this backdrop, the following five chapters all deal to varying degrees with the implications for the church of North America's "new" religious voluntarism.

Cautious Optimism

The first chapter in this section, by Marler and Roozen, begins with a tempting invitation to probe what on the surface looks like a very uninteresting ten-year trend in religious participation within the United States. From 1978 to 1988 there was no significant change in overall levels of

either church membership or worship attendance for the population as a whole. But prompted by the host of optimistic voices found in all United States denominations, Marler and Roozen proceed to ask whether the surface stability means that nothing has changed, or whether it hides subterranean churnings. They find that the latter is the case, and that "the increasing dominance of religious consumerism, as a form of cultural individualism, is the most important change in the religious marketplace of the late 1980s." But this only raises a further question: given the popular perception that creeping individualism is corrosive of institutional commitment, why haven't church membership and worship attendance declined accordingly?

TABLE P3.1
Reasons for Decreasing and Increasing Church Involvement

For Decreasing		For Increasing	
Found other activities	26%	I felt an inner need to go back to church	40%
Started making my own decisions	25	I felt an inner need to rediscover my religious faith	27
Moved to new community	22	I wanted a child of mine to receive religious training	23
Specific problems with church	20	I felt guilty about not going to church	19
Church no longer a help in finding meaning of life	13	I got older and thought more about eternal life	17
Felt out of place because other members were more affluent and better educated	3	I went with my spouse or relative	17
Life-style no longer compatible with church membership	13	I was invited to church at an important time	14
Poor health	4	I was married	12
Work schedule	12	Another reason	9
Divorced or separated	6	I had an important religious experience	8
Other reasons	18	I moved back home	5
No opinion	5	I was divorced or separated	3
		No opinion	3
		I couldn't go due to illness but I got better	2

Source: Princeton Religion Research Center (1988)

Marler and Roozen's answer comes in two parts. First, that the critical dynamic in individualism is "choice," not anti-institutionalism. "Choice" implies a heightened sense of why one chooses his or her institutional commitments. "Choice" also implies a change in the reasons one uses for "making" the choice—individual priorities take precedence over institutional loyalty. But "choice" in and of itself does not predispose the outcome of the choice. Second, within this context of increasing church consumerism, the empirical data show that traditional institutional loyalties and beliefs have decreased as reasons for making the church choice. But the data also show that in the United States, persons are finding church involvement more responsive to their personal tastes. The number of people making the church choice did not change during the 1980s, but the reasons for making the choice did change.

Marler and Roozen also explore how the negotiation of the church choice is different within different denominational families. Their summary conclusion: "Conservative Protestants are increasingly committed to 'my church'; liberal Protestants are increasingly committed to 'what church?'; and Roman Catholics continue to choose 'The Church.'" In each family, however, church consumerism is an increasingly important element. This is especially true for liberal Protestantism, because unlike conservative Protestantism or Roman Catholicism, there is no single coherent liberal Protestant subculture to constrain individual preferences.

The Paradox of Poverty and Potential

The second chapter in the section provides another overview of changing national trends in religious participation, but this time of Canada rather than the United States. Bibby presents a provocatively instructive analysis of the Canadian situation in its own right. But when read together with Marler and Roozen's chapter on the United States one gains the added illumination of comparative perspectives. The "voluntary" nature of religious participation in the North American setting is a dominant theme in both chapters. Marler and Roozen's chapter on the United States analyzes the dynamics of religious voluntarism within a national context of relatively strong religious institutions. In stark contrast Bibby's chapter on Canada analyzes the situation in what he characterizes as a context of "dire institutional crisis." Bibby describes the puzzling relationship between stagnant religious institutions on the one hand, and many signs of individual religious vitality and inquisitiveness. The paradox of religion in Canada is that precisely at a time when organized religion is facing significant problems, the desire for some kind of spirituality is pervasive. From the perspective of religious institutions the chapter

explores two alternatives for resolving the paradox: better distribution of the church's current "product," and changing the church's product.

Seventy-five Million Strong

The remaining three chapters in the section return to the situation in the United States, each focusing on a different subgroup of the population. They start with the 75 million Americans who constitute the baby boom generation, then turn to the religious participation of black Americans, and conclude with the most detailed study of Roman Catholic parish involvement yet to appear.

The baby boom generation represents the largest twenty-year birth cohort in the history of the United States; it currently constitutes one-third of the population; and demographers estimate that boomers will continue to dominate consumer markets for another fifty years—until the youngest boomers turn seventy-five in the year 2039. That the baby boom generation was the major source of the declines in religious participation of the 1960s is a matter of virtual consensus among researchers, as already noted. Recent attention to a rekindled interest in the church among some of the boomer dropouts has softened judgments about the enduring effect of this generation's movement into young adulthood and out of the church. Nevertheless, Figure P3.1 should serve as a reminder of how dramatic and persistent the jolt of the sixties was and is. The figure shows not only the depth of the declines, but also: (1) that any mid-life church bounce for the boomers is, at least up to the present, a relatively minor blip among the trend lines; and (2) that the post-boomer generation appears to have inherited the boomers' predisposition toward low rates of church involvement. On the positive side, the post-boomers' relationship to the church is no worse than that of the boomers; and the boomer mid-life bounce, although small, is real.

An in-depth look at the baby boomers, therefore, presents both a look into the future and an interesting picture of the conflicting positive and negative religious impulses currently at play in American religion. Roof and Johnson's chapter on "Baby Boomers and the Return to the Churches" addresses four major questions: (1) Is there a return? (2) Who are the returnees? (3) What kind of a return is it? and (4) Will the return make any difference for patterns of church growth and decline in the decade ahead?

Roof and Johnson's answers? Yes, there has been some return. But there are more dropouts who remain outside the church than there are returnees. Return rates are highest for conservative Protestants, lowest for liberal Protestants, and just slightly better for Roman Catholics than for liberal Protestants. Who are the returnees? They disproportionately consist of parents; of persons who had relatively strong connections to the church prior to

dropping out; of persons who are relatively conservative in life-style, moral values, and political attitudes; and of persons who had relatively little direct, personal involvement in the counter-cultural activities of the 1960s.

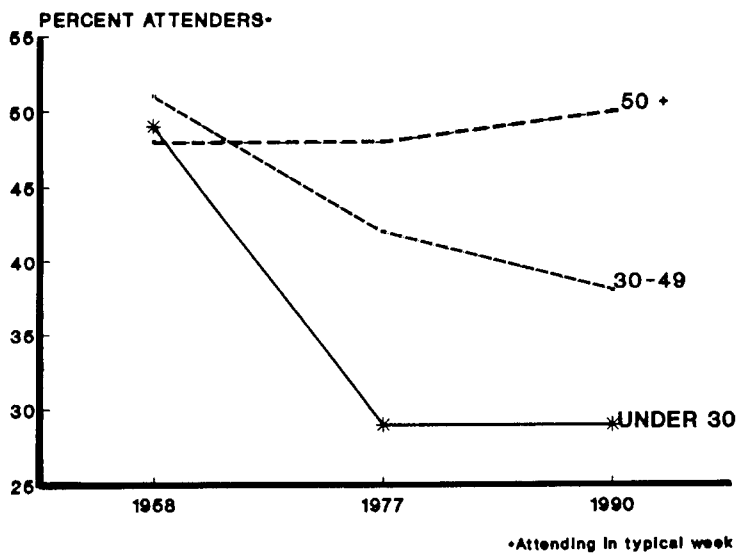
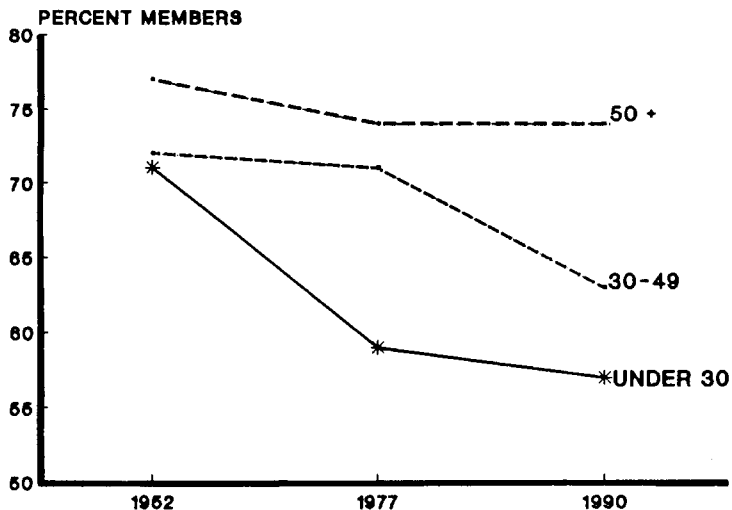
What kind of return is it? Roof and Johnson conclude that it is a return characterized by a fluid consumer mentality, personal concerns, and spiritual quests. What about the future? Younger boomer dropouts appear more predisposed to return than were older boomers, which might "portent an even greater return to organized religion in the 1990s than in the 1980s." But this return would be only to congregations that have adapted or can adapt to the highly voluntaristic norms of belonging characteristic of both younger and older boomers. The key to such adaptation, Roof and Johnson suggest, is a congregation's ability to create religious narratives that encompass one or another segment of the boomer generation's diverse subcultural groupings.

Churched and Unchurched Black Americans

A leading demographic periodical introduces a feature story this way: "you'll know it's the 21st Century when everyone belongs to a minority group" (Waldrop, 1990). Estimates are that by the year 2010 Asians will outnumber Jews in the United States by a margin of two to one, and Hispanics will inch ahead of blacks to become the country's largest racial/ethnic minority group. The significance of the latter comes into more stark relief when it is further noted that the growth rate of the black population will be nearly double that of the white population. Next to the continuing movement of the baby boom generation through the life cycle, the increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the United States will be the major demographic trend through at least the first quarter of the new century.

Unfortunately, research on the religious participation of American racial/ethnic groups pales in comparison to their demographic significance. Religious data on Hispanic and Asian Americans are almost nonexistent, and regrettably no major study has yet to appear from which a contribution to this volume could be culled. The situation is not all that much better for black Americans. But the past decade has seen the publication of *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990)—the first major empirical study of the black church in thirty years. It has also seen the appearance of several national surveys of religion that include significant subsamples of black Americans. Nelsen and Kanagy's chapter on churched and unchurched black Americans contained in this section takes advantage of the latter to provide an extensive analysis of the situation in the late 1980s, and to draw comparisons with the more limited national survey available from the late 1970s.

FIGURE P3.1
Membership and Attendance Trends by Age



Sources: Marty, Rosenberg and Greeley (1968)
 Princeton Religion Research Center (1981, 1991)

Nelsen and Kanagy's point of departure is E. Franklin Frazier's 1963 prediction that domination of the black church in the black community would decrease as blacks became "integrated into the institutions of the American community." The good news of the study is that blacks have realized some upward mobility over the last thirty years, but Frazier's prediction has yet to materialize. In fact, the proportion of churched black Americans increased slightly from 1978 to 1988. Nelsen and Kanagy demonstrate that the slow and sometimes halting movement of blacks out of the rural South, through the major cities of the North and South, and into middle-class suburbs has added new layers of complexity to our understanding of how blacks relate to the church. Specifically, they show a progressive movement from communal to voluntaristic motivations for church participation as one moves from rural to city to suburban locations. Nelsen and Kanagy also document a radical polarization in church membership by age in the major industrial cities of the North. In fact, within an otherwise optimistic assessment of the emerging future of the black church, Nelsen and Kanagy point to the black church's increasing disconnection with urban young adults as its greatest and least understood challenge.

Religious Participation Among Roman Catholic Parishioners

The scholarly community has directed a great deal of attention in the last decade to the eclipse of old-line Protestantism, the public revitalization of conservative Protestantism, the spreading dominance of Mormonism throughout the mountain states of the West, the rise and fall of the "new religious movements," and the amorphous ascent of the equally amorphous "New Age." However, the public consciousness appears to be ambivalently silent about how Roman Catholicism fits into the changing mosaic of religion in the United States. In reading Harold Bloom's best-selling, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (1992), for example, one would never realize that Roman Catholicism is the largest denomination in the United States—three times larger than the Southern Baptists, its nearest competitor; and over twenty times larger than such old-line Protestant anchors as the Episcopalians or such Pentecostal rising stars as the Assemblies of God. Nearly three of every ten adults in the United States currently identify themselves as Roman Catholic, up from 20% in the late 1940s. And there are two strong indications that the Roman Catholic share of the American religious marketplace will continue to inch up in the foreseeable future. First, the Roman Catholic plurality is greater among young adults than older adults. Second, upwards to 90% of Hispanics in the United States are Roman Catholic. Combining these two demographic drivers with the strong upward

social mobility of Roman Catholics since mid-century leads us to concur with Roof and McKinney's (1987) contention that Roman Catholicism is the very center of the newly emerging mainstream of American religion.

Welch's chapter in this section on the religious participation of Catholic parishioners is, therefore, absolutely essential for a comprehensive understanding of church growth and decline in the United States. In addition, Welch introduces several new conceptual considerations to the study of individual religious participation, as well as underscoring the centrality of several others. It is one of very few studies that examines how the characteristics of a local church influences the participation of its members. Welch looks at four types of church involvement and finds that each is responsive to different factors. He reminds us that many, but not all, of the strongest influences on involvement are beyond the control of church leaders. Among those influences over which church leaders have some control, Welch makes a strong case for the importance of specialized ministries, genuine social integration, and the level of faith-sharing within the fellowship.

Welch's chapter will be of natural interest to Roman Catholics. But its lessons have a broader urgency. One of the ironies of the Roman Catholic movement from sideline to mainline is that the church participation of Roman Catholics, once the envy of Protestant denominations, has dropped over the last thirty years to near parity with that of the latter.