



# Work, Family, and the Churches: Where Are We and Where Can We Go?

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THERE IS A TREMENDOUS NOSTALGIA ABOUT FAMILY AND CHURCH LIFE OUT THERE. In many churches, the mere mention of youth ministry or women's groups or building maintenance brings with it a wistful sigh and a comment about the "old days" when youth groups were bulging at the seams, women's groups were active in support of the church, and new buildings were being built, rather than old roofs being patched. In this litany there is usually a vague recognition that all these changes are somehow linked to changes in people's work and family lives. We know that members are too busy to come to church three nights a week; women are not available during the day; and on the list goes. Perhaps, if there is an optimist nearby, the wistful nostalgia will be matched by arguments about the important investments people are making with their time outside of church and the advantages of having women as chairs for the building committee rather than just washing the dishes.

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*Families with school-aged children are still the most likely group to participate in church life, but the proportion of such families is dropping dramatically. The church can no longer depend on "traditional" families to join its ranks and support its work.*

But the conversation cannot avoid the fact that the world of work and family is not what it used to be—and that has had dramatic effects on our religious lives, as well.

While nostalgia may be unavoidable, I want to argue that such backward gazing has not helped churches meet the challenges they face. While many churches are still shaped by traditional expectations about the families they serve, the work and family landscape has been altered in ways that make nostalgia dysfunctional.<sup>1</sup>

Let's start with the numbers. Already by the mid-1970s, well over half of women under 55 were in the paid labor force.<sup>2</sup> In the next decade and a half, employment rates rose dramatically. By 1990, among white women, 70% were employed, and over 40% of all mothers with children at home were employed full-time.<sup>3</sup> While this entry into the labor force was relatively new for white women, African American women had long known the necessity of work outside the home. Patterns of employment have changed for black women (with more in clerical and professional jobs and fewer in service and domestic jobs), but the fact of paid employment is not new.

A labor market with increasing numbers of service, clerical, and professional jobs, along with mandates for "equal employment opportunity," have changed women's opportunities for paid employment over the last generation. Rising educational levels have also changed women's expectations. The idea of a "career woman" is simply no longer an anomaly—quite the opposite. Still, it is also important to recognize that most of the women who are in the paid labor force—black and white—are in monotonous, low-wage, sometimes hazardous jobs. Many are heads of households, not earning second paychecks. And where they are second wage-earners, their paycheck goes to cover the mortgage, not to finance luxury vacations. While increasing numbers of women may be working either for fun or to pursue a career, that is clearly not the norm. Employment uncertainties mean that both men and women are working hard to maintain the well-being of their households.

Maintaining the well-being of the household means, of course, more than what is done in the paid labor force. It also includes what women and men do to care for each other, their children, and the place where they live. While patterns of labor in the household have indeed shifted over this generation, women still tend to work a "second shift" when they get home. Even when women work full-time, most still define wife and mother as their primary roles. And their husbands usually agree. Men still see home as the place where they get supported and nurtured. While they are at work, they think about family less than do women.

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion of nostalgia in this regard, see Penny Long Marler, "Lost in the Fifties," in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof (New York: Routledge, 1995) 23-60.

<sup>2</sup>R. E. Smith, "The Movement of Women into the Labor Force," in *The Subtle Revolution: Women at Work*, ed. R. E. Smith (Washington: Urban Institute, 1979) 1-20.

<sup>3</sup>Bradley Hertel, "Gender, Religious Identity, and Work Force Participation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27/4 (1988) 574-592.

And when they are at home, they do much less of the housework and childcare than do women.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps not surprising then that working men are more satisfied with their marriage and family life than are working women.

More than any single pattern or norm, what we are all experiencing in work and family life is instability and experimentation. The last generation has seen the balance between work and family life dramatically shifting. People have different sets of involvements, different schedules, different relationships, different resources. That shifting and complex network of activity and resources is spilling over into every other area of people's lives, including their church lives.

Are the changes, then, primarily a matter of time? Are the demands of work and household simply too much to allow for church participation, as well? While we all know that the pressures of time often limit what church families are willing and able to do, we also know that there are too many busy families in our pews for that to be the only factor shaping people's church participation.

In fact, when we look at national survey data, we discover a curious fact: married people are more likely to be religiously active than single people. And married people with children are more likely to be active than married people without children. These findings certainly do not support the notion that it is time constraints that keep people from coming to church!

But surely neither of these findings will come as a surprise. They reflect the high value our culture places on "taking the children to church." We tolerate the lax participation of single young adults, chalking it up to "sowing wild oats" or not yet having "settled down." Two people who have married, but not yet had children, usually fall under the same umbrella of excuses. But the parent who fails to provide for the religious education of offspring has some explaining to do. To that degree, traditional ideas about family and church are still very much in place.

But is this affected by labor force participation? Here the answers get complicated.<sup>5</sup> Single women and married men are *more* likely to be religiously involved when they are securely and actively employed in the labor force than when they are not. For these two groups, full-time employment seems to reflect their sense of status in the community, and it spills over into participation in both religious and secular community organizations. They seem to see themselves as able (and expected) to invest themselves in a variety of ways for the good of their communities.

In households with a full-time employed married woman, however, both wife and husband are somewhat less religiously active, on average, than if the wife is employed part-time or not at all. This suggests that there is some truth to the hypothesis that the strains of two-job households may be taking a toll on church participation. Still, even when employed full-time, married women are more involved than any other group, especially when they have school-aged children. The

<sup>4</sup>Joseph H. Pleck, *Working Wives/Working Husbands* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985). See also Uma Sekaran, *Dual-Career Families* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986); and Arlie Hochschild (with Anne Machung), *Second Shift* (New York: Viking, 1989).

<sup>5</sup>The details of these relationships are found in Bradley Hertel, "Work, Family, and Faith: Recent Trends," in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, 81-122.

pattern over time is interesting, in fact. Married women seem to join when their children are born, to go irregularly while children are in their pre-school years, and pick up active participation when the children reach age six or so.

This pattern appears to have been in place in American culture for a very long time, in fact. Anne Brown and David Hall have examined the membership and baptismal records of seventeenth-century New England churches and found a very similar pattern.<sup>6</sup> Parents are very likely to join a church in close proximity to the time when a child is baptized. Similarly, Mary Ryan examined records from churches in areas affected by the revivals of the second great awakening. She found that one third of all converts who joined the First Presbyterian Church of Utica, New York, got married within a year of joining, and 23 percent of them baptized an infant within that year.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there was an echo effect of the revivals. After subsequent revivals in the years ahead, many of these children (and recalcitrant husbands) followed the mothers into full church membership.

The notion that family formation and church membership go together, then, has been a staple of American culture for a very long time. And survey data seem to indicate that it is still in place—somewhat attenuated by increasing female labor force participation, but not eclipsed. So what has changed? If women and men are bringing their children to church in spite of the strains of two-job households, why do we feel as if the relationship between church and family is so different?

Other factors—both demographic and cultural—account for our perception that things have changed. While married couples with children continue to make their way to church in greater numbers than do other population groups, the demographic fact is that the proportion of all households that fit the “bring the kids to church” category is today dramatically lower than it was a generation ago. Using a national survey of 72 protestant congregations, and national survey data from Gallup and others, Penny Marler documents that churches are getting their “market share” of traditional families and older singles but are losing younger singles and other non-traditional households. Meanwhile, it is precisely those “other family” and “non-family” household types that are growing fastest in the U.S. population, household types that are ill-represented in church memberships. Those who are in church are older, empty-nest couples and widow(er)s, along with families that look like the “parents with kids” of yore. Marler shows, in fact, that protestant church membership has varied with the proportion of such “traditional” families in the U.S. population. “From the fifties peak, the proportion of married persons with children in the U.S. population began to decline. This group was 40% of American households in 1970, 31% in 1980, and 26% in 1990.”<sup>8</sup> Protestant church membership has declined in parallel fashion.

<sup>6</sup>Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practices in Early New England: An Essay in the History of Lived Religion,” in *Practicing the Religious: Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup>Mary Ryan, “The Power of Women’s Networks: A Case Study of Female Moral Reform in Antebellum America,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979) 66-86.

<sup>8</sup>Marler, “Lost in the Fifties,” 33.

Our sense that family participation has changed also comes from changes in the culture. These include both our expectations about the roles of women and a growing culture of choice that is even affecting how families approach the task of seeking religious instruction for their children.

Women simply expect different things today than they did in earlier generations, and those expectations have an impact on work, on families, and on religion. Women who are strongly committed to egalitarian ideals are much less conventionally religious than are women who hold more traditionalist ideals. They also have less conventional families. Women with traditionalist ideals, on the other hand, are less likely to be in the labor force, more likely to have traditional households, and more likely to be in conservative congregations. But those traditionalists come disproportionately from an older, less educated cohort that is diminishing in comparison to growing numbers of younger, well-educated women with egalitarian ideals. And it is these attitudes, more than actual work force participation, that affect religious participation.<sup>9</sup>

Even among conservative women, religious ideas about women's roles are not sufficient to keep them out of the labor force. While religious beliefs do influence what they think women ought to be doing, and that, in turn, affects their labor force participation, other factors intervene, as well. Having preschool children and a husband with more income makes working outside the home less likely for these conservative women. When children are not young (or not present) and husbands are not so well off, even conservative women are likely to be in the labor force and affected by their experiences there.<sup>10</sup>

Among non-conservative women with feminist ideals, the norm is not so much a lack of religious participation as it is a different, distanced, and non-conventionally-religious involvement. Where women are associated with liberal religious traditions that affirm their ideas about women's participation, they are no less involved than non-feminist women. However, they also seem increasingly likely to find their own means of spiritual support. M. T. Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes documented literally hundreds of women's spiritual support groups, many of them filled with women who were also, at least marginally, involved in conventional religious institutions. They were, in the words of their book's title, "Defecting in Place" and taking responsibility for their own spiritual nurture and growth, sometimes in quite innovative ways.<sup>11</sup>

Even within congregations, there are also likely to be differences between older and younger cohorts of women. Older women, Joanna Gillespie found in her interviews in Episcopal parishes, see their work in the church as a matter of

<sup>9</sup>Lyn Gesch, "Responses to Changing Lifestyles: 'Feminists' and 'Traditionalists' in Mainstream Religion," in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, 123-36.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Hall, "Entering the Labor Force: Ideals and Realities Among Evangelical Women," in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, 137-56.

<sup>11</sup>Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

service, duty, and obligation.<sup>12</sup> They do things because they need to be done and often find great fulfillment in the connection that gives them to the holy work of the church. Younger women also want to be of service, but they are more likely to ask what work uniquely fits their own gifts. They are less interested in doing something just because it seems to need doing. Their sense of fulfillment comes from contributing their skills.

This emphasis on individual choice and individual fulfillment is reflected in other ways. Indeed the “culture of choice” is the other major cultural trend that makes the relationship between church and family seem different today. The principle of individual choice is now prevalent even inside the family, with nearly half of baby boomers saying family members should choose for themselves about religious matters rather than necessarily attending together as a family.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, such emphasis on individual choice is more prevalent in divorced and blended families, but it is also affected by labor force participation. Women who work full-time are more likely to be individualists than women who don’t, and people without children are more pro-individualist than parents.

In contrast, people who think families should attend together are much more likely to be religiously involved. In this survey of baby boomers, Wade Clark Roof found that many people had dropped out for a time as youth. But those who now believe families should attend together, who have a religiously active spouse, and who have children, have returned to participation at a 90% rate. Individualists, on the other hand, even with a religiously active spouse and children, have only returned at a 41% rate. The link between family and religion is alive and well, then, but only for a specific segment of the population with traditional views about family participation and traditional family structures to match.

The picture that emerges is of a continuing tie between “traditional families” and conventional religious participation. In Marler’s words, “as the family goes, so go the churches.” However, the picture on the same page is of increasingly diverse family forms, with fewer “traditional families” in the population. A younger generation may be returning to religious participation, but its experiences of individualism and feminism continue to place barriers between it and much of organized religion. It seems likely that some of this survey evidence hints at a kind of mutual exclusion going on between status quo religionists and people committed to new patterns of family and work. It may be that many congregations have actively promulgated family values that have pushed out non-traditional members.

But the extremes of disenchantment do not tell the whole story. What people are experiencing in their work and family life—whether traditional or non-traditional—cannot be disconnected from the sorts of religious communities they are

<sup>12</sup>Joanna B. Gillespie, “Gender and Generations in Congregations,” in *Episcopal Women*, ed. Catherine Prelinger (New York: Oxford University, 1993) 167-221.

<sup>13</sup>Wade Clark Roof and Lyn Gesch, “Boomers and the Culture of Choice,” in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, 61-80.

choosing. Between the secularist family innovator on one extreme and the conservative religious traditionalist at the other are vast portions of the U.S. population. For them, both faith and new forms of work and family are realities, both autonomy and commitment are values to be cherished.<sup>14</sup>

And so we return to the dilemma of institutional religion. Its strength for over a century has been its tie to the socialization of children. As people marry and produce offspring, they have been more likely to align themselves with religious organizations and values. That pattern seems clearly still in place, even for the baby boom generation.

However, changes are afoot. Both inside and outside traditional religion there is experimentation going on. Inside, theologians are calling for a new family ethic that takes the individualism of the boomers seriously, but calls them to balance their individual quests with a commitment to caring and collaboration.

Similarly, congregations are moving beyond the notion that their domain is the "private" world of isolated traditional families. Congregations—black, white, and integrated—are tackling public issues that arise out of the crises faced by neighborhood, family, and nation. They are rejecting the notion that being a "family church" means being quietly private and uninvolved. They are creating programs and structures that enable congregants to engage each other in a mediating structure where persons in all their complexity encounter the public world in all its complexity.

Still other congregations are facing the challenge of helping people in all sorts of family units to come together to form meaningful communities. Recognizing that community cannot be expected to happen naturally in today's mobile society, these congregations are creating opportunities for the construction of fictive kinship groups, intergenerational circles of support that supplement distanced family ties.

On the margins of traditional religion, even more experimentation is happening. Thousands of small religious groups are springing up, often to fill a void left by ordinary congregations. From Catholic "base communities" to protestant house churches to women's spirituality groups, people are creating spaces in which to re-unite the pieces of life fragmented by modernization. These groups often unite work and family concerns in a religious context apparently without requiring that the people in them belong to "traditional families." Again, they reconstruct caring and committed relationships under the auspices of a religious community.

It is in these efforts to foster new forms of commitment that the future vitality of congregations may lie. While the support of parents raising children can never disappear from our list of obligations, our tasks must increasingly include the provision of extended family networks and committed communities of support to the growing diversity of mobile seekers who populate our land. ⊕

<sup>14</sup>William V. D'Antonio, "The Family and Religion: Exploring a Changing Relationship," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19/2 (1980) 89-104.