



Region 2 Ministry Forum

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Kenneth W. Inskeep

Department for Research and Evaluation

"Where the Church Counts."

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

- Between 1950 and 1960, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) grew by almost a million members as did the United Methodist Church.¹
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) (in its predecessor bodies), grew by 1.3 million members between 1950 and 1960 and the church added another 350,000 members between 1960 and 1970.
- But, over the same decade, losses started to accumulate in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church. And, between 1970 and 1980, the ELCA, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Churches of Christ and the United Methodist Church lost 2.3 million members. In the next decade, they lost another 1.4 million. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was hit particularly hard losing almost 17 percent of its membership. But, losses were more moderate among the Lutheran churches.
- In the 1990s, the growth (and decline) rates of all Protestant denominational families have slowed.²

ATTENDANCE

- The General Social Survey (GSS) (National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago) has asked the question "How often do you attend religious services?" since 1972.³
 - In 1972, 35 percent of the population reported attending once a week or more.
 - In 1976, 29 percent reported attending once a week or more.
 - In 1986, 29 percent reported attending once a week or more.
 - In 1996, 25 percent reported attending once a week or more.

¹ Membership statistics are from the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. Prepared and edited in the Communication Unit of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115. Published and distributed by Abingdon Press, Nashville.

² See David A. Roozen's and C. Kirk Hadaway's *Church and Denominational Growth*. 1993. Abingdon Press, Nashville.

³ For more information on the General Social Survey, see <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS99>. The GSS follows the highest survey standards in design, sampling, interviewing, processing and documenting.

- The Gallup poll is the poll known most widely when it comes to establishing the percent of the population that regularly attends religious services (Princeton Religion Research Center).⁴ The Gallup poll asks, "Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not."
 - In 1939, 41 percent reported attending church or synagogue in the last seven days.
 - In 1959, 49 percent reported attending church or synagogue in the last seven days.
 - In 1996, 38 percent of the population responded positively to the question.
 - In 1997, 40 percent reported attending church or synagogue in the last seven days.
- But, some have been skeptical of the self-reports and believe that they are inflated. In 1993, Hadaway, Marler and Chaves compared actual attendance counts to survey self-reports in Ashtabula County, Ohio.⁵ As Marler and Hadaway (1999:176) put it, "evidence of substantial over reporting was found. Among Protestants, 19.6 percent attended church worship in Ashtabula County, Ohio during a typical week in 1992—compared to the 35.8 percent who said they attended."
- Most recently, Marler and Hadaway (1999) focused on a single congregation that they (1999:178) identify as "a very large, white, middle-class congregation with a membership over 2,000," in an older metropolitan suburb in the deep South.⁶ On a single Sunday in March 1996, they counted worship attendance at this congregation. Forty percent of the membership or 984 persons were in attendance. In the next week, they interviewed a sample of 300 adult members of the congregation and they asked about their church attendance in the last seven days. Marler and Hadaway (1999:179) note that "out of 300 members interviewed, 209 said they attended church during the previous week." At this rate, the actual number at worship should have been about 1,700 persons.

STRONG CHURCHES, WEAK CHURCHES

What is Going On?

- *Context or Institution?* In response to the "what is going on?" question, authors tend to be in one of two camps. Those with a contextual focus tend to argue that fewer people are attending church particularly among that segment of the population most likely to attend a

⁴ For more information on the Gallup Poll (Princeton Religion Research Center, Princeton, New Jersey) see <http://www.prrc.com>.

⁵ Hadaway, C. Kirk and Penny Long Marler and Mark Chaves. 1993. "What the polls don't show: A closer look at US church attendance." *American Sociological Review* 56: 741-52.

⁶ Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway. 1999. "Testing the attendance gap in a conservative church." *Sociology of Religion* 80:175-186.

mainline church—people who are well educated, white and middle class.⁷ This is due in part to low birth rates, changes in the geographic distribution of the population and so forth. Authors with an institutional focus tend to argue that mainline churches are no longer capable of holding their own in a rapidly changing culture; that they are tired and have lost touch. As institutions, the mainline denominations have abandoned whatever it takes to compete with religious groups that believe they have the "truth" and are evangelistic. These groups are characterized by their religious fervor and their desire for more of a say in the wider society.

- *Supply and Demand?* According to this perspective, growth and decline is the result of religious "firms" that are more or less successful in capturing "consumers" in the "religious market." Marler and Roozen (1993:276) speak of the "consumer-oriented marketplace" where "church programming itself must diversify to fit the interests and needs of a variety of consumer groups or market niches."⁸ This vocabulary is increasingly familiar and widespread in many church circles, including the mainline. The language of "transformation" often refers primarily to the ability of pastors and congregations to see and respond to the larger market for religion in American society.
- *Strictness?* Hoge, Johnson and Luidens (1994:184) note: "One of the most striking findings about the active Presbyterians among our sample of Baby Boom confirmands is the low level of their commitment to the church and its programs . . . Whereas the fundamentalists tend to be of one mind concerning theological and moral issues, active Presbyterians espouse a variety of views . . . Lay liberals have no compelling truth, no 'good news,' to proclaim, and few of them share the views they do have with their friends and acquaintances . . . Lay liberalism, and the individualism and the tolerance of diversity that it celebrates, makes civility and cooperation in human relations possible in a pluralistic society, but they also make for weak churches."⁹

LUTHERAN BELIEFS

Are the members of mainline churches without conviction? Do they lack strong beliefs? What about members of the ELCA in particular? Certainly, the nuances and complexities of Lutheran belief make it more difficult to communicate those beliefs, but the charge of potential weakness is something to be taken seriously. Does nuance and complexity mask weakness?

⁷ For a review of this material, see Kenneth W. Inskip. 1993. "A short history of church growth research." in David A. Roozen's and C. Kirk Hadaway's *Church and Denominational Growth*. Nashville. Abingdon.

⁸ Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen. 1993. "From church tradition to consumer choice: The Gallup surveys of the unchurched American," in David A. Roozen's and C. Kirk Hadaway's *Church and Denominational Growth*. Nashville. Abingdon.

⁹ Hoge, Dean R., and Benton Johnson and Donald A. Luidens. 1994. *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.

It is possible to profile the religious belief of Lutherans based on responses to questions extracted from GSS polls conducted between the years of 1986 and 1996.¹⁰ To answer our question we will compare Lutheran response to persons whom we will assume should hold strong beliefs—persons who indicated they are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Differences are readily apparent.

The Context of Belief

- Overall Lutherans are slightly better educated than Southern Baptists. Twenty-nine percent of the Lutherans have some college education compared to 17 percent of the Southern Baptists, and 23 percent of the Lutherans have completed a college degree compared to 12 percent of the Southern Baptists. (*Among all other respondents to the GSS, 27 percent have some college education and 22 percent have completed a college degree.*) Having a constituency that is well educated may make it considerably more difficult to engender "strong" beliefs since a college education is often designed to produce critical thinking—individuals who challenge the established "truths."
- The average socioeconomic index score for Lutherans (48.7) is significantly higher than the average score for Southern Baptists (43.7). (*Among all other respondents to the GSS, the mean socioeconomic index score is 47.2.*) Because higher socioeconomic status is related to mobility, Lutherans are more likely to find themselves in places a long way away from their provincial homes. This often means that the social fabric—close family, relatives, childhood friends—that is associated with strong religious belief and participation will be less powerful.
- Twenty-seven percent of Lutherans defined themselves as liberal compared to 21 percent of Southern Baptists. Thirty-one percent of Lutherans defined themselves as conservative compared to 40 percent of Southern Baptists. (*Among all other respondents to the GSS, 28 percent defined themselves as liberals and 35 percent as conservatives.*) In other words, the vast majority of Lutherans define themselves as moderate to liberal. By definition, this means that they are more likely to oppose dogmatism of any sort.
- None of the Lutherans defined themselves as fundamentalists compared to all of the Southern Baptists. (*Among all other respondents to the GSS, 29 percent defined themselves as fundamentalists, 40 percent as moderates and 31 percent as liberals.*)

The Beliefs Themselves

- Sixty-one percent of Lutherans said they know God exists compared to 84 percent of Southern Baptists. Twenty-five percent of Lutherans said that they believe God exists but they have some doubts compared to 10 percent of the Southern Baptists. (*Among all other*

¹⁰ For the GSS, about 60 persons a year identify themselves as Lutherans associated with the ELCA or one of its predecessor bodies. The yearly groups are added together for the 10 year period. The GSS did not conduct a survey in 1992.

respondents to the GSS, 62 percent said they know God exists and 17 percent said they believe God exists but they have some doubts.) For Lutherans, the issue of doubt is more normative, perhaps, among some, even a sign of faith while, for many Southern Baptists, doubt is clear evidence of weak faith.

- Twenty-three percent of Lutherans indicated that they felt extremely close to God and 65 percent said they felt somewhat close to God. This compares to 40 percent of the Southern Baptists who said they felt extremely close to God and the 52 percent who indicated they felt somewhat close to God. (*Among all the respondents to the GSS, 32 percent indicated they felt extremely close to God with 52% indicating they felt somewhat close to God.*) Once again, for Lutherans, the question of feeling close to God is secondary to one's belief, in faith, that God remains close to people as they go about their daily lives no matter what or no matter how a person might feel about God.
- Eighty-four percent of Lutherans said they believe in life after death compared to 86 percent of Southern Baptists. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 79 percent said they believe in life after death.*) On this issue, Lutheran belief is less nuance and there is no significant difference between the responses of Lutherans and Southern Baptists. At the same time, the matter of life after death is not of primary concern for Lutherans. A statement developed to answer the question of whether or not Lutherans believe in life after death ends this way: "Anxiety for the future is not a mark of faith. Christians should go about their daily tasks, trusting in God's grace and living a life of service in his name."¹¹
- Two percent of Lutherans attend religious services more than once a week, 18 percent attend every week, 7 percent attend nearly every week and 11 percent attend two or three times a month. This compares to 13 percent of Southern Baptists who attend more than once a week, with 18 percent attending every week, 7 percent attending nearly every week and 13 percent attending two or three times a month. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 7 percent attend more than once a week, with 21 percent attending every week, 5 percent nearly every week and 9 percent attending two or three times a month.*) On the matter of attending religious services, Baptists show a clear advantage in commitment, but once again, for Lutherans, church attendance is not a measure of faith. At the same time, church attendance is foundational for Lutherans and many more Lutherans should/could be more committed to it.
- Eighteen percent of Lutherans pray several times a day compared to 31 percent of Southern Baptists, while 33 percent of Lutherans pray once a day compared to 34 percent of Southern Baptists. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 24 percent pray several times a day and 31 percent pray once a day.*) On these matters of personal piety, attending worship, private prayer and the like, Southern Baptists show more strength of commitment.

¹¹ See <http://www.elca.org/co/brief.html>. "Some Brief Descriptions of Christianity and Lutheranism." 1998. Department for Communication, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

- When asked to choose a number on a seven point between God as "redeemer" (1) and God as "liberator" (7), 37 percent of Lutherans chose "1" compared to 55 percent of Southern Baptists. Forty-seven percent of Lutherans chose "4" compared to 31 percent of Southern Baptists. Five percent of Lutherans chose "7" compared to 3 percent of Southern Baptists (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 37 percent chose "1" and 38 percent chose "4" and 6 percent chose "7."*)
- Twenty-five percent of Lutherans indicated that the Bible was the "actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word" compared to 57 percent of Southern Baptists. Sixty-five percent of Lutherans said that the Bible was inspired but "not everything in it should be taken literally" compared to 36 percent of Southern Baptists. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 32 percent indicated that the Bible was the actual word of God and should be taken literally and 50 percent said it was inspired but not everything in it should be taken literally.*) The fact that so many Lutherans report that they hold a literal interpretation of the Bible is a sign of the strength of fundamentalism in the wider culture. The Lutheran position is the position that the majority of Lutherans take here which is that the Bible is the authority for Christian faith and practice, not a "definitive record of history or science."¹²
- Twenty percent of Lutherans indicated that sex before marriage is "always" wrong compared to 40 percent of Southern Baptists. Forty-five percent of the Lutherans said it is not wrong at all compared to 30 percent of the Southern Baptists. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 25 percent indicated that sex before marriage was always wrong while 43 percent said it was not wrong at all.*) Once again, Lutherans are clearly more likely to waver on matters of personal piety and be somewhat hesitant to define certain behaviors as always wrong. At the same time, Lutherans are quite divided on some of these issues as the following note on homosexuality indicates.
- Sixty-eight percent of Lutherans said a homosexual relationship is "always" wrong compared to 86 percent of Southern Baptists. Twenty-one percent of Lutherans said a homosexual relationship is not wrong at all compared to 8 percent of Southern Baptists. (*Among all the other respondents to the GSS, 69 percent said that a homosexual relationship was always wrong with 20 percent saying it was not wrong at all.*)

The question of weak beliefs cannot be settled here, but there is evidence that Lutherans express more variety—less homogeneity—in their beliefs than Southern Baptists. At the same time, the responses taken by the majority of Lutherans (when asked about these matters by a pollster not affiliated with any church) are very much in line with what one could expect given the teachings of the Lutheran church. If there is evidence of weak beliefs, it is most with regard to matters of

¹² See <http://www.elca.org/co/brief.html>. "Some Brief Descriptions of Christianity and Lutheranism. 1998. Department for Communication, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

religious practice. Certainly, the charge of weak belief is serious enough that it should be pursued further.¹³

CONSUMERS?

One of the underlying assumptions of the market approach to religion is that a market actually exists. Sometimes "markets" disappear. There is no longer much of a market, for example, for eight-track tapes or 5¼" floppy disks. Some have long argued that the market for religious commitment is simply disappearing—that modern society is more secular than it used to be. This is what Marler and Hadaway mean (1999:177) when they conclude we should perhaps question whether religion in America is as robust and as exceptional (as opposed to Northern Europe, for instance) based on their evidence that attendance rates at religious services may be significantly over-inflated. Others argue that the demand for religious products is relatively constant. Stark (1999:263) suggests that people persist in believing religious things even if these things are vague and incoherent.¹⁴ This tendency to believe represents a "potential demand" for organized religion, but its vagueness and incoherence is only a problem for those who see religion otherwise. Stark (1999:264) notes: "subjective religiousness remains high in the nations most often cited as examples of secularization, places where it is claimed that people have outgrown religion for good."

Who Is Organized Now—Who Attends?¹⁵

- Persons who are older, better educated and are married or widowed are more likely to be frequent church attenders. 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 read a newspaper every day are more frequent attenders.
- Those who attend a performance of opera or classical music are more likely frequent church attenders while those persons who attend an auto race or go camping are more likely infrequent church attenders. Those who play an instrument or go to a dance performance tend to be frequent church attenders, while those persons who are more likely to go hunting or fishing are infrequent attenders.

¹³ The investigation of weak beliefs can cut both ways. In this case, for example, there is some evidence of weakness in the beliefs of Southern Baptists. It is at least somewhat surprising that about 25 percent of the those persons designating themselves as Southern Baptist report that they attend religious services less than once a year and almost as many Southern Baptists (14%) as Lutherans (16%) report that they do not believe in life after death. Forty-three percent do not take the Bible literally. Thirty percent do not believe premarital sex is wrong at all and 8 percent do not believe homosexuality is wrong.

¹⁴ Stark, Rodney. 1999. "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion*. 60: 249-273.

¹⁵ This analysis is based on an analysis of the GSS from 1986 to 1996, comparing the responses of frequent church attenders (once a month or more) with infrequent attenders (less than once a month).

- Overall, frequent church attenders are active persons. 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 an art/craft object and went to a movie were frequent church attenders. Infrequent church attenders were more likely than frequent church attenders to say that life is dull.
- Those who prefer classical music or easy listening are more likely to be frequent attenders compared to those persons who like new age music or heavy metal.
- Frequent church attenders are more moderate in their political views. They are also more conservative on issues like premarital sex.
- Frequent church attenders are not more likely than infrequent attenders to say they were very successful in life or that they were very happy or at least pretty happy.
- Frequent church attenders are only slightly less likely to report feelings of loneliness than those who attend church infrequently.
- Frequent church attenders are more likely to say they feel close to God (though almost a quarter of infrequent attenders say they feel extremely close to God).

Who could be organized?

According to Hoge, Johnson and Luidens (1994:204ff.) what was wanted from the church by those they interviewed (persons confirmed in the 1960s in the Presbyterian church) falls into "four main commodity" categories.

- 1. Religious education for children and associated support for family life.** Churches are places that provide religious education and almost all parents want it for their children. They believe in the value of a Sunday school. The education they desired includes moral education and character education "alongside the more cognitive elements of learning about the Bible and church teachings" (Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994:204). They don't want "indoctrination."
- 2. Personal support and reassurance.** Churches are the places where many look when they feel they are alone or need help. It is a place to pull life together. It is a place to reflect and get prepared to face the world outside. This means a setting "where they can speak openly and honestly without fear of rejection" (Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994:204). This kind of support and reassurance often comes through a small group experience.
- 3. Social contacts and a sense of community.** Churches are the places where many look to find committed persons who are stable and reliable people—people that can be trusted when it counts and help out when it's needed. "We were told that suburban living is often sterile and

isolating and that churches are good places to look for contacts and ties" (Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994:205).

- 4. Inspiration and spiritual guidance.** Churches are places where people believe they will be inspired and provided with spiritual guidance. "They needed worship to be uplifting and empowering, drawing them away from petty concerns to remember the larger picture, out of self-pity to praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. They wanted devotions and music to be encouraging" (Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994:205).