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Full adulthood deferred

By Anthony E. Healy

The newest group of adults is severely lagging in religious attendance.

The reason for this lag -- found in recent General Social Survey data -- appears to be continuing changes in the age when people marry and bear children. Young adults are delaying those life events even more than did earlier generations because today's job market requires much more schooling than a few decades ago, and because it is becoming increasingly harder for the young to attain the financial security necessary for getting married and having children.

Not only are the youngest group of adults lagging in religious attendance, the percentage of people ages 27 to 36 in the 2002 General Social Survey who claimed no religious affiliation whatsoever is the highest that figure has ever been among that age group in that survey.

In a switch from the past, this growing defection from religious affiliation appears to be more of a Protestant problem than a Catholic problem. It also is a conservative Protestant problem at least as much as it is a liberal Protestant problem.

The recent survey data also shows that this youngest cohort of adults -- born from 1966 to 1975 -- are the first fully adult age cohort in which the majority are not Protestants, though a

bare majority did grow up in Protestant churches. In the 2002 General Social Survey, the majority of this birth cohort were Catholic, other religions, or no religious preference.

The nation's newest group of young adults exemplifies how the United States is becoming more complex religiously even as it becomes more diverse religiously. People born after 1965 have patterns of religious participation that are less like that of people born in earlier years. These changed patterns may be largely the result of the impact of economic changes, institutional changes in conservative bodies, and religious changes from steady immigration. But as many studies have shown, it is not because people have ceased to be religious.

The main reason for changes in religious attendance appears to be what social scientists are calling the prolonging of young adulthood, rather than changes in generational culture. Scholars in recent years have identified a trend toward longer intervals of time before people are able to settle down and have families. Because religious attendance is usually tied to life events such as marriage and child-bearing, the delaying of these events – sometimes into the mid-30s – appears to lead to a longer lapse in time before people return to regular religious attendance as adults.

A half century ago most young adults went immediately into the job market after high school. They were to marry and have children soon after securing a permanent job. In recent decades, more people have instead gone on to college or other secondary schooling rather than landing jobs. In more recent years, the need for greater education in order to attain financial security and personal success means that not only a college degree is now necessary, but in some cases, graduate degrees are becoming required. This demand for much more education in the job market is pushing back marriage and child-bearing. For young adults unable to get post-secondary training, the chances of finding a job with the income and benefits necessary to

support a family are dwindling -- even with both parents employed -- and thus the opportunities for early marriage and child-bearing for them is also dwindling.

A recent report released by the Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy project concluded that "... many young people have not become fully adult because they are not ready or able to perform the full range of adult roles, and they have not forged a stable identity of who they are and where they fit into society."¹ The authors point out that protracted young adulthood is not -- as often depicted in the popular media -- the result of longer adolescence and the lack of maturity. Prolonged young adulthood comes about because physically and mentally mature people are dependent for a longer time because they are required to have so much more education and are finding it takes longer to establish themselves on the job. The less educated young -- whose parents are less able to provide extended financial support -- are finding it difficult to land steady jobs that pay a decent wage, and some end up drifting in search of better prospects that can remain elusive.

Pointedly, the report authors' also note, "The longer time it takes for schooling and job preparation partially explains why many young adults prefer to cohabit before they marry and why the median age for marriage has risen to unprecedented heights. Family formation, young adults tell us, requires the economic security gained by obtaining a full-time job with benefits."

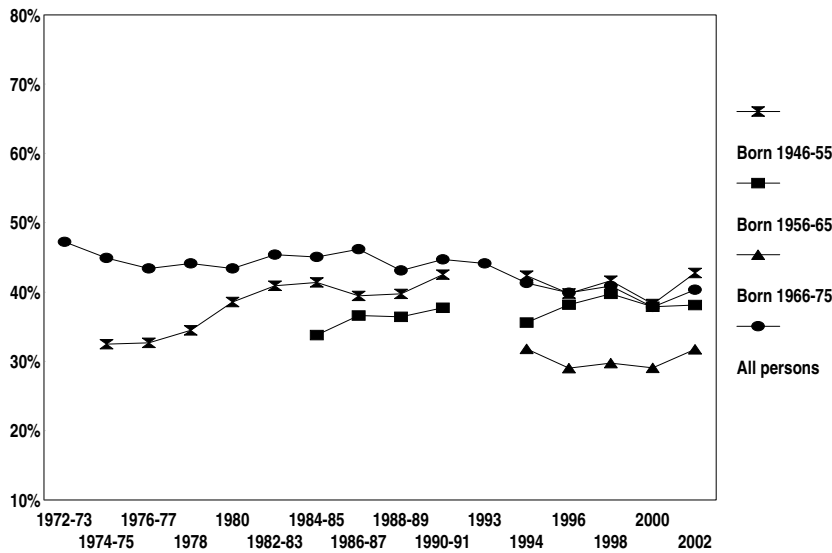
Changes in attendance

As the first chart on this page shows, regular religious attendance among the cohort born from 1966 to 1975 (which came of age in the early 1990s) is well below that among people

¹ The Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, funded by the John D. And Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation, is made up of a team of scholars housed at the University of Pennsylvania. Their website is www.pop.upenn.edu/transad/. Forthcoming is a book published by the University of Chicago Press, *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, edited by Richard A. Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut.

generally, and lower than it is among two earlier birth cohorts. (The first cohort are people born from 1946 to 1955 -- older Boomers -- and the second cohort are those born from 1956 to 1964 - younger Boomers.)

Regular attendance by cohort, 1972-02



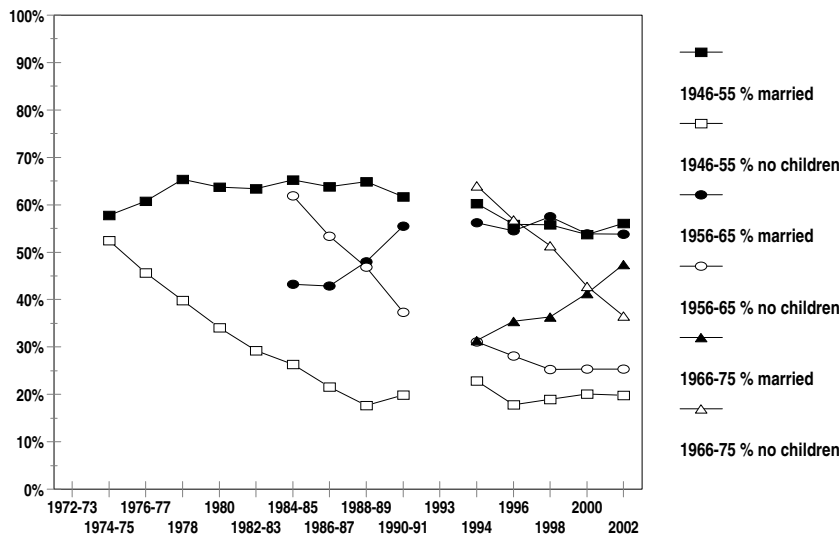
The attendance rate for the youngest and third cohort is even lower than the rate for earlier birth cohorts at the same age. In the 2002 General Social Survey, about 32% of the 1966 to 1975 birth cohort, then aged 27 to 36 years

old, took part in religious services at least two times a month. When Baby Boomers who were born from 1946 to 1955 were 27 to 36 years old, their attendance rate was 42% in the 1982-1983 surveys.

Renewed religious attendance in adult life is generally tied to when people marry and have children, as numerous sociological studies have shown. The second chart shows the proportion of married persons and those without children for the two birth cohorts born from 1956 to 1965 and from 1966 to 1975. On the chart is a cross-over point for both birth cohorts when the percentage of currently marrieds exceeds the percentage of people without children. When that cross-over point occurs for the 1966 to 1975 cohort, the percentage who are currently married is lower (48% vs. 41%) than among the 1956 to 1965 cohort. The percentage without

children is also lower (47% vs. 43%). The cross-over takes place for the younger cohort when it is 25 to 34 years old, but at 23 to 32 years of age for the older cohort. Delays in marriage (as well as marital disruption) have resulted in a lower marital rate among the younger cohort, although some still are having children.

Life events over three birth cohorts



The third chart

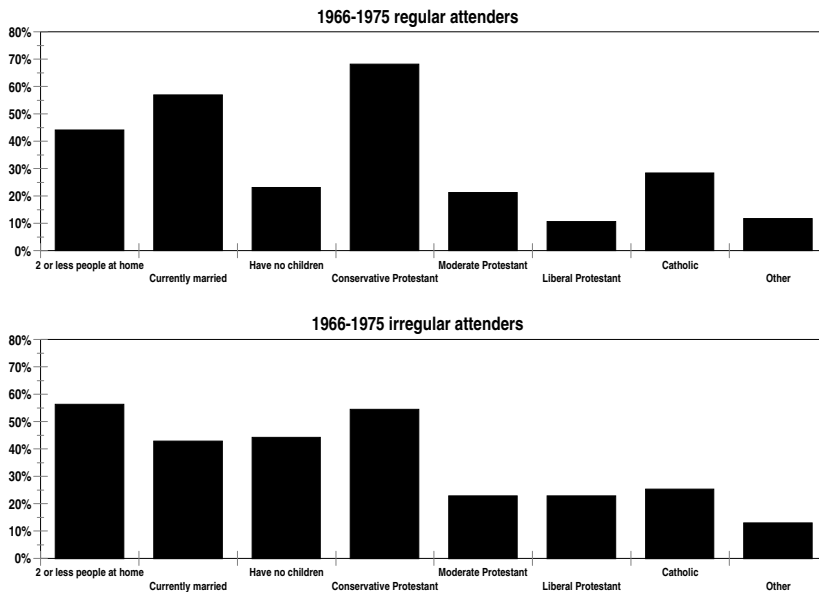
highlights the tie between marriage and child-bearing and religious attendance, based on the 2002 General Social Survey data. Regular attenders in the 1966 to 1975 cohort are more likely to be married and have

children than irregular attenders. Regular attenders are also more likely to be conservative Protestants and Catholics, and irregular attenders are more likely to be liberal Protestants.

Liberal Protestants -- who are usually better educated and hold higher status jobs -- appear to be affected more by delays in marriage and child-bearing than conservative Protestants. When data for the birth cohort are combined from the 2000 and 2002 surveys to improve reliability, nearly half of liberal Protestants said they had been never married compared with a less than a third of conservative Protestants. (About one in six conservative Protestants are currently divorced compared with about one in 12 liberal Protestants.) Over a third of the cohort's Catholics have

never married, but more are currently married than among liberal and conservative Protestants.

Comparing regular, irregular attenders



The drop in affiliation
 The proportion
 of General Social
 Survey respondents
 who claim no affiliation
 has risen in recent
 years. The proportion
 claiming such in the
 youngest birth cohort is
 even higher -- about

17% of people compared with about 14% of all respondents in the 2002 General Social Survey. After climbing slightly from the 1960s to the 1980s, the rate of no religious affiliation jumped in the 1990s, according to a recent, extensive study of attendance and affiliations trends conducted by Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer at the University of California, Berkeley. The reason cited for the increased lack of affiliation was not that people had turned away from religious belief, but that infrequent religious attenders had become dissatisfied with the conservative turn in religion and had ceased to identify themselves with any religious group. This trend is duplicated among early Baby Boomers who had not returned to religious participation. That group may find religious communities too strict for their taste (see the January-February 2003 edition).

Among the youngest cohort, an unusual high proportion -- about 8% -- said in the 1994

General Social Survey that when they were age 16, their family had no religious affiliation. When this birth cohort was 19 to 28 years old in the 1994 survey, about 15% claimed no religious affiliation of their own. In the 2002 survey, that figure had bumped up to 17%. By comparison, 9% of older Boomers in the 2002 survey claimed no religious affiliation, and at age 19 to 28 (the 1974-75 surveys), 13% of them said they had been raised with no affiliation.

Notably, 34% of this youngest cohort who claimed no religious affiliation said in the 1998-2002 surveys that they were Protestant at age 16. About 38% said they had no affiliation then; about 20% said they were Catholic. Though this data is less reliable because the numbers sampled are small, it does indicate that defection to non-affiliation was greater among Protestants than Catholics. Recent research conducted of denominational switching by Dean R. Hoge of the Catholic University of America and Thomas P. O'Connor of the Center for Social Research in Maryland has found that Catholics are somewhat more loyal to their religious upbringing than Baptists and Methodists. Of the Protestants who defected, about 61% grew up in conservative bodies. When they were 19 to 28 years of age in the 1994 survey, about 60% of the youngest cohort who were Protestant said they grew up in conservative denominations.

Several sociological studies conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s had identified liberal Protestants as disproportionately the contributor of people to non-affiliation, suggesting at the time that it was the theological looseness of liberal Protestantism that was the cause. Though the General Social Survey data is too thin to say with certainty one way or another, the change in rates of non-affiliation among religiously conservative young may be due to several factors. One thesis could be that the amount of education needed in today's economy is causing the conservative young to abandon conservative churches. Another thesis may be that changes toward greater acceptance in recent decades among conservative congregations in order to

accommodate Boomers -- the so-called “new paradigm” congregations -- have left the bodies less able to retain the young as did stricter, earlier generations of conservative churches.

Recent research has concluded that changes in adherence among religious bodies are due more to demographic factors than to institutional or doctrinal factors: Conservative groups are doing better because their adherents marry earlier and have more children. Conservative bodies also historically did a better job of retaining their young than did liberal bodies. That balance now appears to be shifting. This loss of adherents to non-affiliation is thus more threatening to conservative than liberal bodies. However, changes in when people marry and bear children appear to be having more of an effect on liberal Protestant adherents than conservative Protestants and Catholics. The time away from attendance because of the prolonging of young adulthood is growing the most among the highly educated who tend to be in liberal bodies.