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# Sticking with it

**By Anthony E. Healy**

**N**ow in late middle age, older Baby Boomers are again taking a road less traveled religiously. Instead of dropping out after their children have grown, as some of their elders did in a previous era, many Boomers who had stuck with, or returned to, church, synagogue or temple in the 1970s and 1980s appear to be staying put. However, some older Boomers who never really came back now appear to have given up on organized religion altogether -- but not on religion.

This scenario is both good news and bad news for religious institutions. The good news is that older Boomers who regularly attend religious services may not be headed out the back door in late middle age as some scholars had expected. The bad news is that the older Boomers who have given up on religious ties may be doing so not because religious bodies were too loose or too liberal, as a number of scholars had contended in the 1970s and 1980s. They may be doing so because religious bodies are now being seen as too strict and too conservative. In fact, regular attenders among older Boomers have shifted somewhat toward liberal religious bodies.

A preliminary analysis of General Social Survey data finds that religious participation of older Boomers born between 1946 and 1955 did not fall when households shrunk as children left home over the past decade. (I have not included younger Boomers, born from 1956 to 1965, who

are still raising children.) In the 2002 survey, older Boomers were between 47 and 56 years of age. Though two-thirds of their households were made up of two persons or less, older Boomers still averaged around 40% in regular attendance, nearly as high a rate that group has ever had.

At the same time, the proportion of older Boomers classified as religiously liberal based on their religious affiliation has risen substantially. But of those older Boomers classified as religious liberals, about two-fifths claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. Moreover, the number claiming no affiliation also jumped substantially over the past decade.

The relationship of religious attendance and the family life cycle is well established in scholarly literature. As people leave home and move into young single adulthood, rates of religious attendance decline. As they marry and women bear children, religious attendance climbs. One common version of this life cycle thesis is that people return to religious participation because they want to educate their children in religion and to experience a religious environment. Another version put forth more recently by sociologist Penny Edgell of the University of Minnesota is that after women have children, religion becomes more compelling. Both mother and father then return to religious participation with those children.

David A. Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, part of Hartford Seminary, has added a third phase to this life cycle thesis. He says that when children become teenagers and begin to leave religious programs, the parents of those children then slack off in their own religious attendance. Earlier scholars had identified this “Empty Nest, Empty Pew” phenomena, but Roozen presented the first full statistical analysis of this trend. Roozen suggests that the phenomena is pervasive across generations. The data he analyzed from the General Social Survey up to the early 1990s found that the religious attendance of the small portion of older Boomers who had teenagers or empty nests was dropping. If this trend continued in that generation, Roozen said, “the inevitable and relatively massive transition of the Boomers out of

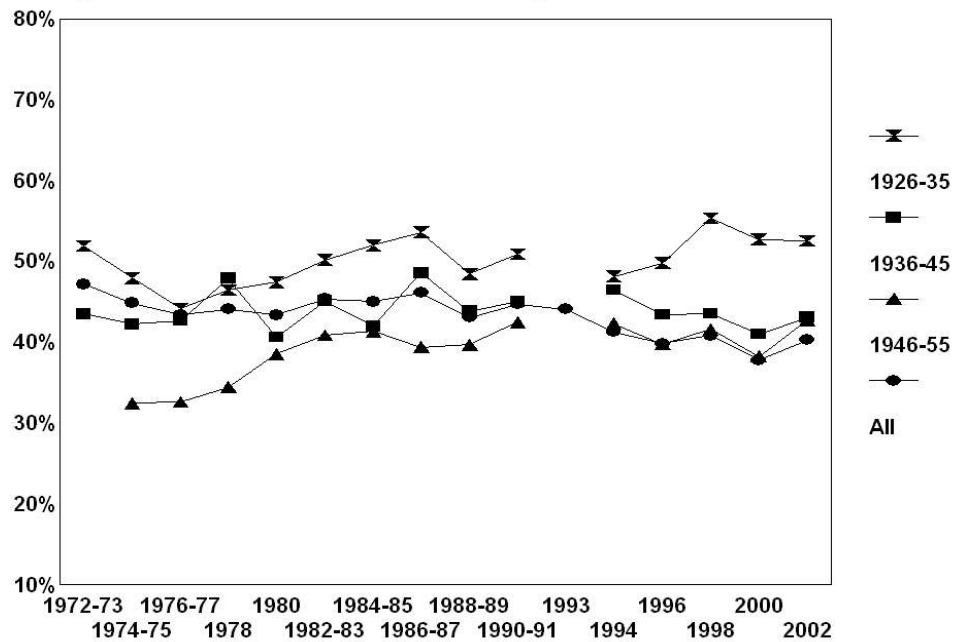
active parenting should exert considerable downward pressure on overall levels of religious participation for at least the next twenty years.” Sociologist Wade Clark Roof said he had identified the same trend among Boomers, too, in a survey for his 1999 book *Spiritual Marketplace*. (Roof wrote the seminal scholarly work on Boomers, *A Generation of Seekers*.)

When many Boomers came of age in the early 1970s, the life cycle effect was not holding for that generation as strongly as it had for previous generations. Boomers had lower rates of religious attendance when they achieved adulthood than those earlier generations. The lower rates of attendance for Boomers were identified as an element in the membership decline of mainline religious bodies by Roof and William McKinney in *American Mainline Religion*, a classic study published in 1987. Scholars also cited reasons other than demographic and life cycle factors for the sharp decline in religious attendance that took place in the 1960s and early 1970s. They asserted that mainline religious bodies had failed to maintain religious strictures and their membership boundaries had become too fluid, unlike conservative bodies which remained strict and had tough membership rules. Dean Kelly’s *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, published in 1977, was on the forefront of that argument, and was highly influential in the religious community and among scholars. That book, and others like it, encouraged religious leaders to stiffen boundaries and set out firm moral and religious rules. Since that time, however, scholarly studies have found that strictness is not necessarily attractive to potential adherents; that significant numbers of people are switching from liberal to conservative bodies; and the main reason for mainline decline is demographic. Mainline adherents marry later and bear fewer children.

The first chart in this article shows religious attendance between 1974 and 2002 for General Social Survey respondents born in three different time periods, as well as for respondents as a whole. The surveys have been aggregated into two-year intervals for the years

when they were conducted annually. The semiannual surveys of 1978 and 1980 lack the respondent numbers of the later

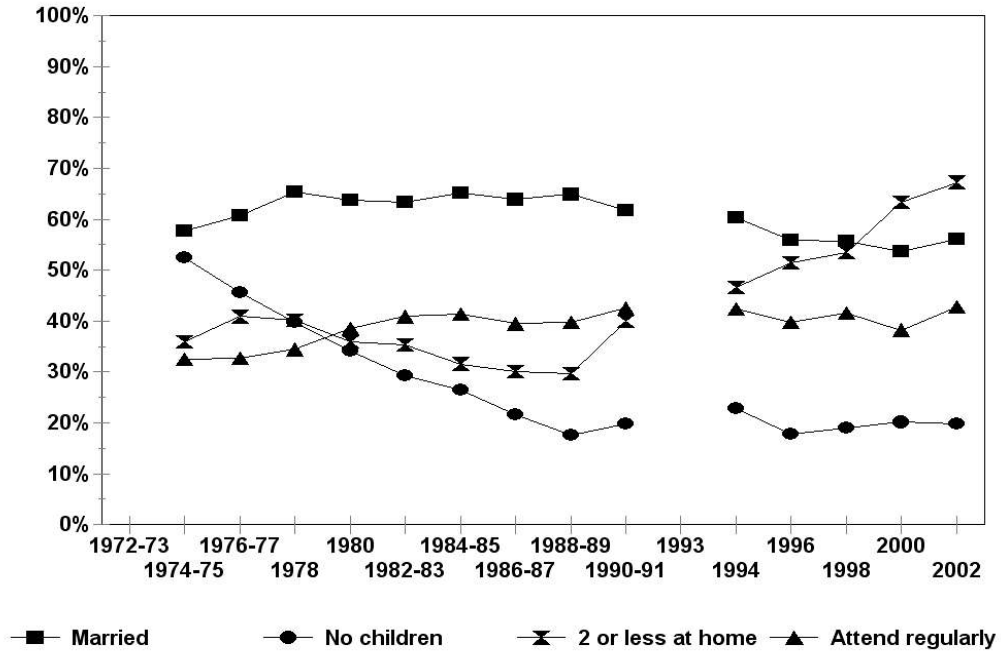
## Regular attendance by cohort, 1972-02



semiannual surveys. Only one survey was conducted in the 1972 and 1973 period. The number of respondents was so small that its data has been dropped. In recent years, some scholars have raised questions about the validity of religious attendance survey data, saying that the data was proving to be too high. Because those questions strike at the validity of all survey research, the scholarly community thoroughly debated that issue. The general conclusion is that in the surveys, people who do not usually attend religious services are not lying about attending. But people who usually attend religious services with regularity are reporting they attend more than they do -- every week when they really miss weeks here and there. The general consensus is that such misreporting does not negate the validity of the survey data. This article uses data from the General Social Survey at the University of Chicago, considered the “gold standard” in survey research. The data shown is for respondents who say they attend religious services at least twice a month. Those respondents are “regular” attenders; those that attend less than that (or never) are called “irregular” attenders.

## Changes in the 1946-55 age cohort

The chart shows that regular attendance for all respondents (the line with the circle) peaked in the 1980s, then slipped to



achieve a rough but fluctuating consistency in the 1990s and 2000s. (The large plunge in religious attendance that took place in the last part of the 20th century occurred mainly in the years just before the General Social Survey was first conducted.) The chart also shows that the religious attendance of respondents born from 1926 to 1935 has stayed higher than that of the general population except for a brief spell in the 1970s. That was the period in which that birth cohort moved into middle age and children left its households. The small 1936-1945 cohort (with a few wild swings) roughly follows the same attendance pattern, but in later years. Its children departed in the 1980s. Older Boomers (born 1946 to 1955) rose steadily in attendance throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Older Boomer attendance has bounced around in the past few years, but as on average has stayed about the same figure as earlier.

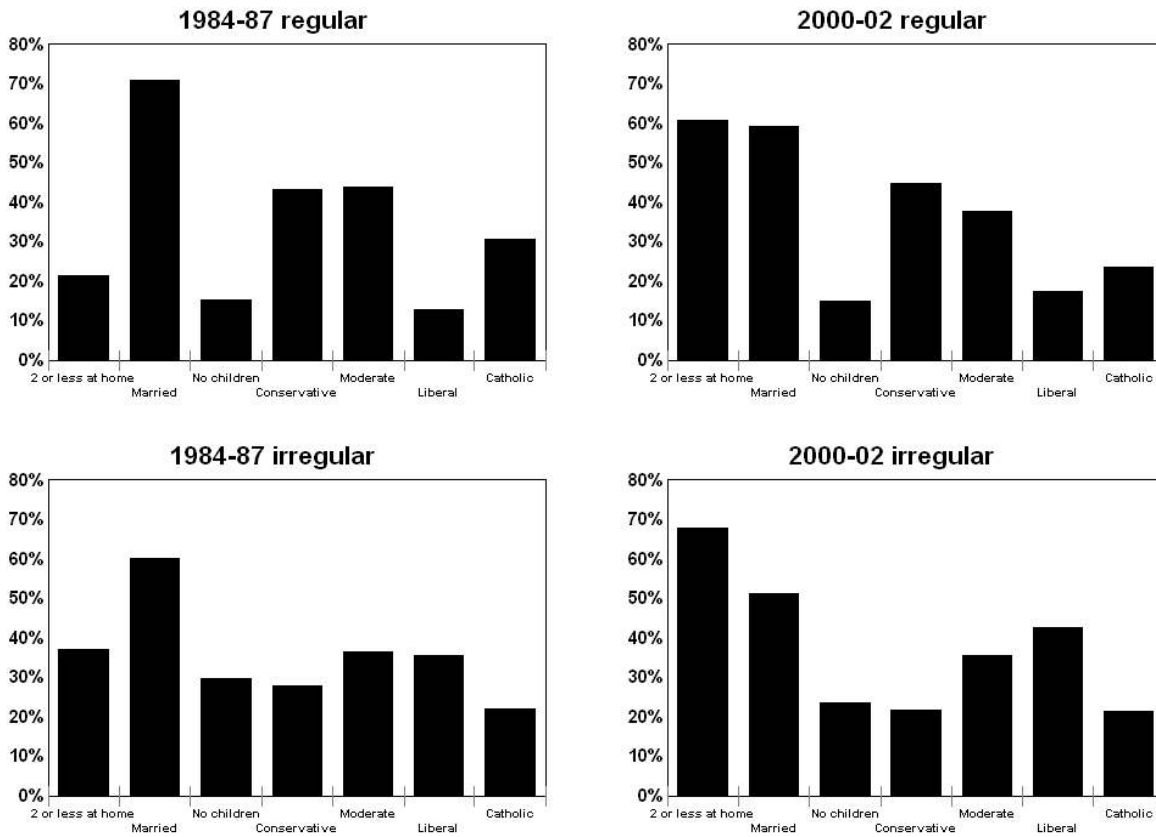
The second chart shows the demographic and attendance changes of the 1946-1955 birth cohort from the year 1974 (when the entire cohort was finally old enough to be included in General Social Survey) to the year 2002. The General Social Survey does not have a question for

asking married respondents if they have their own adolescent children in the household. But three pieces of data from the survey approximate that question. Those data are whether a person is currently married, whether a person has ever had children, and how many people currently live in a person's household. As the chart shows, the percentage of currently married persons rose, but then leveled off in the 1980s. It started to decline in the 1990s because more people became divorced than got married. At the same time, the percentage of people who said they had never had children fell until the 1988-89 survey when it leveled off. Finally, the proportion of older Boomer households with two or fewer persons fell from the mid-1970s until the 1988-89 surveys. Then the figure began to rise rapidly. Altogether, these trends suggest that many older Boomers finished childbearing in the late 1980s, and older Boomer married-couple households began to empty out shortly thereafter. As households shrunk, a number of marriages ended in divorce.

Early on, older Boomers followed the track in attendance predicted by the life cycle thesis, though never in great numbers. Attendance rose in the 1970s when older Boomers had children, and then moved upward more slowly in the 1980s when Boomers were raising their children. Attendance peaked in the 1990-1991 surveys when about 42% of older Boomers attended services at least twice a month or more. Since then, however, attendance has bounced around, as noted earlier, but the trend over the period is relatively steady. Though it may still be too soon to say conclusively, older Boomer attendance does not appear to be following the path of earlier generations in late middle age.

The third chart shows that households shrunk and marriages ended for both regular and irregular attenders. In the 1984-1987 surveys, which is approximately the peak period for raising children, only 21% of regularly attending older Boomers lived in a household with two or fewer people. In the 2000-2002 surveys, 61% of older Boomers who attended regularly lived in a one-

## Regular and irregular attenders



to two-person household. (The surveys have been further aggregated to enlarge the sample size and to allow for finer analysis with a high degree of certainty.) Among older Boomers who attended irregularly (or not at all), the percentage of households with two persons or less went from 37% to 68%. Despite the loss of children from the households between the two periods, older Boomers attended in both periods at the same rate: 40%. However, in the 2000-2002 surveys more older Boomers in households with three or more people attended regularly (46%) than their counterparts in households with two or fewer people (38%). In the 1984-1987 surveys, 28% of older Boomers in households with two persons or less attended regularly. During that period, small households were mostly made up of people who hadn't yet had children or even gotten married. Older Boomers with larger households -- who generally were married and had children -- had an attendance rate of 46%, exactly the figure as 15 years later. Remember that

some Boomers in the 2000-2002 surveys had never married or had children. Those households still had a much lower attendance rate in that survey period. Those households are mostly responsible for pushing down the attendance rate of small households. Married older Boomers in small households attend at a rate not unlike that of older Boomers generally -- about 42%.

Another interesting trend is change in the number of currently married older Boomers. In the 1984-87 surveys, 71% of regular attenders were married. That figure dropped to 59% in the 2000-2002 surveys. Among irregular attenders, the percentage went from 60% to 51% between the first and last periods. This data indicates that regular attenders divorce nearly as often as irregular attenders. Finally, educational differences are sharp between religious orientations. About half of all older Boomers classified as conservative had attended college or had college degrees. By contrast, four-fifths of those older Boomers classified as religiously liberal had attended college or had college degrees. More than a third had advanced degrees.

Between the two survey periods, older Boomers changed their religious orientations. First, they appeared to have become more liberal. Many more irregular attenders either identified themselves with liberal religious bodies or claimed no religious affiliation. In fact, about 45% of the irregularly attending older Boomers identified as religiously liberal claimed no religious affiliation. The changes suggest that some people who have in the past claimed a religious affiliation and never took much part in religious activities have given up claiming an affiliation. Second, the proportion of regular attenders who said they were Catholic fell, but the proportion remained about the same among irregular attenders. Third, the data show that among older Boomers, regular attenders have shifted toward the liberal side. About 17% claimed a liberal affiliation in the 2000-2000 surveys, up nearly a fourth from the 1984-1987 surveys. The proportion in moderate bodies has dropped, but the proportion in conservative bodies has not basically changed.

In a comprehensive study of the same General Social Survey data published in an academic journal in 2002, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, both of the University of California at Berkeley, spotted the trend toward no affiliation among all adherents in the 1990s. They concluded that the trend had occurred because of dissatisfaction with what people saw as the conservative turn in religion. “In the 1990s, many people who had weak attachments to religion and either moderate or liberal political views found themselves at odds with the conservative political agenda of the Christian right and reacted by renouncing their weak attachment to organized religion,” the authors explained. Those people who renounced attachment were not without religious beliefs, and in fact, had firm religious beliefs, Hout and Fischer said. Having attended religious services infrequently, these “mental” members of various denominations gave up even that attachment. The authors’ conclusions appear to match what has happened among older Boomers -- 14% of whom in the 2000-2002 surveys claimed no affiliation, compared with only a few who claimed none in the 1984-1987 surveys.

An alternative to that explanation might be that people may have found *congregations themselves* to be too strict or conservative, rather than simply being annoyed by conservative religious trends. The 2000-2002 General Social Survey data provides no way to test this possibility. What is known from the data is that of older Boomers who claimed no religious affiliation, only slightly more older Boomers said they were part of religiously liberal bodies when they were age 16 than older Boomers generally (but the survey results are barely significant). As such, the surveys do not indicate that people who now claim no affiliation were necessarily any more religiously liberal in their upbringing than they were religiously conservative. In that case, loose strictures or boundaries did not lead older Boomers to declare no affiliation since those raised in conservative bodies would not have found those qualities lacking. As Joseph Tamney, now retired from Ball State University, found in an Indiana town he studied

intensively for several years, people prefer “open” churches to strict ones. It is possible that the presence of tough strictures and tight boundaries drove away some older Boomers.

The journey of the Baby Boom through time has commanded the attention of the popular media, as well as of many people in religious institutions. The chapter that is now being written is of a generation that, despite their weak religious beginnings, had by the later years of the 20th century achieved a basic level of attendance. Moreover, older Boomers who found their way into religious institutions may be sticking with those religious bodies despite predicted life cycle effects. As religious scholars Roof and McKinney pointed out 15 years ago in *American Mainline Religion*, Baby Boomers generally see religious attendance as a matter of choice, rather than an obligation as their elders saw it. Scholars believed that affiliation arrived at by choice was less strong a social bond than affiliation arrived at by obligation. Thus, Boomer ties to religious bodies were seen as weak by scholars. Nancy T. Ammerman, a sociologist of religion at Boston University, says, however, that once a choice is made, that choice is a strong and durable commitment. The strength and durability of choices, as compared with giving in to obligation, may be reflected in the steady regular attendance of many older Boomers. Then, too, some older Boomers have found religious bodies not to their desire, though they harbor, and continue to harbor, religious beliefs. Never before having decided one way or another, these Boomers have now made a choice. That choice is *no*. Not *no* to religious faith, but *no* to religious institutions.

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