

The Parish Paper

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

IN THE WEST MICHIGAN CONFERENCE • THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever – www.TheParishPaper.com

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New Trends in Belonging

Kathryn, raised in a Catholic family, stopped attending Mass after she divorced ten years ago. When asked about her religious preference today, she says, “None.”

Susan was active in a Baptist church until she married Jack, who had attended an Episcopal church with his parents. Susan and Jack plan to find a congregation that meets both their needs—*eventually*. But they say they just haven’t found the time to explore their options. If asked about their present affiliation, they, too, answer, “None.”

Tom never attended worship services growing up. As an adult he feels formal religion doesn’t have much to offer. He also says, “None” when describing his religion.

The choices of these individuals illustrate the inconsistencies often observed between what people *say*, what they *believe*, and what they *do*. Why? Americans make multiple choices about where they attend religious services, what they believe, and how they describe their religious affiliation. Sociologists of religion refer to this triad as “*belonging, belief, and behavior*.” New evidence suggests that the “three Bs” of religious life are more dramatically uncoupled than in previous decades.

Research about “Nones” and religious switching reveal much about the religious landscape’s remarkable changeability.

Religious Belonging

What Is a None? A person who answers the question “What is your religion, if any?” with “None” joins the ranks of the unaffiliated—which is currently about 15 percent of American adults.¹

People who answer “None” are the fastest growing group in the religious landscape, growing by 138 percent since 1990. In contrast, people affiliating with Catholic congregations and Protestant groups failed to keep pace with the population growth of the past two decades.

Who Are the Nones? Most Christian groups have a female bias (approximately 60 percent of worshipers are women; 40 percent of worshipers are men). But the ratio of women to men among the Nones is reversed: 60 percent of Nones are men; 40 percent are women.

Additional differences:

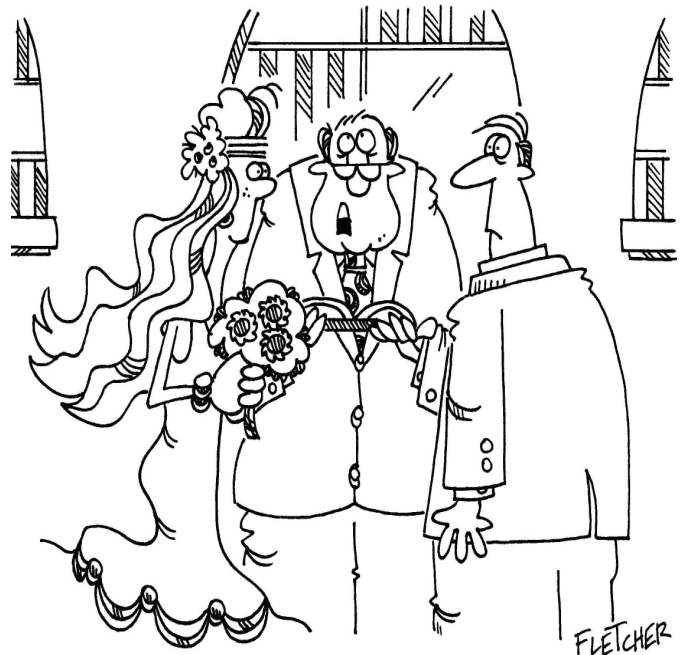
- Nones are younger. More than 70 percent of Nones are under age fifty (compared to 60 percent of the American adult population in that age bracket).

- Because marital-status profiles mirror age charts, Nones are also over-represented among the single, never-married population.

- On the other hand, educational attainment by Nones is fairly close to the national average: 31 percent of Nones are college graduates compared to 27 percent of the U.S. population.

While the Nones are a diverse group, almost eight out of ten Nones said they were raised in some kind of religion as children. Nones that left Protestantism to become unaffiliated were less likely to have regularly attended worship services or Sunday school as children or teenagers. Former Protestants and Catholics who are now unaffiliated say they just gradually drifted away from their childhood religion.

What fuels the growth of the Nones group? While there are many pathways to no religion, marriage across religious traditions is one such avenue. Instead of choosing one or the other spouse’s religious tradition, the couple picks “neither and none.” Also, more people now have cross-religious experiences through workplace and



WE GATHER TOGETHER IN THE SIGHT OF GOD...
TO JOIN THIS RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED COUPLE
IN HOLY MATRIMONY.

friendships. Exposure to diverse religious traditions appears to encourage thinking that “none” is as good as “any of the above.”

Adults leaving the Church contributed substantially to the None group’s expansion. In the 1990s white Catholics departing the Church fueled explosive growth of Nones. The more recent boom in Nones stems from white mainline Protestant departures.

Former Catholics now make up 10 percent of all American adults. About half of those former Catholics have become unaffiliated; the other half became Protestants. Many who left because they were unhappy with Catholic teachings became evangelical Protestants; Catholics who left because they married a non-Catholic tended to become mainline Protestants.

Once a None, Always a None? Surprisingly, Nones are the *most* likely of any group to become affiliated. Most people who were raised unaffiliated now belong to one religion or another. In fact, four in ten Nones who were raised unaffiliated became Protestant. Some former Nones joined a religious group because they say that their spiritual needs were not being met. And some say they finally found a religion they liked. Three out of four—raised unaffiliated but are now part of a religious group—joined because they enjoyed the religious services and worship style. But even those Nones who remain unaffiliated leave open the possibility that they may one day join a religious group. One-third say they just have not found the right religious group yet.

The growth of Nones takes place against a swirling national backdrop of joining, departing, and switching. Close to one-half (44 percent) of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once or profess a religious affiliation different from that in which they were raised. Switching begins early in life. Most people who change their religion leave their childhood faith before age twenty-four. A large majority report switching or departing a religious affiliation before reaching age thirty-six. But very few report changing religions after they reach age fifty.

Religious Belief

The rising tide of Nones is *not* evidence of increasing secularism—because polls consistently show that the majority of Americans believe in a personal God (seven out of ten adults). Likewise, surveys demonstrate that many of those who believe in God are currently Nones. Further, four in ten of the unaffiliated Nones population report that religion is at least “somewhat important” in their lives.

Religious Behavior

If the answer to “What is your religious preference?” is “Catholic” or some other religious group, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the person attends Mass or worship services regularly. Just because someone *identifies* with a religious group, that doesn’t mean he or she is a

church member, attends worship services, or participates in church programs.

The size of the gap between religious identification and actual behavior depends on the individual and the faith group: In general, Catholic self-identity persists throughout the life cycle, but Mass attendance continues to decline overall. A smaller gap exists between identification with a conservative Protestant denomination and worship-attendance rates. And the Nones attend funerals and weddings in churches or religious settings.

The New “Normal”

Modern pathways to faith—the American way—involve circling, doubling back, or retracing a previous trail. Younger adults seek “not so much to join a tradition as to find belonging among a people; not so much to accept a body of doctrine as to find welcome for what they already believe; not so much to surrender their lives but to enhance who they already are.”²

How Can Our Congregation Respond?

Ask congregational leaders to address the rise in Nones by discussing these questions:

1. Do we emphasize the participation of children and youth in all aspects of congregational life because such participation has life-long returns?
2. Do we have a systematic way to re-connect with attendees who seem to be gradually drifting away?
3. Do we welcome single, never married adults? “Mixed” religious couples or families? A spouse who chooses to attend alone? Former Catholics? What are our specific strategies to meet the needs of these groups?
4. Do our religious services and worship styles meet the needs of people younger than age forty-five?
5. Do we assume that people connect with a congregation in the following sequence? They (a) believe, (b) join, and then (c) participate.
6. Or do we recognize that the following sequence is the new normal? People (a) participate, (b) join, and then (c) believe.
7. If the latter sequence is the new normal, what else can we do to get more people to take that first step—participate?

¹Findings drawn from the following two research sources: American Religious Identification Survey by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org); and U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, (www.pewforum.org) “Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.”

²Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), as quoted in “Liberal Path,” by Timothy Renick, *The Christian Century*, May 5, 2009, page 33.