

Emerging Adult Participation in Congregations

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In this essay, I provide new information about the congregational participation of emerging adults (ages 18 to 29) in the United States.¹ These results are based on my analysis of data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, which was completed in worship services by over 100,000 adults in 436 congregations during the weekend of April 29, 2001. This analysis focuses on the subsample of adults in 399 Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant congregations.²

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) provides information about people attending a sample of American congregations designed to be representative of those typically attended by American adults.³ This dataset has two unique strengths for the purposes of this essay. First, it includes a large number of emerging adults (over 10,000) surveyed in the congregations they attend. Second, it collects extensive information about the background, participation, and attitudes of these emerging adults.

This report is organized in five sections. First, I describe the prevalence of emerging adults in congregations. Second, I describe the demographic characteristics of these emerging adults. Third, I describe how they are involved in congregational life. Fourth, I analyze what emerging adults value in congregations. Finally, I analyze the demographic and theological characteristics of congregations with an above-average concentration of emerging adults.

1. How Common Are Emerging Adults in Congregations?

Emerging adults are twice as common in the general population as they are in

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congregations. According to data from the Census Bureau, in 2001, the emerging adult age group made up 22% of the adult population in the United States.⁴ In contrast, emerging adults made up slightly less than 10% of the total adult population in the congregational sample.

The concentration of emerging adults varies considerably among congregations in different religious traditions (see Table 1). Evangelical Protestant congregations have the highest concentration of emerging adults (14%), followed by Catholic parishes (10%), and mainline Protestant congregations (6%).

The concentration of emerging adults in congregations also varies by census region. Overall, emerging adults are concentrated most highly in congregations in the West (12%). However, the West is also the region with the lowest concentration of emerging adults in mainline Protestant congregations (4%).

Table 1: Percentage of emerging adults in congregations by census region and religious tradition (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Northeast	5%	7%	14%	8%
Midwest	7%	8%	16%	9%
South	6%	9%	11%	9%
West	4%	12%	17%	12%
National average	6%	10%	14%	10%

2. What Are the Traits of Emerging Adults in Congregations?

This section describes the breakdown of emerging adults in these congregations by marital status, gender, country of birth, race, labor-force participation, and devotional activities. For reference, I compare emerging adults to congregants ages 30 to 75.⁵

Marital Status

The majority of emerging adults in congregations have never married. However, most emerging adults have married by the time they are 26. By age 29, the never married comprise only 1 in 4 respondents. In comparison, 1 in 13 older adults have never married. A small minority (6%) of emerging adults reported “living in a committed relationship,” though this response was twice as common among mainline Protestants and Catholics as it was among evangelicals.⁶ One explanation for the variation in prevalence of cohabiting respondents could be that evangelicals tend to marry younger than those in other traditions; hence, there would be a smaller proportion of unmarried evangelicals able to cohabit. However, the proportion of never-married emerging adults is similar across traditions, so it seems more likely that social norms related to evangelical teaching about the sinfulness of sex outside marriage inhibit churchgoing evangelicals from cohabiting or lead cohabiting former parishioners to fade from congregational life.

Gender and Children

The distribution of men and women does not vary much across religious traditions, or by emerging-adult and older-adult status within each tradition. In all categories, women make up about 6 in 10 worshippers. Until age 29, the majority of emerging adults in congregations have no children. Among emerging adults who do have children, about half have one child and half have two or more children.

Native and Foreign Born

Most emerging adults were born in the United States. Foreign-born emerging adults are most common in Catholic parishes, where they constitute 3 in 10 emerging adults. In comparison, 2 in 10 older adults in Catholic parishes are foreign born. Foreign-born emerging adults make up 3% of emerging adults in mainline Protestant and 7% of emerging adults in evangelical Protestant congregations.

Race

The racial diversity of emerging adults varies significantly between religious traditions.

Almost all emerging adults in mainline churches identified themselves as white, as did over three quarters of evangelical emerging adults (see Table 2). There is no majority racial group among Catholic emerging adults. Nearly 40% of Catholic emerging adults identified as Hispanic. The pattern of overall racial diversity shown in Table 2 could be the result of aggregating emerging adults from highly segregated congregations. However, a similar pattern of racial diversity is found within congregations in each tradition. Consider as one indicator of racial diversity the percentage of congregations in which whites make up at least 20% but less than 80% of worshippers. This threshold of racial diversity is met by 1% of mainline congregations, 9% of evangelical congregations, and 29% of Catholic parishes.

Table 2: Distribution of race and ethnicity among emerging adults (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical
White	92%	49%	78%
Black	4%	2%	11%
Hispanic	1%	38%	8%
Asian	1%	10%	2%

Note: Respondents could choose multiple categories and additional categories not tabulated here.

Labor-Force Participation

Emerging adults are as likely as older adults to participate in the labor force. However, the USCLS question about labor-force participation did not distinguish among full-time work, part-time work, and self-employment. About two thirds of adults in both age groups reported active labor-force participation. Nearly 4 in 10 emerging adults are students.

Devotional Activities

Emerging adults were less likely to report spending daily time in devotional activities such as prayer and meditation than were older adults (33% vs. 46%).

3. How Are Emerging Adults Involved in Congregational Life?

Most emerging adults in congregations reported attending weekly. Evangelical emerging adults are the most likely to be weekly attendees. Mainline congregations have the highest percentage of emerging adults visiting for the first time among all emerging adults present in the congregation. While having a high percentage of visitors may sound positive, it is not necessarily great news for mainline congregations, because the percentage is calculated based on a relatively small total population of emerging adults. The relatively high percentage of first-time visitors among mainline congregations is an indication that mainline congregations have a hard time retaining those emerging adults who occasionally visit.

Emerging adults are twice as likely to have participated in their congregation for less than two years compared with older adults. However, the majority of emerging adults have participated in the congregation for at least two years and a quarter of emerging adults have been attending for over a decade.





















Emerging adults do not contribute as large a portion of their income to congregations as older adults do, on average. About a quarter give at least 5% of their net income, compared with about half of older adults who give this amount. A fifth of emerging adults said they do not contribute to their congregation.

Most members of both age groups reported having at least some close friends in their congregation. However, emerging adults were more likely than older adults to report little contact with others in the congregation. Among emerging adults who worship at least once a month, little contact with others in the congregation was reported by 1 in 10 evangelicals, 2 in 10 mainliners, and 3 in 10 Catholics.

4. What Do Emerging Adults Value in Congregations?

Emerging adults and older adults appreciate similar aspects of their congregation. The survey asked respondents to vote for up to three aspects of congregational life they most value. Both age groups voted sermons, communion, and traditional worship as the most valued traits of their congregation, though a larger percentage of 30- to 75-year-olds voted for each of these traits. Emerging adults are more likely to value contemporary

Table 4: Favored styles of music by age group (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Favored music	18- to 29-year-olds	30- to 75-year-olds
Traditional hymns	44% 	61% 
Praise music	41 	32 
Contemporary hymns	22 	27 
Other contemporary music	19 	12 
Music from a variety of cultures	9 	9 
Sung responsorial psalms	8 	11 
African American gospel music	7 	4 
Classical music or chorales	7 	10 
Contemplative chants like Taize, Iona	2 	2 
No music or songs	1 	1 

Note: Respondents voted for up to two preferred styles of music.

Emerging adults were more likely to report sometimes experiencing boredom during worship services than older adults. Among emerging adults, boredom was reported by roughly 4 in 10 evangelicals, half of mainliners, and 6 in 10 Catholics.

Both age groups tended to report that their spiritual needs are being met by their congregations and that church leaders encourage the respondents to find and use their gifts and skills. However, the older age group was slightly more likely to respond affirmatively to each of these measures.⁷

5. What Are the Characteristics of Congregations with at Least 10% Emerging Adults?

In 95% of congregations in the USCLS sample (378 of 399), emerging adults are underrepresented compared with their presence in the general American population (22% of adults). While about 10% of all adults in the USCLS congregations are emerging adults, the average congregation has an even smaller percentage of emerging adults (8%).⁸ This difference between the overall percentage of emerging adults and the average percentage in congregations is due to the concentration of emerging adults in large congregations.

In the remainder of this report, I consider the characteristics of congregations with at least 10% emerging adults. Less than a third of congregations meet this threshold. Considering the characteristics of these congregations will provide clues about which factors could help attract and retain emerging adults. For most congregations, it is probably unrealistic to hope that enough emerging adults can be recruited that they will make up 22% of adults, as they do nationwide. A more realistic goal for congregations would be to have 10% of adults in the emerging category. Among the congregations in this sample, the 10% emerging-adult threshold is met by 10% of the mainline, 31% of the Catholic, and 59% of the evangelical congregations. In the following section of this report, I compare traits of congregations with less than 10% emerging adults and at least 10% emerging adults.

Table 5: Distribution of congregations in which at least 10% of adults are ages 18–29, by religious tradition (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

	Mainline congregations	Catholic congregations	Evangelical congregations
Less than 10% emerging adult	90%	69%	41%
At least 10% emerging adult	10%	31%	59%

It may seem likely that communities with large emerging adult populations produce congregations with large emerging adult populations. However, even congregations close to large emerging adult populations may struggle to involve emerging adults in congregational life. Among congregations in the survey, being in a county with a higher proportion of young adults does increase the chance that the congregation has at least 10% emerging adults. However, even in counties with high proportions of emerging adults, the majority of congregations do not meet the 10% threshold.

There are three important demographic patterns that distinguish congregations with higher percentages of emerging adults across each of the religious traditions. Emerging adults are concentrated in congregations that are larger, have proportionally more men, and are more racially diverse. Congregations that meet the 10% threshold have more adults attending worship services than the congregations that do not meet

this threshold. In congregations with less than 10% emerging adults, 36 out of 100 congregants are men, while 41 out of 100 congregants are men in congregations with at least 10% emerging adults. In congregations with more emerging adults, whites are only 76% of worshippers, whereas whites are 92% of worshippers in congregations with fewer emerging adults.

Earlier we saw that emerging adults are more likely than older adults to value evangelism, social activities, and social diversity. These values fit well with the observed tendency of emerging adults to cluster in congregations that are larger, have a more even gender balance, and have more racial diversity. The survey did not ask whether respondents value the congregation as a place to find dating partners. However, we have seen that most emerging adults in congregations are unmarried, so it seems safe to assume that many would indeed like to find dating partners in a congregation. Emerging adults may assume that the chance of finding a suitable partner is higher in larger congregations, which may even offer young adult groups. The presence of at least a few young unmarried men may be valued by both men and women.

Table 6: Demographic characteristics of congregations, by religious tradition and emerging adult composition (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Average worship attendance estimate				
Emerging adults	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Less than 10%	137	616	110	258
At least 10%	151	846	228	381

Percentage of men in congregation				
Emerging adults	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Less than 10%	36%	36%	38%	36%
At least 10%	42%	39%	41%	41%

Percentage of white adults in congregation				
Emerging adults	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Less than 10%	96%	84%	90%	92%
At least 10%	86%	52%	85%	76%

Congregations with high concentrations of emerging adults tend to be more theologically conservative than other congregations. About half of respondents in congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults hold exclusivist theological views (denying that all religions are equally good paths to truth), compared to 3 in 10 who hold exclusivist views in other congregations. Likewise, in the congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults, half of congregants say that the Bible is to be taken literally, word for word. Only 3 in 10 are biblical literalists in congregations with lower concentrations of emerging adults. Within religious traditions, these percentages vary considerably, but the same pattern holds. In mainline, Catholic, and evangelical congregations, the congregations with a greater concentration of emerging adults tend to be those with members who hold more conservative beliefs.

Table 7: Theological characteristics of congregants, by congregation's religious tradition and emerging adult composition (U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001)

Emerging adults in congregation	Percentage of congregants who were exclusivists			
	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Less than 10%	25%	20%	63%	31%
At least 10%	29%	22%	72%	53%

Emerging adults in congregation	Percentage of congregants who were Biblical literalists			
	Mainline	Catholic	Evangelical	All congregations
Less than 10%	22%	16%	64%	29%
At least 10%	31%	24%	68%	51%

Conclusion

Emerging adults are underrepresented in each religious tradition we have considered. They are most likely to be found in evangelical churches and least likely to be found in mainline churches. The majority of emerging adults in congregations are unmarried and do not have children. Most are women. Most were born in the United States, but a large minority of Catholics were foreign born. Catholic emerging adults come from more diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds than Protestants.

While emerging adults value many of the same traits in their congregation as older adults, they place greater emphasis on nontraditional worship styles, evangelism, social activities, and diversity. Emerging adults tend to be concentrated in congregations that are larger and have more men, greater racial diversity, and members with more conservative theology.

Appendix: Notes on the Data in This Report

All claims in this essay refer specifically to respondents in mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical Protestant congregations in the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey. While there are many other surveys of congregations, most rely upon information provided by one key informant in each congregation. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey is the largest available survey of adults worshipping in American congregations. Respondents in the sample are concentrated in relatively large congregations, as are Americans nationwide. In *Congregations in America*, Mark Chaves notes the median worship attendee participates in a congregation of 400, while the median congregation has 75 participants. In other words, the average worshipper goes to a congregation that is relatively large, while the average congregation is relatively small.

Nearly 1,300 congregations were invited to participate in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. Over 800 agreed to administer the survey, but nearly half did not return completed surveys, for various reasons. While this response rate would be considered low for a sample of individuals, it is a significant accomplishment for a burdensome census of all worshipers attending a congregation during a weekend. It is possible that the characteristics of emerging adults in the congregations that did not participate in the survey vary to some degree from participating congregations. Reported results should be considered descriptions of the general patterns expected to be observed in mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical Protestant congregations nationwide rather than statistics that can be generalized with a known degree of precision.

Additional information about the U.S. Congregational Life Survey is available at

www.uscongregations.org/. All analysis in this report was conducted by the author.

Notes

¹ Another valuable resource on this topic is chapter 11 of Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Wuthnow analyzes information from the National Congregations Survey. In the National Congregations Survey, one key informant in each congregation provided extensive information about the congregation, including an estimate of the percentage ages 18 to 35. Wuthnow analyzes the characteristics of congregations with high and low reported estimates of young adults.

² See the appendix of Hackett (2008), *Religion and Fertility in the United States: The Influence of Affiliation, Region, and Congregation*, for notes on religious tradition coding. Note that all religious congregations were eligible to be included in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The survey includes congregations from many traditions, including Jewish synagogues, Buddhist temples, and black Protestant churches. However, because of the limited number of congregations from each of these traditions in the sample, this analysis focuses only on the three traditions that have over 100 congregations in the sample. The subsample of congregations in this report includes 166 mainline Protestant, 128 evangelical Protestant, and 105 Catholic congregations.

³ In a prior survey with a representative sample of Americans (the 2000 General Social Survey), respondents who attended a congregation within the last year were asked to name their congregation. Nominated congregations were located and invited to participate in the Congregational Life Survey.

⁴ This statistic is calculated from information posted here: www.census.gov/popest/archives/2000s/vintage_2001/US-2001EST-ASRO-01.html. The midyear 2001 total U.S. adult population was estimated to be 212,244,726 people, and the number of adults ages 18 to 29 was estimated to be 46,757,145.

⁵ For lack of a widespread label for this population that is past the emerging adult age range, I refer to them as "older adults." In this dataset, 80% of worshippers are in the older age range (ages 30 to 75). Adults over 75 comprise 15% of mainline Protestants but only 6% of evangelical Protestants.

⁶ It is not possible to determine whether these “committed relationships” are heterosexual or homosexual from the information collected in the survey.

⁷ Recall that the Congregational Life Survey provides information about only those attending worship services in each congregation. Some of the respondents who have participated in these congregations in the past whose spiritual needs were not being met or whose gifts and skills were not affirmed by church leaders are likely to have stopped attending regularly.

⁸ Among the adult population of congregations in this sample, emerging adults are 5% of the average mainline congregation, 8% of the average Catholic parish, and 12% of the average evangelical congregation.