

**Empty Nest; Empty Pew:  
The Boomers Continue Through  
the Family Cycle**

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The religious journey of the baby boomers is, perhaps, the most well documented pilgrimage of any American cohort (see, for example, Roof, 1993; Hoge, Johnson and Luidens, 1994; and Roozen, Carroll and Roof, 1995). The intense scrutiny of the boomers' religious journey is due, in part, to the boomers' distinction of being the first cohort to come of age during an age of pervasive national survey research. Coupled with this, it also is undoubtedly due to the varied directions taken in the boomers' journey -- leading their parents to the "revival" of the 1950s; plunging the mainline into decline during the late 1960s and early 1970s; and most recently rekindling optimism with their prodigal return. And along the way they have presented social scientists of religion grist for a wide range of new theoretical speculation -- from rich conceptualizations of conversion arising out of reflection on the new religious movements (e.g., Robbins, 1988), to "new paradigms" (Wamer, 1993), to the ultimate in market orientations, "church as choice" (e.g., Marler and Roozen, 1993).

This paper has nothing so grand in mind. Indeed, it is but a research note stimulated by the recent availability of data that for the first time allows empirical investigation of a question originating nearly ten years ago when several colleagues and I were documenting the big chill generation's warming to worship (Roozen, McKinney and Thompson, 1985). Among other things we showed that one of the major contributing factors in the boomers' return to active religious participation during the 1980s was their movement into parenting roles. Of course not all boomer drop-outs were returning, as Roof's, *A Generation of Seekers* (1993) clearly shows; and other factors were also important for many who did return. But there has since been sufficient confirmation of our original research that I feel confident riding with the now almost taken-for-granted wisdom that parenting has been a major stimulus to boomer religious participation.

Given the parental return -- and remembering that for boomers to have "returned" because of their children, they must have "left" during a pre-child rearing period of life -- I, like perhaps many others, have long wondered if the boomers would leave again, once they were no longer rearing children. That is, will the next banner for the boomers' religious journey be: **EMPTY NEST; EMPTY PEW?**

Prior research on the relationship between church participation and either age or family-life-cycle provides little definitive help in speculating about this possibility. Not only is this because this work has produced conflicting results (see Hoge and Roozen, 1979 for an overview; Hout and Greeley, 1987, 1990 and Chaves, 1989, 1990 for a relatively sharp and recent exchange); but also because the religious implications of the specific transition from active parenting to empty nest has never been directly addressed. This paper, therefore, is not only a first look at the implications of this specific transition for the church participation of the baby boomers, but also the transition's implications for the religious participation of previous cohorts.

**DATA AND MEASURES**

The data for my analysis comes from the National Data Program for the Social Sciences's General Social Survey (GSS) series, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. GSS samples are relatively typical, national, cross-sectional samples of the non-institutionalized American population, 18 years of age and older; each cross-sectional sample having an N of approximately 1,500 (for sampling details see GSSDIRS). The 1973, 1974 and 1975 samples from this series are pooled for my 1974 reference point; the 1983, 1984 and 1985 GSS samples are pooled for the 1984 reference point; and the 1993 and double 1994 GSS samples are pooled for the 1994 reference point.

General convention refers to those born between 1946 and 1965 as the "baby boom" generation. My analysis distinguishes between older baby boomers (born: 1946 to 1955) and younger baby boomers (born: 1956 to 1965), and focuses on the former--i.e., the older boomers. There is both a practical and a substantive reason for my distinction and focus. Substantively, demographers have noted decided differences between what I call the "older" and "younger" boomers, differences in both demographics and values (e.g., American Demographics, 1985). Practically, only members of the "older" boomer group have as yet reached the empty nest stage. Selective comparative data is also reported for the pre-1926 cohort, the depression cohort (born: 1926-35), the WWII cohort (born: 1936-45) and the post boomer cohort (born after 1965).

Religious participation is measured through the GSS worship attendance question, "How often do you attend religious services?" For my purposes the original nine coding categories are collapsed into low ("about once or twice a year," or less), moderate ("several times a year," or "about once a month") and regular (three times a month or more.)

A seven category family cycle variable was constructed from several GSS questions

concerning age, marital status, number of children and current age of children in the household. Abbreviations and definitions of my seven family-cycle categories include: 1) NM (never married--even if children are present in the household); 2) WDS (widowed, divorced, separated--even if children are present in the household); 3) MNC (married, never had children and no children currently present in household); 4) M C<6 Only (married, only children less than 6 years old present in household); 5) M PreTeen C (married, at least one child aged 6 to 12 present in the household); 6) M Teen C Only (married, youngest child present in the household is aged 13 - 17); and 7) M Empty Nest (married, have had children but none are currently in the household).

## **ANALYSIS**

Table 1 presents the trend in worship attendance across my three reference points (1974, 1984 and 1994) for the United States adult population as a whole, and by cohort. I trust it contains no surprises for religious trend watchers. Overall, worship attendance has been extremely stable since the mid-1970s, but a few significant fluctuations are evident by cohort--the most important for present purposes being that for the older baby boomers between 1974 and 1984 reflecting the "parenting bounce."

Table 2 tracks cohorts through the family cycle from 1974 to 1994. Specifically in regard to the older boomers we see the movement from single and married with either no children or young children in 1974, to married with either young or preteen children in 1984, to married with preteen or teenage

children and the first significant appearance of empty nesters in 1994. That the dominant family cycle trend for the older boomers during the next two decades will be into empty nest category is evident in examining the Depression cohort family cycle trend between 1974 and 1994 and the WWII cohort trend between 1984 and 1994. In 1974, for example, only 13% of the Depression cohort were empty nesters; in 1994, 53% were empty nesters. In 1974 less than 5% of the WWII cohort were empty nesters; in 1994, 41% were empty nesters. Although the older baby boomers tended to marry and have children later in life than the two immediately preceding cohorts, which would suggest a slightly "delayed" movement into the empty nest stage of life; this is at least partially offset by the fact that the older boomers also tended to have fewer children (Watkins, Menken and Bongaarts, 1987).

Table 3 tracks regular worship attendance over time by cohort by family cycle stage. It takes us directly to my focal question: *will the boomers drop out of active religious participation again, once they're, again, no longer actively parenting?* Focusing on the older boomer cohort in Table 3 we see several patterns. First, in each of the three reference years regular worship attendance is highest for marrieds with preteen children. Second, with the first appearance of significant numbers of older boomer empty nesters in 1994 the table shows that regular attendance for empty nesters is significantly less than for persons with either preteen or teenage children, the drop from preteen to empty nest being particularly dramatic (53.0% vs 37.2%, a decline of nearly a third). Third, in the 1984 and 1994 older boomer columns we see that the drop-off in regular worship attendance related to movement through the parenting cycle actually begins before the empty nest stage, it begins once the youngest of a parent's children reaches her or his teens. And finally, particularly in regard to marrieds with preteen children, we see significant changes in worship attendance over time, suggesting an interaction between family cycle and period affects (that is, family cycle is not the only influence on the older boomer trend in worship attendance).

Table 4 addresses the question of whether or not the "empty nest-empty pew" syndrome is a pervasive phenomenon among older boomers or limited to a few, specific sub-groups. The table shows regular worship attendance by family cycle for older boomers in 1994 within categories of a wide range of social, demographic and attitudinal "control" variables. The relatively small N's and lack of statistical significance encountered within many of the control variable categories dictate some caution in regard to interpreting the table as anything other than suggestive. But one consistent "suggestion" is that the empty nest-empty pew syndrome is pervasive. Within 18 of the 19 control variable categories presented in the table regular attendance is lower among empty nesters than it is among marrieds with preteen children. The single exception is for married couples in which one spouse is working full time and the other spouse is working part time. And, within 17 of the 19 control variable categories regular worship attendance is lower among empty nesters than it is among marrieds with only teenage children present in the household.

Table 4 is a bit less consistent in showing that the erosion of worship attendance really begins at the "teen only" stage and then further erodes at the empty nest stage. Nevertheless, this pattern is still evident in 13 of the table's 19 control variable categories.

The impact of movement through the family cycle on the older boomer worship attendance trend is graphically rendered through the simulations presented in Figures 1 and 2. [Figure 1](#) looks backward to 1974; [Figure 2](#) looks forward to 2014; both simulations use a procedure called test-factor

standardization (Rosenberg, 1961). Looking backward, the simulation graphed in Figure 1 asks the simple question: What would the trend in old boomer regular worship attendance have been since 1974 if there had been no movement through the family cycle. (The "standardized" trend shown in the figure was produced by setting the older boomer's 1984 and 1994 family cycle distribution equal to the cohort's 1974 family cycle distribution thus removing any direct effect of movement through the family cycle.) A comparison of the figure's actual and standardized trends shows: (1) that the "parenting bounce" was responsible for nearly half of the increase in older boomer regular attendance between 1974 and 1984; and (2) that the older boomer's regular attendance would have increased rather than decreased between 1984 and 1994 if had not been for the older boomers continual movement through the family cycle.

Looking forward, the simulation presented in Figure 2 asks: What will boomer attendance be in 2004 and 2014 if the only influence on their attendance is the cohort's continuing movement through the family cycle. Such a project, of course, requires an estimate of what the older boomers' family cycle distribution will be in 2004 and 2014. For simplicities sake I have used the WWII cohort's family cycle distribution in 1994 for the 2004 estimate and the Depression cohort's family cycle distribution in 1994 for the 2014 estimate. As already noted, the fact that older boomers tended to marry and have children later in life than these two cohorts might suggest that using these two cohorts' family cycle distributions for projecting to the older boomers will over-estimate the proportion of boomers in the late- and post-parenting stages of life. However, the fact that older boomers also tended to have fewer children than with the WWII or Depression cohorts pushes in the other direction, thereby producing credible estimates for our present purposes. As shown in Figure 2, the older boomers' continual movement through the family cycle will exert a downward pull on their worship attendance--from 41.8% regular attendance in 1994 to 36.6% in 2014 using the assumptions of my simulation. In one sense this drop of 5.2% percentage points is not overly dramatic. However, given that there are roughly 35 million older boomers, it does translate into just under 2 million fewer regular attenders in 2014 than in 1994.

## **DISCUSSION**

Will the boomers drop out of active religious participation, again, once they are no longer actively parenting? Although it is perhaps too early to provide a definitive and fully controlled answer, the findings presented here suggest that it is certainly an emerging trend worth watching. The findings also suggest that while empty nesters typically have lower levels of religious participation than marrieds with preteen children, the drop will be much more dramatic among baby boomers than for prior cohorts.

If this proves to be the case then just as family cycle transitions into parenting roles among the baby boom cohort exerted an upward push on worship attendance for this cohort over the last 20 years and helped stabilize overall religious participation rates in the United States over this same period, *the inevitable and relatively massive transition of the boomers out of active parenting roles should exert considerable downward pressure on overall levels of religious participation for at least the next twenty years.* That this downward pressure will be more noticeable on overall national trends than the downward twinge evident in Table 1 for 1984-1994 is suggested by two factors in particular. First, and as already noted, the "first-look" data presented in this paper suggests that the boomer drop-off in religious participation between preteen parenting and empty nest will be greater

for boomers than for previous cohorts. Second, the younger boomers have thus far followed the same family-cycle, religious journey as the older boomers; and the massive, combined size of these two boomer cohorts gives immediate primacy to their overall demographic affect.

Two additional cohort, family cycle trends further suggest downward demographic pressure on levels of religious participation in the United States over the next several decades. First, the immediate post-boomer cohort will soon replace the two boomer cohorts as the major cohort transitioning into parenting roles. However, this is an extremely small cohort (sometimes referred to as the "baby bust" generation) and the parenting stimulus to religious participation it will likely contribute to overall levels of religious participation should pale in comparison to the downward pressure from the boomers transition out of active parenting roles. Second, the cohort following the baby bust generation into adulthood (sometimes referred to as the "baby boomlet," and the second largest U.S. cohort after the boomers), will be moving over the next decade or so through their young adult not married or married without children family cycle stages. If this cohort holds true to their parents' example of low attendance (their parents being the boomers), then the movement of this next large cohort into family cycle stages traditionally low in religious participation will exert additional considerable downward pressure on overall levels of religious participation in the United States somewhat akin to that exerted by the boomers in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The common wisdom is that parenting is a stimulus to religious participation, and with one major qualification the data presented in this paper re-enforces that wisdom. In conclusion it is important to highlight that qualification because it is totally absent in prior research on the relationship between religious participation and the parenting-cycle. The qualification is that the parenting of teenage children is less conducive to the religious participation of parents than the parenting of younger children. To most parents and pastors of post-confirmation teenagers whom I know, this is hardly a surprising finding. In addition, the recent work of, for example, Ozorak (1989) and Erickson (1992) provides helpful perspective on adolescent religiosity as a time of readjustment for the adolescent, which if connected to recent voluntaristic or choice models of adult (in this case, parent) religiosity, certainly suggest plausible explanations for the "teen only" and empty nest qualifications of traditional family cycle models of religious participation evident in my data. But this theoretical synthesis remains to be done, and I end with the invitation for you to return with me 10 years from now to see if the emerging themes I have identified regarding the on-again, off-again relationship of the boomers to the organized religion and the predictions about future trends which these themes suggest, prove to be the case.

### **Endnote**

1. An earlier version of this paper using 1979-81 and 1989-91 GSS data was presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the Religious Research Association. The "empty nest" effect on older baby boomer worship attendance is highly consistent across the different data sets used in the earlier and the current versions of the paper.

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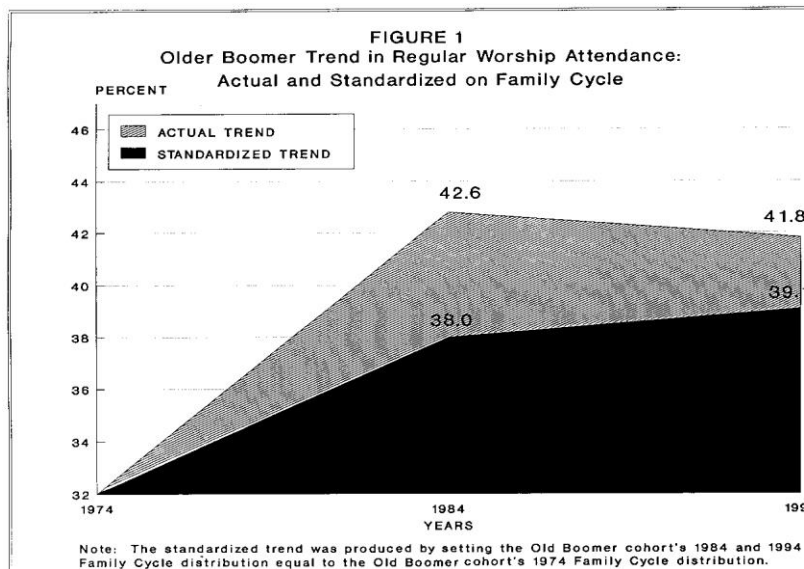
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### Figure 1

Older Boomer Trend in Regular Worship Attendance:  
Actual and Standardized on Family Cycle



Note: The standardized trend was produced by setting the Old Boomer cohort's 1984 and 1994 Family Cycle distribution equal to the Old Boomer cohort's 1974 Family Cycle distribution