

**Men's Commitment to Religion:
Perceptions of its Nature, Nurture, and Consequences**

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There are so few men in our churches now! Why is this happening? How can we fix this crisis?! How can we get more men participating? Such laments echo across the national, regional and congregational offices of the traditional mainline Protestant denominations today, as they have every year during the last century - and longer.

In fact, the substantial preponderance of women over men in the pews has been noted over the course of *three* centuries by historians of American religion. (Taves, 2002). Even by the mid seventeenth century in the Puritan male-led congregations of New England, historians have found written records and speeches lamenting the fact that women vastly outnumber men in these congregations, probably because women are essentially more pious. (Lindley, 1996:19-22) Notwithstanding, at the beginning of the 20th century, some church leaders concerned about the situation

"...discovered X or more accurately, *constructed* - a "crisis," pointing to the "excess of women over men in church life" as a new and dangerous threat, requiring immediate attention." (Gail Bedermen, cited in Taves, 2002, p.307)

At the beginning of the 21st century, there continue to be church leaders who are voicing this *excess* of women over men in their congregations, as an immediate *crisis* to be addressed, including the Episcopal Church which has long had a majority of women in its parish pews. Currently, there are more women than men in the congregations of most US denominations. However, in contrast to conservative Protestant denominations and similar to other liberal Protestant denominations, Episcopal congregations generally have significantly more women than men as members (Hadaway, 2002:16).

Both hundred years ago and presently, in this country and globally, writings by historians and other social scientists, reflect continued debate over whether congregations are first or mainly "feminized" in their worship and programs (1) because of the superabundance of women in the pews who nudge the churches that way, *or* (2) because congregational worship and programs, whatever their forms, are more attractive to women, who in contrast to men, are more emotional, nurturing, spiritual, and communally involved (Taves, 2002; Stark, 2002.)

(1) Church officials and many in the pews are more likely to hit on the first explanation for the lack of men in churches. Some see the greater secularization of society - particularly in the prevalence of Sunday sport events as competing effectively for the attention of men. Others put the greater

blame on the more equitable role women now have in secular institutions and families in American society, feeling these developments spur women to seek top positions not only in secular organizations but also in the church. Some fear that women leaders will make the church services and programs even more feminized, driving men further away from congregational participation.

(2) Psychologists of religion are more apt to endorse the second factor as explaining the prevalence of a female majority in congregations (Beit-Hallami, 2003; Beit-Hallami and Argyle, 1997). Personality tests conducted on sample across nationalities and religions find that feminine "traits" of caring, generosity, emotionality, etc. are far more prevalent in women.. Further, psychological indices of feminine orientation indicate that men who score higher on feminine orientation are more likely to be religiously committed, whether they are newly ordained clergy (Francis et. al., 2001) or elderly lay men (Thompson and Remmes, 2002). Sociologists suggest that the high proportion of gay men who are regular church attenders (Sherkat, 2002) carve out their own socio-emotional spaces and rationale for membership, ignoring those aspects of the congregation they dislike (Yip, 2002), as women have long done in patriarchal churches (Watling, 2002; Winter, et.al.).

Social factors and personality traits interact to affect attitudes and behavior, and not always in predictable ways. Psychologists Beit-Halami and Argyle (1997:251 et. passim) conclude from their extensive review that there are many gaps in attempts to link personality variables with religious behaviors and values. Individual religiosity, these authors predicate, is more connected to social identity of individuals rather than to any innate traits they may possess. If churches are viewed as places which attract women generally and men with feminine interests, men who strive to maintain their masculine identity, will avoid attending because as Stark (2002) puts this stereotype: "only wimps go to church."

Present Study: Sample and Methods

Perceptions concerning men's participation in congregations were investigated in a study commissioned and conducted by the Committee on the Status of Women, Executive Council of the Episcopal Church in 2001-2002, on which I was the research analyst (see report of the Committee on the Status of Women, "Reaching Toward Wholeness II," 2003). The primary purpose of this survey was to see how the status of women had changed since 1986-87 and to assess what blocks still remain to the full participation of lay and ordained women in the church. Participation of lay men in the church, though of secondary interest, was considered to be a possible correlate of other factors affecting the status of women, as well as a concern in itself.

In 2001 eighteen dioceses, geographically representing the United States, agreed to be part of this study and send out surveys. Between October 2001 and February 2002 committee chairs in the participating dioceses sent out about 350 surveys, using a random sampling method but over-sampling for women. A postage-paid return envelope addressed to Hartford Seminary was included with all surveys sent. A total of 2,843 diocesan surveys were returned (69% women, 31% men), about a 45% return rate overall. This is primarily a sample of *lay persons* in that only 12% are ordained (or 128 clergywomen, and 154 clergymen). The lay men and women in the sample were drawn from mailing lists and did not take the survey within their congregations; hence the sample likely includes both nominal and regularly attending members (although frequency of church attendance was *not* directly asked.)

The survey was by necessity limited to twelve pages of questions of interest to the Committee on the Status of Women. It did not include psychological indicators of femininity nor any other personality characteristic. It did, however, include questions on men's participation and gave opportunities for respondents to write comments on this topic. These data are used herein to explore why men may not be as involved in congregational life as some may want.

Questions and Some Answers About Men's Church Participation

1. Do women in church leadership positions deter men's participation?

One of the possible sources of resistance to some members' willingness to have women in congregational leadership roles is their assumption that the influx of women in church leadership positions is a primary cause for the scarcity of men in their pews.

Therefore, the following questions were asked in the survey:

- **Most congregational and diocesan leadership positions should be filled by men.**

The great majority (over 80%) of clergy women and men, as well as lay women and men, clearly *disagreed* with this first statement. They believe that the Episcopal Church and its congregations should have women leaders in the twenty-first century. It is rather the *extent* to which women are taking over leadership positions that evokes more ambivalence.

- **If women move into more of the leadership roles in the church, men's participation will drop further.**

Fewer respondents disagreed with this second statement. About half of the clergy men, lay women and men were at best ambivalent about whether women's filling more church leadership roles would reduce men's participation. (See Table Appendix, #1) While a clear majority of clergywomen disagreed with the statement; still about a third apparently felt that some men might react by withdrawing. Comments written on the returned surveys give insights into why some lay persons believe that men may decrease their participation with increasing numbers of women in the pews and leadership of their congregations.

A few believe the greater presence of women in church leadership angers men to the point of leaving, e.g.

- *Our church has moved too far towards women's issues and written off the men. Our parish only has had female vicars, who have no interest on issues or programs for men. The result is on Sunday's we see a lot more women than men the pews. The women claim all the committees, except buildings and grounds, and outnumber men in the Vestry.*
- *When I became involved in the Episcopal Church forty years ago, I was very pleased to see so many men in the pews and involved in the church. Now it seems we have many more women and they seem to be taking over the church. It seems there are fewer and fewer men in full time ministry or in pews, and more and more women. I wonder - is there really a shortage of men or are the women driving them away?*

Others commenting seemed less convinced that men are "driven away" by women's taking more leadership roles in their congregations, but rather that if women take these positions then men feel

freer to avoid such responsibilities. This can occur, the following comments suggest, either because busy men would rather not donate time to a church activity if anyone else will do it; or because men see any church activity as too feminine for their tastes, or even because some men are apprehensive they might not be as good as the women leaders in these church positions; e.g.:

- *My observation is that the more women are involved in church leadership, the less involvement from men. Their attitude seems to be passive: "Let the women do it." The whole church needs revitalizing in this respect.*
- *Perhaps men are not involved because they are seeing these church jobs as female ones C much as nursing or being a secretary are usually considered. Or, perhaps it relieves them from another burden.*
- *My concern with pushing women into upper level positions is that us guys may start to think they are doing too good in these areas and decrease our own participation.*

Some women may well agree with the "guy" quoted above, especially when they considering some of the men filling lay leadership positions in their congregations, e.g.

- *The major problem in our church is the preponderance of white males serving on the Vestry who are not spirit-filled. Most are suits - doctors, lawyers, etc., who do not even take time to come to coffee hour to socialize. These men are concerned about the budget and how they look - rather than the image of the church to newcomers and current members. With such role models how will our church ever grow in membership?*

Each of these possible scenarios may operate to reduce the congregational participation of some men. However, survey analyses suggest that on the whole, the fear that an increase in the number of female lay and clergy leaders will reduce the participation of men is unfounded.

- First, even though the Vestries (congregational governing board of elected lay leaders) ranged in percent women from under 40% to over 75%, neither lay men's nor women's responses to this question were affected by what proportion of the Vestry were females.
- Second, whether lay women were pastored by ordained women is unrelated to their opinions about the impact of women's church leadership on men. However, lay men were more likely to *disagree* that more women in leadership hurt men's interest in church participation if they had a woman pastor than if they did not.
- Third, other than age of the layperson, other characteristics such as educational attainment, income, marital status, children, etc., were unrelated to whether lay persons of either gender believed more women in leadership reduced the participation of men. However, younger laypersons were far more likely than elderly members to disagree that women's leadership diminished men's church involvement. In illustration, while over two-thirds of both men and women under age 35 *disagreed* that more women in church leadership would deter the participation of men, this proportion diminished within each age group, until among those 75 and older, less than a third disagreed. This suggests that perceptions of women's leadership having negative effects on men are holdovers from an

era where women were rarely in top church positions, rather than unbiased perceptions of the current reality.

2. Do Men Need Special Attention to Get Them to Participate in Church?

The major reason that men are less involved in congregations, as psychologists cited predicate, have far more to do with the "feminine" nature of the whole church experience being intrinsically more alien to men's "masculine" personalities and interests.

Are there programs, services and activities in congregations that would attract the average man, or are most too geared just to women's interests? Are men encouraged or discouraged in joining congregational groups and programs? Should men need and be given more appreciation and support for whatever time they can give to their congregation? Two items were placed in the survey to explore these possibilities.

- **Presently, there is a lot to interest and challenge men in the life of the church.**

The great majority, two-thirds or more of the clergy and lay women and men, *agreed* with this first statement, including 76% of the lay men. Apparently, most feel that it is not the fault of their congregational services and programs that relatively few men are involved.

- **Men need to be encouraged to have a meaningful involvement in church life more so than women.**

At the same time, more agreed that men need to have greater "encouragement" than women to take advantage of what the church offers. Only about fifty percent of the lay men and women *disagreed* with this second statement (see Table Appendix, #2), the remaining half of the sample being at best ambivalent about whether men need more encouragement. (Those laity who were most likely to *agree* with this second statement, however, were also those most likely to *disagree* with the first statement, suggesting that many feel that getting more men involved is going to take a combined effort of finding new kinds of programs for men *and* encouraging men to try these out.)

Whether male or female congregational members surveyed believed men need greater encouragement than women, is unrelated to whether they presently have a woman pastor or to the percent of women on their Vestries. Again however, older lay men and women were somewhat more likely than younger members to feel that men do need more positive nudging to participate and affirmation for so doing. While over two-thirds of both men and women *under age 35* *disagreed* that men needed more encouragement than women, this was almost reversed among those age 75 and older. Older men may indeed not be as affirmed by others in the congregation to the same degree as are younger men, as discussed next.

- **I feel in this congregation that my participation is appreciated.**

Over 90% of the respondents agree with this survey statement, although lay persons are less likely to agree "strongly" than clergy (See Table Appendix, #3). Men's degree of feeling appreciated, however, is not significantly related to their opinions about whether more efforts should be made to

involve men in church life. Possibly, those lay men among the desired male minority of parishioners, may feel really "special" - and not sure therefore that their treatment is typical for other men in their or other congregations.

The factors that influence men's *own* feelings that they are valued members of their congregations are the more important considerations to examine. However, it should be first noted that lay men's perceptions of how much their participation is appreciated are *unrelated* to whether their congregation has an ordained woman on pastoral staff or the proportion of women on the Vestry.

What does matter:

- Being appreciated by others takes some individual effort. Those laypersons currently involved in the greatest number of different activities within their congregations (total score index developed from check-off list of 20 activities), were more likely to say their participation in the congregation is appreciated. This is particularly true for lay men.
- Being elected to a top lay leadership position, also leads to feeling appreciated. Lay women and lay men particularly who have been or are now Vestry members are more likely to feel valued by their congregations.
- Being in a church which is thriving seems important in how much lay women and men feel personally affirmed as desirable members. This is possibly because many of these men and women take responsibly for the vitality of their congregation, or others treat them as partly responsible for its growth or decline.
- Being a younger *man* is important in how valued lay men feel for being present in and to their congregations. Age, however, is not related to how much appreciation women report. In illustration, among those under age 35, 80% of the lay men to 62% of the lay women "strongly agree" their participation is appreciated by others in their churches. Among lay members between age 65-74 somewhat fewer men feel so affirmed, 66% of the men to 70% of the women. By age 75 and older, only 50% of the men to 67% of the women feel so appreciated for their congregational involvement.

Some of the reasons that elderly men describe themselves as less appreciated than young and middle-aged men is because they are. Other correlations indicate that elderly men are the most opposed to women's taking top leadership positions in their parishes and dioceses and devoting more resources to women's issues. Grouchy old men are not apt to be treated with much esteem by the increasingly older female majority in many Episcopal congregations.

3. How Can We Get Men with Masculine Interests (who are in good health, and not arrogant, lazy or grouchy) Be Involved in Our Congregations?

Several from a number of dioceses commented that getting gay men involved was not the problem in their congregations, gay men like much of the same kinds of worship and programs that women do. Rather, their great difficulty was getting straight men participating, particularly the younger and middle-aged men. As noted earlier, the typical membership of congregations may stigmatize church participation as something "real guys" don't do. To quote one respondent:

- *"Women have a natural inclination in a spiritual life. Men need to be encouraged in this area. The church could do more to foster programs for heterosexual men to explore being masculine **with** the church."*

True, the very prevalence of women in congregations and their favored activities may make it difficult for straight men to as easily make friends and become part of the congregational community. Men apparently do not get the same health and emotional benefits from congregational friendships that women obtain (Krause, et. al., 2002), and this may be one reason. As two other respondents noted:

- *There seem to be more social/fellowship activities that are geared toward women than men. Men find it harder to make friends with the church, partly because there are more women than men attending.*
- *_I am worried that all-around guys are not finding much fellowship in the church. Camaraderie is missing.*

What can be done to bring the "all-around guys" in to the church? What about special men's groups, something like the Promise Keepers - but groups and gatherings which will appeal to mainline denominational men who are theologically unlike the charismatic religious conservatives drawn to PK events (Johnson, 2000)? From this survey, it seems that most kinds of men's spirituality/fellowship groups will probably not appeal to the majority of liberal Protestant men, and certainly few who are members of Episcopal congregations. Over half the lay men responding had never been in a men's group "connected with a congregation or diocese with which you meet regularly" and did not want to be. Further, almost three-fourths (72%) of the lay men disagreed they had ever "gained personal and spiritual insights from church related groups composed only/mainly of persons of my gender." Elderly male parishioners were those most apt to be members of men's church-related groups in this study.

Although most men in Episcopal congregations are not going to be drawn to workshops on topics such as "Christian meditation and prayer" anyway, survey results suggest, they may be induced to come to education events on other less feminine-appealing topics. Men in good health and not overly busy in their secular lives, may be more attracted to church-related/sponsored activities that involve fund-raising, raising houses, or other types of direct outreach to the needy in the surrounding community or world. It is finding just the right program(s) to interest men, nominally mainline and preferably Episcopalian in the particular church vicinity, that is problematic. Often nothing new is tried to increase the participation of men - particularly if the congregation has not grown for some years and its lay leaders and most members are older, e.g.

- *Women outnumber men 4 to 1 in my present congregation. There is almost a total absence of programs for improving the participation of men. Men are basically ignored for the most part...Men don't usually congregate unless there is a specific goal or project in mind.*
- *Many churches I see, especially ours, are run by older parishioners. Therefore, the services, the Christian education, the events - are oriented toward a traditional senior perspective. To bring young men into the church, the church needs to embrace and discuss the hard issues of the day.*

At the same, many women active in congregations might agree with the following survey respondent that no matter what is offered to men - in the last analysis men are going to have to take time from other things to participate:

- *All the outreach and charitable work heavily involves women. With the shape of business and travel obligations these days, there is very little free time or down time until retirement. If anything, men need to find a way to carve out a little more time for their involvement.*

Summary and Reflections

Getting men involved in congregations to the same extent women are, has never been easy over the centuries. Current "crises" of men's relative absence in congregations of the Episcopal Church (and likely most other denominations) is *not* due to the greater proportion of women now in lay and clergy leadership positions, probably for two reasons:

(1) Women's leadership style in contrast to men's style on the average, is both more empowering of others and less directive both among male and female clergy (Zikmund, et. al, 1998) as well as for executives, managers, and supervisors in a wide range of organizations and settings (Eagly et al. 2003). This kind of "transformational" leadership as some call it, while generally more effective for all persons and situations, is also more acceptable to men with women leaders (Eagly et al. 2003). At any rate, this present study shows that simply having women in lay and clergy congregational leadership, does not in itself deter men at least nominally "churched" from participating in their congregations or feeling appreciated for their presence.

(2) Men, especially perhaps those who are concerned with maintaining a masculine social identity, as Beit-Hallahmi's (2002, 1997) extensive reviews of research and analyses demonstrate, are not likely to attend worship services and religious educational events in droves, if they can avoid so doing. The findings in this paper suggest that mainline congregations may increase the number of men involved in worship services and programs, by offering events, projects with a concrete task focus which will appeal more to men's agenic interests in the world outside the church. However, even assiduous attention to these approaches is unlikely to greatly expand the proportion of men active in congregations.

Denominations and congregations have survived long without a balance of men to women in the pews. If **real men** support the church financially and approve of their family members attending, why be concerned that men are not present? Solution: let the jocks be and let the more spiritually advanced women and men both people and manage the congregations!

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TABLE APPENDIX	CLERGY		LAITY	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
	(128)	(155)	(1554)	(611)

1. If women move more into the leadership roles in the church, men's participation will drop further.

Agree	6%	14%	14%	17%
Not sure	24%	33%	34%	33%
Disagree	53%	52%	50%	70%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Correlations of above item with: [1]

- e. Age (young to old) of laity.....-.20*** -.17***
- f. % Women on Vestry
(church governing board).....-.04 .03
- g. An ordained woman is on staff of congregation
(yes, no) -.01 -.14.**

2. Men need to be encouraged to have a meaningful involvement in church life more so than women.

Agree	26%	27%	26%	28%
Not sure	18%	17%	18%	18%
Disagree	56%	56%	56%	56%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Correlations of above item with

- a. There is a lot to interest men in church.... -.14*** -.12**
- b. Age (young to old) of laity.....-.11*** -.10*

3. I feel in this congregation my participation is appreciated.

Agree strongly	84%	83%	66%	64%
Agree somewhat	15%	14%	25%	28%
Not sure	0%	2%	5%	5%
Disagree	2%	1%	4%	3%

100%

100%

100%

100%

Correlations of above item with

- a. Men need to be encouraged.
more so than women..... .01 -.09
- b. # (0-20) of different church activities now
involved.....-.16*** -.25***
- c. Member of Vestry in last 10 years (yes, no)..13*** .19***
- d. My congregation is:
1. growing, 2. same 3. declining. 17***.17***
- e. Age (young to old) of laity.....-.04 .13**

[1] * significant at .01 , ** sig at .001 level , *** sig. at .000 level or better