





The Challenge of Faith

Bringing spiritual sustenance to busy lives

By Kimberly Morgan and Sally Steenland

[I wish church leaders could] spend a day with a typical working mom, single mother, or caregiver to see the stresses of women's jobs.¹

[I'd love to] change the perception that a working woman is less of a mother and that her family suffers because she works.²

It's a fallacy to think women can do it all. Women can do what they're called to do.³

These women's voices, captured in a series of focus groups and conversations across the country, express a dilemma facing millions of women today: how to balance work, family, and faith. It is hard enough for women to find sufficient hours in the day for job and family. Finding time for religious involvement is harder still, even though the support and services that organized religion provides may be needed now more than ever.

Religious institutions today also face a dilemma. They exist in a competitive, mobile marketplace and must adapt to the changing roles and time constraints of women in order to grow—and even to survive.

Religion is important in the lives of many women who look to it for sustenance, community, inspiration, and guidance in their daily lives. Women also seek in religion a purpose larger than themselves and the opportunity to put their faith into action and work for a better world. For women whose lives are often fragmented

and harried, religious communities provide a place where stresses can be unburdened and joys shared—where they can step back from the fray, connect with God and others, and prepare to re-enter the world.

As more and more demands have been placed on women, many religious institutions have attempted to respond, adapting their beliefs and practices to meet the needs of women and their families. Many have done so out of a sense of mission, connecting theological beliefs in human dignity, equality, and justice with practical support.

Some religious institutions maintain a firm belief in the spiritual superiority of the “traditional” family and primacy of women’s domestic role, yet they offer programs to accommodate working mothers and blended families.

For some religious institutions, the reality of working women’s lives has exposed a discrepancy between their beliefs and day-to-day practices. On the one hand, they maintain a firm belief in the spiritual superiority of the “traditional” family and primacy of women’s domestic role, yet they offer programs to accommodate working mothers and blended families. Child care programs, especially, are growing across faith traditions, so that at least one-quarter of children in child care centers are in programs located in churches, synagogues, and other places of worship.

That is not the only discrepancy regarding women and religion today. Women say that religion matters a great deal to them, but the numbers show that as their workforce participation increases, their religious participation declines. Women today are also religiously mobile, moving from one faith tradition to another, and in and out of organized religion altogether. Spirituality is also on the rise. From meditation and yoga to contemplative walks and New Age self-help books, more and more women are seeking renewal in sources outside organized religion.

These changes—and the dynamic interactions among them—are highly significant for individuals and for society. The faith communities that women belong to exist

within larger institutions with histories, doctrines, cultures, and influence. Over the centuries, these institutions have helped shape social morality and cultural norms, and in turn, have been influenced by them. In the private sphere, religious institutions shape how we find meaning, balance responsibility to others with self-fulfillment, and respond to the modern world. In the public sphere, religious institutions can be prophetic voices for justice, as well as rigid defenders of an unjust status quo. Their views on family and morality have helped form government policies, and their power to engage and inspire people to action remains a powerful force today.

This chapter examines many of these changes and challenges. We examine the role of religion in women's lives—how it helps to unify their different identities and navigate competing demands and stresses. We look at the ways religious institutions are responding to changes in their congregations. We also analyze the growth of spirituality and how it is shifting followers away from the traditions, teachings, and public witness that many religious institutions provide.

As women (and men) increasingly grapple with shifting gender roles and responsibilities, as families face greater economic stress, and as women juggle multiple tasks in days that are too short, religious institutions can provide sustenance and support. However, their budgets are shrinking as demands for their services are rising. Their volunteer pool of women has been greatly diminished. The challenges facing religious institutions today are significant. They need to provide for the spiritual and material needs of women and their families, while speaking out on behalf of a moral vision that values women and family in a way that is neither regressive nor nostalgic, but authentic and prophetic for today.

Religion matters to millions of women

A glance at polling data might lead one to think that as women have left the home for paid work, they have also left religion. There are many reasons for declining religious participation in this country, but the correlation between women's rising workforce participation and decreasing religious activity is real.⁴ The opposite also tends to be true—the more religious women are, the less likely they are to work outside the home.

One obvious reason for women's declining religious participation is lack of time. As women cram into their day a host of work and family responsibilities, they

A current snapshot of women and religion: diverse and mobile

The picture of religion and women in America is varied and complex, filled with seeming contradictions and blank spaces where research is missing. For instance, as women’s workforce participation has risen, their religious attendance has declined. And yet religion is important in women’s lives—more so, according to research studies—than in men’s. For instance, women are more likely than men to say they believe in a personal God,⁵ to pray daily, and to attend weekly worship services.⁶

More than 82 percent of American women are Christian. Over 53 percent of all women belong to the Protestant tradition, nearly 27 percent are affiliated with evangelical churches, 19 percent with mainline churches, and 8 percent with historically black churches. Twenty-five percent of American women are Catholic. Other affiliations include Mormonism (1.8 percent), Judaism (1.6 percent), Buddhism (0.7 percent), Islam (0.4 percent), and Hinduism (0.3 percent). Thirteen percent of women claim no specific religious affiliation.⁷ Although their numbers are lower, millions of women are not religious: 0.9 percent are atheists, and 1.7 percent are agnostics.⁸

Women outnumber men in virtually every Christian tradition (see Figure 1). The numbers are highest for African American women: 60 percent of those affiliated with historically black churches are women. In fact, African American women are the most religious of all

Americans. More than eight in 10 say that religion is very important to them and about 6 in 10 attend worship services every week.⁹ In non-Christian faiths, the numbers are reversed. For example, there are higher proportions of men than women affiliated with the Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu traditions.¹⁰

Hispanic women—both Catholic and Protestant—are also more religiously active than men, although Protestant Hispanics of both sexes are more active than those who are Catholic.¹¹ Asian Americans are most likely to be unaffiliated with a religious tradition. Nearly one in four have no religious affiliation. About 17 percent of Asians are evangelicals; another 17 percent are Catholic, and 14 percent are Hindu.¹²

None of these figures captures the extent to which women are involved in more informal religious practices. Studies of Latinas find that they are often leaders within their own communities in the practice of folk religion—activities not sanctioned by the Catholic Church but that are manifestations of popular religious beliefs.¹³ Ignoring this role (what one scholar labels the “matriarchal core of Latino Catholicism”¹⁴) can lead researchers to underestimate the significance of religious commitment in this community, and the leadership roles of women within them. Similarly, an in-depth study of immigrant congregations including Hindus,

often find their tasks spilling into the next day and their energy stretched to its limits. This is what University of Minnesota sociologist Penny Edgell found in a study of working mothers who were religiously active—they felt drained in their family and work life. According to Edgell, managing work, family, and religious activities could be harder for women than men, partly because of the longer hours women spend on housework and home chores.²⁴

Greek Orthodox, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Mexican Catholics found that women are often central to the practice of domestic religious rituals in these faiths.¹⁵

In terms of race and ethnicity, most religious traditions are majority white (see Figure 2). For instance, Protestant congregations are 74 percent white/non-Hispanic and the Catholic Church is 65 percent white/non-Hispanic. Islam is the only religion with no racial majority.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the growth in immigration from non-European nations since the 1950s has not only increased the population of non-Christians in American society, but has changed the face of many Christian congregations, a process of “de-Europeanization” of American Christianity, as one sociologist has put it.¹⁷ Immigration from the Caribbean and African countries has altered the membership of historically black churches as well.

One notable change in recent years has been the frequency with which women, and men, switch religious affiliation, moving among different faith traditions—and in and out of organized religion altogether. A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that about half of all Americans change their faith at least once during their lives. People change faiths for widely different reasons, from marrying someone from another religion, to moving to a new community, to finding a

faith they like more.¹⁸ One example of large-scale mobility has been the movement of Hispanics out of the Catholic Church and into various Protestant churches—what sociologist of religion Andrew Greeley has called the “worst defection in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States.”¹⁹

Given the competitive market facing religious congregations, many have shown considerable capacity for change. Case in point: the growth of mega-churches, usually defined as Protestant congregations with more than 2,000 members.²⁰ Another change is the development of “post-denominational” Christianity, in which churches shed denominational doctrines, hymns, liturgy, and organizational structures for a more fluid, generic style.²¹ Some of these newer churches seem to be responding to popular demand for a less content-heavy, more emotional, and “user-friendly” religious experience. In fact, some analysts argue that being able to adapt to public tastes is what has kept religion current and helps explain why the United States has higher rates of religious practice and belief than other industrialized nations.²²

It should be noted that many of those who leave one religious tradition do not join another. According to the Pew survey, “the group that has grown the most...due to religious change is the unaffiliated population.”²³

In fact, a study that Edgell conducted of pastors and lay leaders in upstate New York found that many cited lack of time as the main problem facing their congregations.²⁵ National data back this up, showing that “for both men and women, long hours spent at work is related to lower levels of church attendance, less involvement in other congregational ministries and a reduced sense of the importance of religion...these problems [may be] particularly acute for workers in



RETURNING TO THE FOLD. Young people often reconnect with or participate for the first time in organized religion when they get married and have children. {MONA REEDER, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, CORBIS}

lower-paying service and blue-collar jobs, who may not have resources to pay for services that help them cope with the time squeeze.”²⁶

Besides lack of time, another reason for declining religious attendance among women is generational. Young people often reconnect with or participate for the first time in organized religion when they get married and have children. Starting

a family seems to trigger the desire to belong to a faith community, as new parents seek help giving their children a moral and spiritual foundation for growing up. New parents also look for others like themselves to find support and community.

Today, however, women are getting married and having children later in life. This means that most adults in their early 20s are now single, and not yet inclined in large numbers to join religious communities. It used to be that young people who went to worship services and those who did not were similar in terms of marriage and family. But that is no longer the case. Now those who are religiously active are far more likely to be married than those who are not.

Young women facing economic and work stresses, mobility among friends, relationship uncertainties, questions of identity, and more, are unlikely to seek out a faith community as a place of understanding and support.

There may be a confusion of cause and effect here, whereby the family orientation of many religious institutions discourages singles from attending. For young women, this means that at a time when they may be facing economic and work stresses, mobility among friends, relationship uncertainties, questions of identity, and more, they are unlikely to seek out a faith community as a place of understanding and support.²⁷

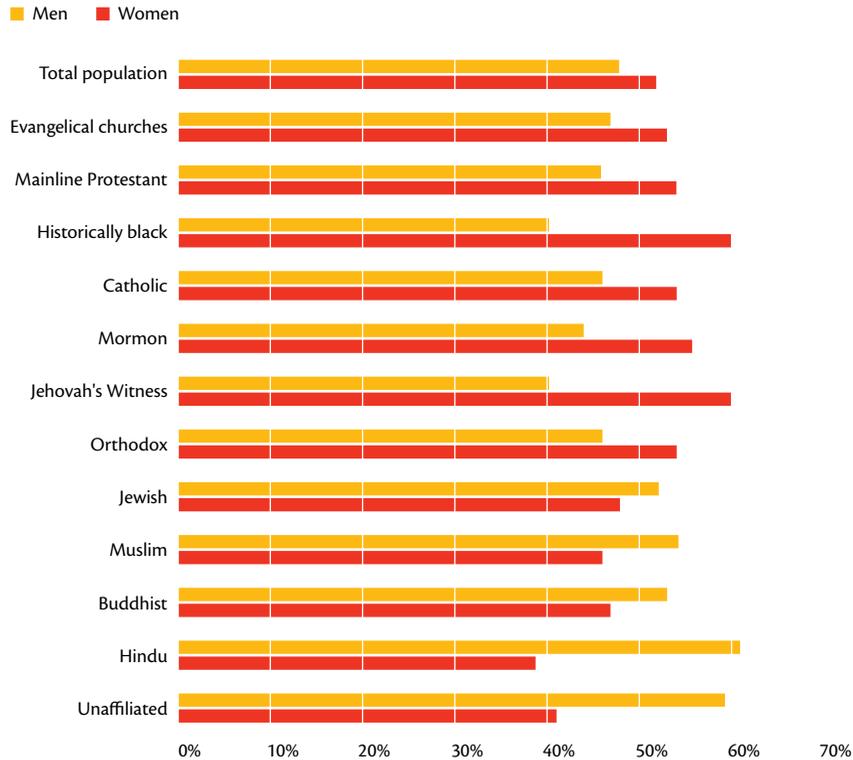
This is not to say that religious institutions are not reaching out to singles. Indeed, many are. A participant in a conversation with faith leaders in Atlanta convened for this report described efforts of her synagogue to attract young singles and build community among them. In addition to holding regular activities and events, leaders make a practice of following up with attendees, inviting them to lunch or Shabbat dinner.

There are other, less easily explained, reasons for declining religious participation among women and men. At the conversation in Atlanta, a female pastor described “regular nonmembers” in her congregation—those who show up weekly for worship

FIGURE 1

Women outnumber men in virtually every Christian tradition, but not other faith traditions

Percent of gender distribution of major religious traditions



Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Landscape Survey* (2008): p. 63.

services and put money in the offering plate, but get no further involved. Some attend for a good sermon and music, but don't want the commitment of belonging. Others go "church hopping" because they like various aspects of each place and don't want to settle on one. The pastor said that these "regular nonmembers" have few demands. If they get sick, they don't expect a pastoral visit, nor do they expect services from the church community. The pastor described other parishioners who are active—but in specific, self-directed ways. They are not interested in serving on committees, but instead want to do projects that involve their families, such as working in a food bank or helping to build a house.

Millions of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women are people of faith—and yet they are not welcomed as participants, members, or leaders in many religious institutions. A few denominations, such as the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association, are officially inclusive. Some religious institutions have no public position regarding gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals participating and joining their congregations, while others declare homosexuality to be a sin. Increasingly, religious institutions are facing a challenge to their beliefs and practices when it comes to gays and lesbians who participate in worship services, offer their time and gifts as volunteers, contribute financially, and enrich the community in myriad ways. One participant in the Atlanta conversation with faith leaders told of her church welcoming those who'd been turned away from other churches. Her church expanded its capacity for compassion and deepened its sense of community through an AIDS ministry it created that eventually broadened its scope to care for the sick and deliver meals to those in need—programs and services that had not existed before.

Many women want to connect family, work, and faith

Despite a significant decline in women's religious participation, the fact remains that religion is central in the lives of millions of women. It offers them daily guidance and help in navigating life's complexities, as well as a way to unify their different roles. Sociologist Mary Ellen Konieczny at the University of Notre Dame discovered this in her ethnographic study of two Catholic parishes, one theologically conservative and the other more liberal. In both parishes, women said their faith helped them make decisions on a range of family issues,

TABLE 1
Women's religious affiliations

Christian	82.4%
Protestant	53.8%
Evangelical	26.9%
Mainline	19.0%
Historically black	8.0%
Catholic	25.0%
Mormon	1.8%
Jehovah's Witness	0.8%
Orthodox	0.6%
Other Christian	0.3%
Other religions	4.2%
Jewish	1.6%
Muslim	0.4%
Buddhist	0.7%
Hindu	0.3%
Other world religions	<0.3%
Other faiths	1.1%
Unaffiliated	12.8%
Atheist	0.9%
Agnostic	1.7%
Secular unaffiliated	4.8%
Religious unaffiliated	5.4%
Don't know/refused	0.7%

Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (2008); p. 62.

including the struggle over whether to leave their jobs to stay home and raise their children. Women said they were guided by the moral ideals of their faith, its practices, and by connecting with others in their church.²⁸

Similar themes emerged from a series of focus groups conducted by the Catholic Church in 2002 that asked nearly 300 women in dioceses across the country about their spirituality and their work outside the home.²⁹ Despite geographic, racial-ethnic, and age differences, the women echoed one another in a number of areas. First, they refused to compartmentalize the different aspects of their lives, seeing spirituality as a “unifying factor” that connected work and family.

Women want the Catholic Church to see their paid work as valuable, and to recognize and utilize their skills.

In addition, women wanted the church to see their paid work as valuable, and to recognize and utilize their workplace skills. Women also wanted the church to acknowledge the time constraints they faced. When asked how the church could be of help to them, women offered a variety of suggestions, such as: Reach out to single mothers, provide support to unmarried women, invite older women to be mentors for younger women who are juggling home and work, and support legislation and policies that help working women, such as affordable child care, living wages, and more.³⁰

The need to connect work, family, and faith was also echoed by Protestant women, both liberal and conservative, in interviews conducted by Emory University sociologist Tracy Scott. Conservative women saw motherhood as the most important “work” a woman could do—yet many were dissatisfied with its day-to-day realities. One young mother told Scott, “Being a mother is the largest part of my identity...but it’s hard to raise kids; it’s hard to be with them endless hours a day.... I know that when I work [at my paid job]... I come home and I have so much energy. If I spend all day home...by five-o’clock I’m like a wet rag.”³¹

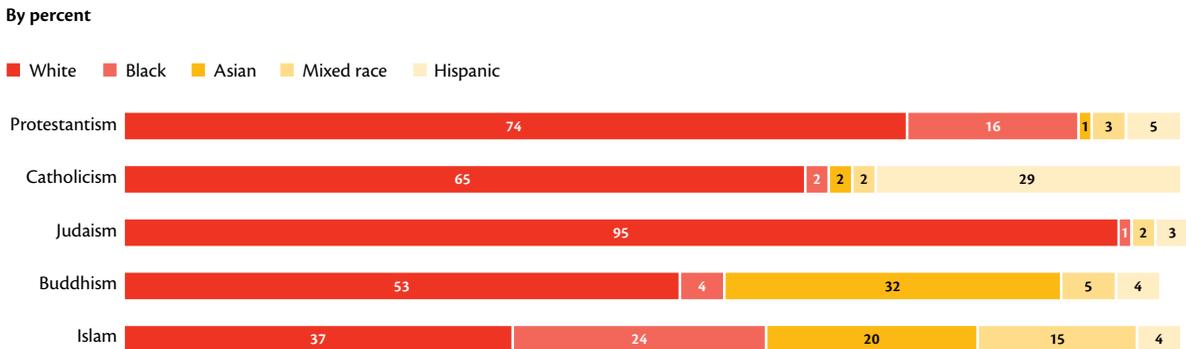
Conservative women interviewed in this survey valued the esteem, appreciation, and praise they got from working—and having their own paycheck. They liked feeling productive, contributing to the community and world, and having

an identity apart from those of “wife” and “mother.” When they talked about the “God-created differences between men and women,” many felt that their churches encouraged domestic work as women’s “real work” and family as their top priority.³² Some women searched for biblical passages to give them guidance about “women’s roles outside of ‘family work.’” One woman began occasionally attending an evangelical church with fewer fundamentalist notions than her home church. It was at this new church that she heard a sermon proclaiming that there was nothing wrong with a woman having a paid job, as long as her priority remained the home. The woman told Scott: “I agree with that.”³³

Liberal women spoke of choices and struggles, too—especially choices made between job and family. Yet they did not speak of pressure “to live up to any prescribed roles” nor did they feel constrained by theological gender restrictions.³⁴

Both conservative and liberal women discussed the religious notion of “calling”—in which work has spiritual meaning and purpose that provides fulfillment. The sense of being called to a vocation was stronger among conservative women, even though they were less committed than liberal women to paid work.³⁵ According to Scott, the notion of “calling” among conservative women was flexible, referring to any number of tasks or roles and included both paid and family work. For conservative women, the sense of being called by God justified the different choices they made and blessed their roles outside the home.³⁶ In contrast, liberal women spoke

FIGURE 2
Most religious traditions are majority white
The racial and ethnic composition of American religions



Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Landscape Survey* (2008); p. 44.



One of the ways churches and synagogues and faith communities have to be relevant is to reach out to the people who are in nontraditional kinds of settings. I find that my denomination has refugees from other churches and traditions that are not accepting of divorce, who are looked down upon, gays, lesbians, and people who are in any kind of nontraditional kind of family setting. The faith communities are going to be left in the dust because the world is changing. That doesn't mean we give up. We're not giving up anything. We're gaining something.

Kathy in Atlanta



EBENEZER
BAPTIST
CHURCH

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of “calling” in terms of paid work, not motherhood, and linked it to fulfillment and purpose in the world.

The centrality of religion in the lives of African American women cannot be overstated. Not only are women the backbone of many traditional black denominations, a number of which might not exist without their contributions, but faith is a basic pillar in many black women’s lives. As Daphne Wiggins, associate pastor at the Union Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, found in her ethnographic study of two African American congregations in Georgia, spirituality and church membership not only provide practical assistance to women (help with family care, for instance) but also emotional sustenance and spiritual fortification that help them cope with the challenges of family and work. A nurse in the study who had a stressful job told Wiggins, “It’s only my spirituality and my closeness with God [that] gives me that confidence. I feel confident when I’m at work, even with all the chaos going on.”³⁷

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Religion is also a vital force in the lives of many Latinas. Although there is little research that directly speaks to the role of faith in helping Latinas grapple with paid work and family, scholars have remarked upon the active presence of religion in the lives of Hispanic men and women.³⁸ For women who struggle against discrimination, toil in low-wage jobs, and bear heavy domestic responsibilities, religion is often a daily source of sustenance and support. In the words of one author, “Latinas’ God is a personal, living God with whom they converse daily—upon awakening, while driving to work, booting up a computer, reprimanding children, and wondering how they will possibly get through another day.”³⁹

One of the Jewish participants at the faith leaders’ conversation in Atlanta spoke of the importance of religion in the home and of teaching religious values to one’s children. “I wear the tallis in my family,” she said, referring to a prayer shawl

traditionally worn by males, adding that she felt women were “spiritually hard-wired” to transmit religious values. In addition to carrying out traditions in the home and contributing time and skills to synagogue, many Jewish women are leaders in faith-based organizations such as the National Council of Jewish Women, Jewish Women International, and other groups that have long and impressive histories of working on social justice issues, especially those involving women, children, and families.

Religious institutions are adapting to women’s changing lives

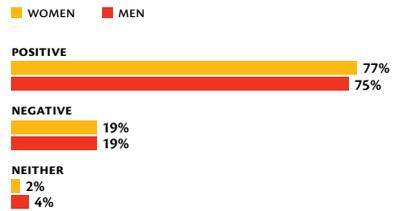
Historically, religious institutions have held as a spiritual ideal the model of a two-parent family in which women cared for the children and home and men were the financial providers. Although many families never reflected this model—high numbers of African American, immigrant, and white working-class women were always in the workforce—the notion of a female caregiver and male breadwinner was often sanctified as the way God intended the world to be.

Religious institutions benefited greatly from the traditional nuclear family, especially in the post-war years. Women served as volunteers, teaching Sunday school, organizing charity efforts, devotional classes, and more. As one author wrote about synagogues, “Women emerged as the most powerful and sustaining force....They dominated congregational activities, and their efforts made all religious functions possible.”⁴⁰

The concept of the nuclear family came crashing down in the 1960s. Divorce rates increased, women entered the workforce in record numbers, had fewer children, and challenged traditional gender norms.

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Forty years ago just over one-third of all workers were women. Today about a half of all workers are women. Has this change been positive or negative for American society?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.



“THE METHODIST FAMILY OF THE YEAR” OF 1951. Historically, religious institutions have held as a spiritual ideal the model of a traditional two-parent family, but the nuclear family became less common starting in the 1960s. {BETTMANN, CORBIS}

Religious institutions came under scrutiny as well. Women criticized male-dominated structures and fought to be ordained. They questioned patriarchal theology and created feminist doctrines of the divine. They looked for spiritual fulfillment outside religion. And they left the volunteer positions that had sustained religious institutions and led them to thrive.

In the 1980s, many conservative evangelical churches decried the dramatic transformation of the family. Blame often fell on women for “forsaking” their maternal nature and “deserting” their children for paid jobs, thus destroying the moral fabric of society. Policy issues such as child care and parental leave were caught in an ideological battle, as conservatives battled mainline Protestants, Jewish organizations, and others that supported federally funded child care.

Despite the inflammatory rhetoric that often surrounded such battles, the reality on the ground turned out to be somewhat different, as even evangelical churches

had to adapt to increasing numbers of working mothers and divorced parents in their congregations. According to Penny Edgell, “as the proportion of the population who are most likely to attend church—two-parent families with children in the home—shrinks, the religious ‘market’ shrinks.”⁴¹

Adapting their attitudes and beliefs

Given the traditional foundations and centuries-old beliefs of many religious institutions, it isn’t surprising that there remains within them a residue of outdated views that have the veneer of truth. Often these views are unspoken, or even unconscious. But assumptions about the primacy of women’s domestic responsibilities and related beliefs about the spiritual superiority of traditional families, motherhood, and restrictive sexuality can stymie religious institutions from being more creative and supportive in meeting the needs of women today.

Yet, religion exists in a spiritually competitive marketplace. Unlike ages past when the faith you were born into was likely to be the faith you died in, religious traditions today gain and lose members on an ongoing basis. And while people who shift allegiances claim a variety of reasons for doing so—from disagreeing with spiritual teachings to disapproving of the rigidity of religious institutions—the reality is that religious institutions must work to gain and retain their followers.

Many mainline Protestant denominations, such as Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal, have shifted their views to support women’s changing roles. In these churches today, there is broad acceptance of mothers’ employment and diverse kinds of families—including, in some churches, same-sex couples and parents. These are also the denominations in which female clergy are most welcome and likely to be found.

Jewish faith traditions—Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox—have also changed their views toward women. Many synagogues have taken down the partition (*mehitzah*) that separates men and women during services, and women have taken on religious practices once exclusively controlled by men. Some researchers have found that feminism has had a beneficial impact on the Jewish community, increasing educational rates of women and raising their profile and leadership in the community. Since the early 1970s, Reform and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism have ordained women as rabbis, and women became rabbis in the Conservative branch in the 1980s.



rites of passage. For most Jewish women today, their bat mitzvahs happens at adolescence, but for decades this wasn't this case. That's why these 10 women close to or in their 90s who were denied this rite of passage in the 1950s and 1960s are preparing for it now. {DAVID AHNHOLTZ, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*}

The response of the Catholic Church to changes in gender roles, sexuality, and the family has been complex. Historically, Catholic churches have been somewhat more accepting of working mothers than mainline or evangelical denominations because many parishes served immigrant communities in which a number of women worked outside the home. In addition, an important dimension of

Catholic social teaching emphasizes providing for the needy and vulnerable. For many Catholics, this support has included government assistance for programs on poverty, health care, and more. Still, many Catholic leaders—all of them male and unmarried—maintain a rigidly conservative stance on abortion, contraception, sexual education, and divorce—all issues of elemental importance to women. Female leadership in the church remains constrained, since women are forbidden to be priests. However, Catholic women have shaped history as nuns, religious activists, and heads of faith-based institutions delivering much-needed services and fighting social and economic injustice.

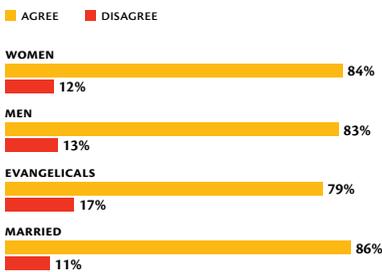
An important dimension of Catholic social teaching emphasizes providing for the needy and vulnerable. This support has included government assistance for programs on poverty, health care, and more.

White evangelical churches have also found themselves forced to adapt to societal change. Despite their preaching and pronouncements, mothers in these congregations went to work, children went to child care, and husbands and wives got divorced. However, the adaptation by evangelicals was neither easy nor swift. Initial reaction to the feminist movement in the 1970s was harsh. Leaders criticized evangelical feminists who challenged claims that women's subordination to men within marriage was biblically ordained, and they criticized mothers for working outside the home. As recently as 1998, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a statement declaring that "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband, even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ."⁴²

Despite such sexist statements by religious leaders, church communities have begun to speak in a different voice—one that emphasized marital partnerships and male and female complementarity⁴³ in which men and women were created differently but not unequally. A "pragmatic egalitarianism" took hold in many churches.⁴⁴ At the same time, many evangelical churches became less condemning of divorce, shifting from denouncement to silence. As congregations included more single parents and blended families, divorce became less decried as a spiritual and social ill. Evangelical leaders turned to other issues, such as abortion

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: Husbands and wives today are negotiating more than earlier generations about the rules on relationships, work, and family?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

and same-sex marriage, to blame for threatening the soul of America.⁴⁵ The advantage of those two issues was that they were “external sins” that did not visibly affect most evangelicals, while an issue such as divorce was “too close for comfort.”⁴⁶

In reality today, many evangelical churches support men and women as equal decision-makers in the home, and evangelical men appear to be as engaged as other men, if not more so, in day-to-day parenting.⁴⁷ Moreover, although evangelical mothers have lower rates of workforce participation, their numbers since the 1990s have been rising.⁴⁸ As Penny Edgell observes, “Lived religion blunts the sharp edge of ideological zeal while new understandings of the good family evolve. This lived religion is what most Americans encounter and what shapes hearts and minds.”⁴⁹

Offering new programs and services

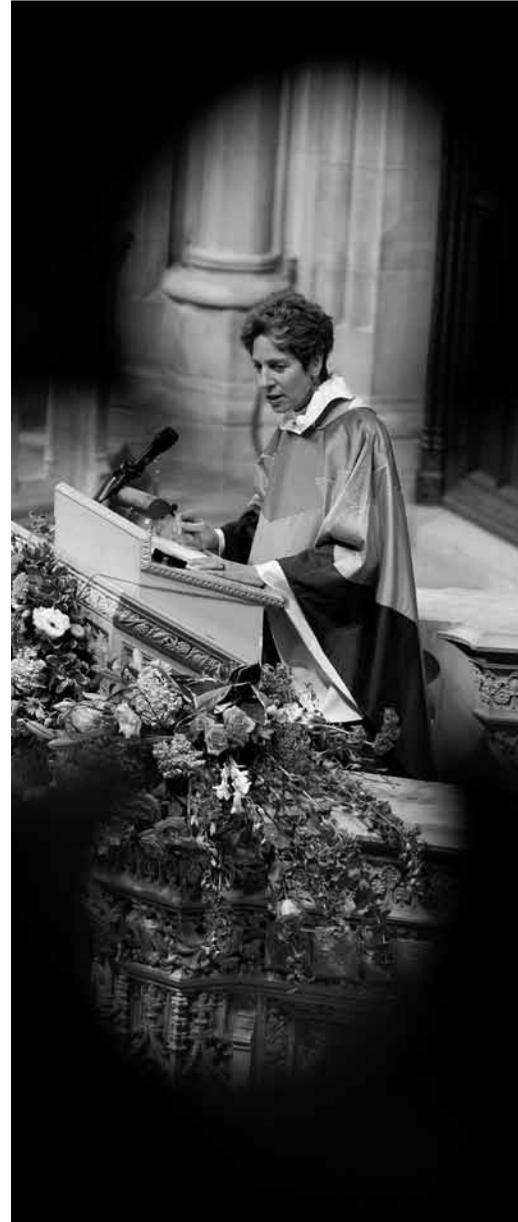
In addition to shifting their views, religious organizations have been adapting their programs and ministries to respond to the changing family. Typical shifts include moving the time of worship and other activities and offering new kinds of services. For instance, many activities for families are no longer offered during the daytime when most parents work, and many denominations now have programs for single parents.⁵⁰

Child care is of particular importance to working parents. Although some religious institutions have long provided it, the growth in mothers’ workforce participation since the 1970s prompted more religious institutions to move into this area.⁵¹ Between 1992 and 2008, there was a 76.4 percent increase in child care provided in Protestant institutions, a

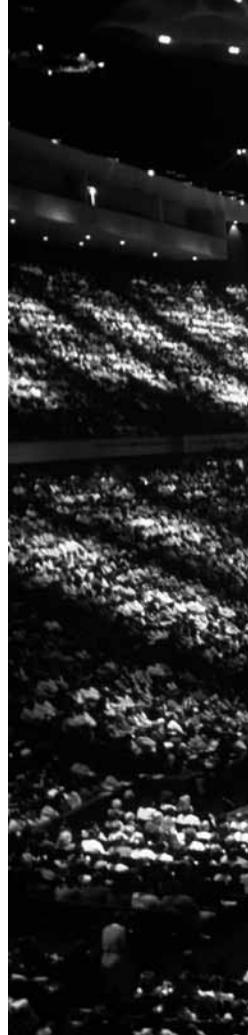
52.6 percent increase offered by Catholic institutions, and a 47.7 percent increase by Jewish institutions.⁵² Today, one-quarter of children under the age of 5 who are in center-based child care are in programs located in churches, synagogues, and other places of worship.⁵³ This figure may even underestimate the proportion of children in religiously affiliated child care because many children are in “faith-affiliated” and “faith-infused programs” that are located outside places of worship.⁵⁴

Conservative Protestant churches also are increasingly providing child care, driven in part by the desire to teach religious values through these programs.⁵⁵ In fact, one study has found that although liberal churches tend to be more symbolically accepting of diverse lifestyles and nonrestrictive gender roles, they offer fewer programs and services for women and their families than conservative churches do. Conservative churches have also been more likely to find innovative ways to adjust the schedules of their children’s programs to attract kids amid the competition of secular activities.⁵⁶

One point to highlight is that the Great Recession we’re in has greatly increased the need for services provided by religious and faith-based institutions. These institutions are close to their communities, witnessing job losses, home foreclosures, and members of their congregations and communities going without health insurance and food. At a time when social-service programs can be out of reach or non-existent for many people, religious and faith-based institutions are among the places that provide support.⁵⁷ Besides offering prayer and spiritual guidance, many religious organizations offer practical assistance through food and clothing banks, emergency loan programs, job retraining, and more—and doing



BREAKING STAINED GLASS BARRIERS. Katharine Jefferts Schori is the first female priest to lead a national church in the nearly 500-year-old Anglican Communion. {MATTHEW CAVANAUGH, EPA, CORBIS}





NEW REVIVALISTS. The Grand Opening of Lakewood Church's new Central Campus. Over 57,000 people packed the Sanctuary and video overflow rooms. Houston's Lakewood Baptist Church spent over \$95 million to turn the former NBA sports arena into one of the largest churches in the country. {NINA BERMAN, REDUX PICTURES}

so at a time when their budgets are shrinking. Many religious institutions are also advocating for public policies such as universal health care as part of their mission.

“Churches are at the forefront of this recession,” said a participant at the faith leaders’ conversation in Atlanta. “People are reducing their tithes and offerings... yet more are coming to church with needs. The rent is due. The car broke down. Church is a refuge. How do we help them?”⁵⁸

Religious institutions with immigrant congregations are often active providers of social services, despite the fact that in some disadvantaged communities they lack the resources to offer a wide array of programs.

In addition to responding to these urgent needs, religious institutions provide ongoing services, such as marriage and family counseling, programs for senior citizens, youth mentoring, and after-school programs.⁵⁹ A 2000 study of Islamic mosques found similar services for families. For instance, 74 percent offered marital or family counseling, 84 percent provided cash benefits to families or individuals, and 16 percent provided child care or preschool.⁶⁰ Educational programs were also important: 21 percent of mosques had a full-time Islamic school, while 71 percent provided a weekend school for either children or adults.

Religious institutions with immigrant congregations are often active providers of social services, despite the fact that they lack the resources in some disadvantaged communities to offer a wide array of programs.⁶¹ In addition to youth groups and summer camp, many immigrant congregations, including those of non-Christian faiths, hold their own “Sunday school” as a way to teach children their religious beliefs.⁶² One in-depth study of immigrant congregations found that a number sponsored women’s groups to provide social services, especially to other immigrant women. A Muslim woman in the study said that their activities focused on areas “where women have always taken a leadership role behind the scenes,” such as helping children, the sick, divorced women, and in other areas of need.⁶³

Among religious institutions that offer the most programs and services are mega-churches. For many mega-churches, their sense of mission is intimately tied to an entrepreneurial business model whereby they aim to be responsive to their followers—or “clients.” This spiritual-business model often relies on a sizeable budget that allows a dazzling variety of services and amenities, such as health clubs, cafes, and movie theaters, to attract and retain followers. For instance, Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, offers 16 basketball courts, a Cybex health club, a bank, a rock-climbing wall, eateries, and shops.⁶⁴ And Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, offers drama, dance, and video workshops; finance and tax classes; activities for children of all ages; marriage-strengthening classes; programs for women including movie nights, autism support groups, and Bible study; service opportunities; and more. According to a 2002 *New York Times* article, “these churches are becoming civic in a way unimaginable since the 13th century and its cathedral towns. No longer simply places to worship, they have become part resort, part mall, part extended family and part town square.”⁶⁵

For many mega-churches, their sense of mission is intimately tied to an entrepreneurial business model whereby they aim to be responsive to their followers—or “clients.”

Spirituality is growing fast

Spirituality in America is growing rapidly, especially among women. Books, retreats, workshops, rituals, and meditation practices are gaining followers among women who are religious, and those who are not. At first glance, there might seem to be little commonality among spiritual practices that range from massage therapy and sweat lodges to Zen meditation, 12-step programs, feminist nature rituals, and fasting.⁶⁶ And it is true that many practices called “spiritual” are so simply because that is how their followers describe them. Yet among its varied expressions, spirituality is often thought to fall into three categories: spirituality that is separate and distinct from organized religion; spirituality that is in conflict with organized religion; and spirituality that complements, or is part of, organized religion.⁶⁷

For many African American women, religiously inspired spirituality offers an effective way to respond to work-related stress. In one research study, 97 percent of black women said that spiritual practices helped them cope with stresses at work. Spirituality was the most frequently named coping mechanism, with many women saying they prayed “a great deal.”⁶⁸ In addition to prayer, African American women relied upon their trust in God, in their hope for a miracle, and in the renewal of their faith as they faced difficulties on the job. For these women, major stresses included the overwhelming demands of their job, the need to make ends meet, and working with prejudiced co-workers.⁶⁹

Spirituality was also important to the Catholic women in the focus groups discussed earlier. A number of them identified “nonreligious” activities as

RELIEVING STRESS, FINDING STRENGTH. For many women, spirituality is found in yoga and other exercise routines. {LAIF, REDUX PICTURES}



spiritually renewing, such as gardening, walking on the beach, yoga, poetry, music, and exercise.

Younger women are more likely to be involved in spirituality than older women. They are more likely to choose personal experience over church doctrine as the best way to understand God⁷⁰ and to create their own belief system from a variety of sources, such as friends, websites, magazine articles, TV shows, books, and movies. Because fewer of them are involved in organized religion, their spiritual beliefs and practices tend to be separate from religion.⁷¹

There are a number of reasons for the growth of spirituality among women. It is flexible and portable, able to fit into a busy schedule of work, chores, and travel.



For many women, doing yoga or meditating each morning can provide them with greater spiritual focus and energy than going to weekly worship services. This is especially true if worship services are scheduled at a time that competes with family activities and chores. Reading spiritual self-help books can provide specific methods and techniques for self enhancement—a toning up of the soul, just as the gym tones up the body.

There are a number of reasons for the growth of spirituality among women. It is flexible and portable, able to fit into a busy schedule of work, chores, and travel.

Another reason for spirituality’s appeal is that it doesn’t claim a specific set of doctrines or beliefs to conflict with or supplant the beliefs of organized religion. The fluidity of spirituality seems appealing to increasing numbers of Americans, many of whom have “only a vague denominational identification” and are unclear about which religious group they belong to.⁷³ In addition, as people travel longer distances to reach houses of worship, spirituality can feel more convenient and efficient. Furthermore, the once-unique role of clergy in answering spiritual questions has been supplanted by a wide variety of sources, including the Internet, which can answer questions instantly and anonymously in the comfort of one’s home. Finally, the community that women once found in religious institutions is now being found in the workplace, at the gym, and other places where women spend their days.

Not everyone thinks the growth of spirituality is a good thing. In his essay “Against Spirituality,” the late Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf argues that the Kabbalah and other forms of Jewish spirituality are undermining the deep sense of social connectivity, mutual responsibility, self-criticism, historical roots, and intellectual rigor of Judaism.⁷³ Wolf quotes Reverend Donna Schoper, who warns of the “dangerous lure of spirituality” for all religions. She says, “Amateurish tai chi and yoga, quasi-Buddhist meditation, and New Age prayers are a far cry from the ancient practice of the Sabbath.”⁷⁴ Schoper goes on to complain about highly personalized spirituality replacing organized religion. Spirituality can mire a person in the self, she says, and cause him or her to lose sight of the sacred. According to Schoper, “religion

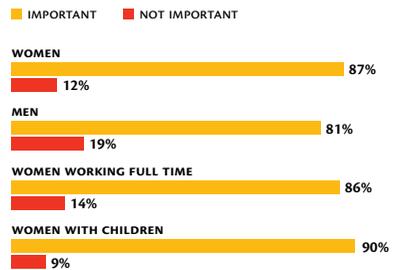
steeps people in its long history of reflection on ethics” and at its best “offers time and space for spiritual experience.” In contrast, “spirituality gives us a quick fix that fits into our fast-paced insular lifestyle.”⁷⁵

Others are not so critical. Theologian Sandra Schneiders, emeritus professor at the Jesuit School of Theology, sees spirituality as an important vehicle for transcendence. The paradox of religious institutions, she says, is that they are culturally based and can be hypocritical, rigid, corrupt, and reflect the biases of the larger society.⁷⁶ However, she defends organized religion for its capacity to initiate people into “an authentic tradition of spirituality,” giving them “companions on the journey and tested wisdom by which to live,” as well as support in times of suffering.⁷⁷ Schneiders goes on to say that when people leave religious institutions to “find a small group of like-minded companions in exile, they are left without the corrective criticism of an historically tested community and the public scrutiny that any society focuses on recognized groups within it. And they also lose the leverage which would enable them to influence systemically either church or society.”⁷⁸

This last point is especially important for working women, since religious institutions can be strong allies and advocates for a social agenda and public policies that help women better fulfill their roles as parents and workers. Schneiders argues against a “privatized spirituality,” which she likens to “social cocooning,” claiming that it can be naive and narcissistic, and a private pursuit⁷⁹ rather than a disciplined and committed participation in community. It is important to be outward looking as well as inward looking, focusing on social, as well as personal, transformation.

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Is it important having religious faith?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

Where do we go from here?

As more women become the breadwinners in their families and soon the majority of workers, the stresses and demands in their lives will grow. So will their need for support, sustenance, and services. It may be that women will continue to leave organized religion if institutions don't respond to their needs. Already, more and more women are patching together a crazy quilt of religious practices and spiritual activities in order to find a space for reflection and wholeness in their lives. However, they need something more. They need religious institutions to listen to their voices and pay attention to the complicated reality of their lives.

As women strive to integrate work, family, and faith, religious institutions must also do their part. They must put forth a moral vision of what it truly means to value women and families, and lay out steps for achieving that vision. This means working for public policies that tangibly support families and make it easier for women (and men) to be both good parents and employees. It means valuing women's leadership talents and skills—and eradicating outdated customs that value men above women. Finally, it means re-invigorating sacred teachings on compassion, dignity, justice, and equality to speak out forcefully on behalf of women and their families today.

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