Join the church? Well . . . Attenders, not members: Attenders, not members

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Decades ago, Dorothy E. Payton and her husband moved with their young children to a small prairie town in Montana. Although a devoted Methodist, Dorothy and her husband attended a United Church of Christ congregation. The only alternatives in town were Missouri Synod Lutheran and Catholic churches.

“My husband and I did not join the UCC, though our children were confirmed in the church,” she said. Later, the congregation of fewer than 50 members was warm and caring toward her upon the untimely death of her husband. As years passed, she served as deaconess and church historian. She wrote for the newsletter and helped decorate the church every holiday.

Thirty-five years after she first became active in the church, she actually became a member. It was, she wrote in 2003 in a column for the UCC Web site, “a very happy ending to this story.”

Not many churchgoers take that long to join.

But newly available figures from the largest-ever survey of Americans attending worship services show that one-fourth of all active nonmembers in mainline Protestant churches declined to join for at least six years, and 14 percent still resisted after a decade or more. The holdout figures are nearly the same for evangelical congregations.

Some Protestant pastors compare the visitors’ first year or so to “dating”—churchgoers deciding whether they like the congregation enough to join. When active nonmembers have been around so long they think of themselves as members, one pastor likened it to “common-law marriage,” or in contemporary terms, “cohabitation.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many cases are like Dorothy Payton's: people cannot bring themselves to affiliate with a different denomination. Many others refrain from joining because of divided religious loyalties within the family—in Catholic-Protestant marriages, for example, or Christian-Jewish ones.

"Some people really do take membership very seriously," said J. Bennett Guess, editor of *United Church News*. Guess said the UCC has a ritual for recognizing the often-varied background of new members. "We give thanks to every community of faith that has been your spiritual home," says the rite, which aims to ease the transition for new members.

Yet, Guess admits, some nonmembers simply "do not see the need to join as they partake of a smorgasbord of benefits without the financial burden, saying, 'After all, I'm not a member.'"

In that vein, church leaders blame a cultural tendency toward delaying commitment, keeping one's options open. "Who needs church? It's not anything you need to put on your career résumé," reflects Nancy Maffett. She has been director of outreach and discipleship for nearly 18 years at First Presbyterian Church of Colorado Springs, a bustling church of more than 5,000 members.

"Despite the city's reputation as the evangelical center of the West," Maffett said, "70 percent of Colorado Springs is unchurched." First Presbyterian draws thousands of visitors each year through its recreation program and other ministries. "We've had a ministry to the divorced for 25 years, but once they start feeling better they leave," she said. "Our challenge is to help newcomers have transformational experiences; otherwise nothing changes."

What's a church to do? Long-term hangers-on constitute a "free-rider" problem for many congregations, contend sociologists of religion who often associate strong church growth with strict financial, organizational and theological policies that distinguish the church from secular society. Since nonjoiners do not have the same financial obligations as members and are usually barred from leadership roles, the presence of free riders at struggling churches constitute a kind of burden for the core membership.

But other sociologists, and certainly most church leaders, counter that a patient, "open arms" policy is true to Christian tradition and bears practical fruits for most congregations.

Researchers have not had a good picture of nonmember numbers and traits until recently. John (Jack) Marcum, associate for survey research at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), presented the first comparative data on active nonmembers at the October annual meeting of the Religious Research Association in Kansas City, Missouri.

Marcum pulled together the data from the large U.S. Congregational Life Survey that polled 300,000 worshipers in more than 2,000 houses of worship in April 2001, asking all adults sitting in church to fill out questionnaires. Overall, Marcum found that mainline congregations have more members and those becoming members (86 percent) at services than do evangelical congregations (80 percent). That figure is consistent with the observation that evangelical and charismatic churches are more apt to woo religious seekers and to emphasize attendance over membership numbers.

The study focused especially on churchgoers who, when asked if they were members, said, “No, but I regularly attend here.” In mainline congregations, 8 percent answered that way and 4 percent said they were nonmembers but declined to elaborate. The corresponding percentages in evangelical churches were 12 and 6 percent.

“Two things stand out” in both mainline and evangelical churches, Marcum said. “The regularly participating nonmembers tend to be younger and less likely to be married.” Another thing: “They really give a lot less money than members do.”

In mainline congregations, 28 percent of participating nonmembers say they contribute at least 5 percent of their income, compared to 52 percent of members. In evangelical churches, the comparable figures are 51 percent (nonmembers) and 80 percent (members). In evangelical settings, which put a greater emphasis on tithing, 31 percent of active nonmembers say they give 10 percent, while 56 percent of members do so.

The random sampling of more than 20,000 worshipers in mainline pews showed that active nonmembers participate much less than members in Sunday school, study and social groups and community outreach. What attracts their participation—aspects they “most value”—are the sermons (49 percent, compared to 43 percent of members), contemporary worship services, “openness to diversity” and activities for community social justice.

At the same time, nonmembers who keep coming may do so because they share the characteristics of the membership. In mainline churches, for instance, the nonmembers' beliefs about the Bible closely match those of members, as do their education and income levels. On how often they pray, 46 percent of members and 43 percent of nonmembers say "every day or most days," and the single-digit percentages at "hardly ever" and "never" are nearly identical for both groups.

Surprisingly, the nonmember regulars in mainline churches are nearly as likely as members to invite friends or relatives to a congregation's services: 50 percent of the members and 44 percent of nonmembers said they've done that. (At evangelical churches, 70 percent of members and 57 percent of nonmembers said they extended invitations.) As for a "readiness to talk about faith" with others, 58 percent of the mainline nonmembers say they "do so if it comes up"—only slightly less than the 60 percent of mainline members and evangelical nonmembers who do likewise.

Those "outreach" figures confirm what sociologist Scott Thumma of the Hartford (Seminary) Institute for Religion Research says about the value of nonmembers. "Churches grow by word of mouth, and [nonmember attendees] are a huge 'word of mouth,'" Thumma said in an interview. Even if occasional churchgoers miss a lot of services, they are out somewhere in the community. "Somebody strikes up a conversation at a mall and asks, 'What church do you go to?'" said Thumma. "It really expands the influence of that church."

Thumma, who has studied mega-churches, said that the nonmembers, visitors and spectators at large-sanctuary congregations fill a need even if they only "throw in a couple bucks every month" when the collection basket is passed. "Without them, instead of having a filled 2,000-seat sanctuary, all of a sudden you seem to have hundreds of empty seats," he said. "You don't have the same dynamic for the service."

Some superchurches have taken extraordinary steps to be "seeker-friendly." The giant Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, opened in September a new 7,200-seat auditorium for worship. Willow Creek, whose senior pastor is Bill Hybel, long ago designed its weekend services for the unchurched and visitors, and designated mid-week services for its 6,100 "participating members."

"The Sunday morning services are at 80 percent capacity now, but the place feels full with 6,300 attending," said Cally Parkinson, Willow Creek communications

director. And now, instead of two services for members on Wednesday and Thursday nights, Willow Creek can bring the “believers” together for one service on Wednesday, she said.

“We welcome anyone who comes through, but our pastors and senior leaders do teach the value of membership,” she said. “To become a participating member, an interview is required—centered on spiritual growth—along with a reaffirmation each year.”

Large churches that deemphasize membership and its obligations can face a shortage of volunteers, says Maffett of First Presbyterian in Colorado Springs. Another congregation in town, one affiliated with the 9,500-church Willow Creek Association, does not have a volunteer problem. “Willow Creek makes it clear that membership is a claim on your life,” she said. “Over the years, however, people from some independent churches that have no formal membership category have called to ask about our program because they found out how hard it was to get volunteers.”

The “free rider” problem was articulated in a provocative guest column for *Episcopal Life* magazine early last year by sociologist Robert J. Stonebraker, a Lutheran layman. “Although most churches shelter free riders, mainline Protestants seem especially vulnerable. We sell ourselves so cheaply; our price is so low,” he wrote, referring by comparison to stricter, sacrifice-demanding congregations.

The presence of free riders can be expensive and demoralizing, Stonebraker contended, and it can “suck out” excitement from Sunday services since the nonmembers don’t know the hymns and responses, and don’t seek out or greet visitors “because they cannot identify which people are visitors.”

The magazine received six dozen letters in response. A single mother of three said she appreciated a parish’s understanding that she had little money to donate. A clergyman wrote that he is “somewhat ruthless” about those he calls “stowaways,” cutting them from mailing lists if there is no response on membership. Another priest said many practicing Episcopalians came with slow-healing wounds from other denominations: “My main rebuttal is that we are all free riders who lap up not cheap grace, but free grace.”

In a study he coauthored last year, Stonebraker, who lives in South Carolina and teaches at Winthrop University, concluded that large mainline congregations in

areas where their denomination is very popular may experience soft giving patterns because of a “free rider effect.” Citing data from Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations, Stonebraker said attenders at ELCA churches in northern states who hope to benefit from social networking tend to have less enthusiasm than members do for church missions. “Giving per member in these popular denominations is low,” the study concluded.

His own experience reflects this phenomenon, he said in an interview. As treasurer of a large ELCA congregation in Pennsylvania and now at one half its size in South Carolina, Stonebraker noted that the smaller church had the same attendance and gave more money. “We find that, all else being equal, ELCA giving is higher in areas in which the ELCA market share is lower, which is what the ‘free rider effect’ predicts,” he said.

Dissenting from criticism of nonjoiners is Mark A. Chaves, who heads the University of Arizona’s sociology department. “The whole ‘free rider’ discussion is, in my view, very misleading on theoretical and practical grounds,” he said. “It certainly is true that getting rid of the low-end contributors will, as a matter of arithmetic, raise a church’s per capita giving rate, but the congregation will have less money at the end of the day, not more.”

Chaves, whose book *Congregations in America* (Harvard University Press) was published this spring, said he doubts that many clergy want the marginal givers simply to go away. “Assuming that there is a core group of people who carry the financial and work load of the church, a church with a bunch of free riders is in general stronger than the same church without the free riders.”

The reasons churchgoers cite for not joining—a question not asked by the U.S. Congregational Life Survey—appear to vary widely.

Hollywood United Methodist Church, barely more than a block away from the home of the annual Motion Picture Academy Awards, has a fair number of gay and lesbian churchgoers, said Senior Pastor Ed Hansen. He believes the continued resistance by the denomination to gay pastors and same-sex union rites gives some regular attenders a reason not to join.

In other cases, obstacles may arise if one partner is Catholic. “We’ve had a lesbian couple coming to church,” Hansen said, “The woman who has a Methodist background plans to join, but her partner with a Catholic background won’t.”

Despite resistance attributed to church loyalties, one denominational researcher points to the fact that “more Americans are rejecting denominational identities.” C. Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church, said he believes that “joining something is becoming increasing irrelevant too.”

A relatively new focus on attendance in the Episcopal Church “is based on a recognition that membership rolls often mean little,” Hadaway said. Unless a congregation regularly cleans its rolls, it may be listing members who are less active and who contribute less than nonmembers. “I have never been certain that free riders are a bad thing,” he said.