

Do Congregations Influence Fertility?

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Religion influences fertility patterns, which in turn influence the size of religious groups. During America's "Baby Boom," women in Evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic churches had more children than their counterparts in Mainline Protestant churches. Evangelical Protestant babies were more likely to stay in their mother's tradition as adults than Roman Catholic babies. As the Baby Boomers grew, the percentage of Americans attending Evangelical Protestant churches increased, the percentage attending Catholic churches held steady, and the percentage in Mainline Protestant churches shrank (Hout, Greeley and Wilde 2001). Many scholars assume that religious fertility differentials have more or less disappeared and consequently, this subject has attracted little interest in recent decades (Westoff and Jones 1979). Marcum suggested there may be remarkable heterogeneity among Protestant denominations but this observation has produced little further research on the topic (1988; Marcum 1981).

Although the influence of religion upon fertility at the individual level has been studied as well as denominational fertility levels, congregational fertility dynamics have been virtually ignored. This is surprising since numerous volumes and articles have been written about church growth, and fertility is one of the most predictable determinants of church growth and decline.

This paper describes current fertility variation among congregations at the denominational level and analyzes the determinants of congregational fertility using multivariate regression. Additional multilevel analysis is underway and will be presented at PAA if this paper is accepted.

There are two primary explanations for religious influence upon fertility. The first argues that the *particular theology* of a group translates into distinct patterns of birth control, sexual activity, and childbearing. An alternate explanation for religious influence upon fertility is the *characteristics* hypothesis, which maintains that the compositional attributes of a group are the actual cause of fertility patterns. The *particular theology* and *characteristics* hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. The challenge is to understand how these explanations are related to one another. For example, American Fundamentalists have used theological arguments to dissuade their children from pursuing higher education, thereby increasing educational disparities between a future generation of Fundamentalists and the general population, which may fuel fertility disparities (Sherkat 1999). Theological instruction regarding sexual activity, gender roles, and the ideal family can influence age at marriage, career paths, and desired fertility.

I argue that *congregational culture* may also influence fertility. *Congregational culture* encompasses a broad range of values, norms, and practices which structure the boundaries of socially acceptable family and career choices for congregants. The lived religion reflected in *congregational culture* may diverge significantly from official church doctrine. In fact, recent studies have concluded that traditional families are most pervasive within congregations of denominations with inclusive statements about the family while nontraditional families are most likely to worship in the congregations of denominations with restrictive understandings of the ideal Christian family (Edgell 2003; Wilcox, Chaves and Franz 2004). Trends in American households such as increased cohabitation, delayed marriage, delayed childbirth, and frequent divorce are challenges to the nostalgic ideals of family life upheld in many churches (Marler 1995). Whether *congregational culture* encourages members to appreciate, lament, or resist these trends could have a significant effect upon how members think about union

formation and childbearing. In the present analysis, I focus on how (and whether) *congregational culture* fosters particular fertility patterns and values, which I will refer to as *natalist culture*.

The fertility of women in congregations and denominations may also be influenced by cultural and economic characteristics of their community or region, such as labor market opportunities, the availability of desirable marital partners, and overall fertility patterns. Religious heritage may leave a lasting impression upon the culture of a region, even as the religious composition of the region changes. It is also possible that the particular mix of ethnic and religious groups in a region will shape the culture in a lasting and far-reaching manner. Thus, the experience and consequence of being Catholic may vary significantly between cities in which Catholics are in the majority and in cities where Catholics perceive themselves as embattled minorities.

My analysis uses data from the Congregational Life Survey (CLS), which was administered to everyone attending worship in a random nationwide sample of congregations as well as separate samples of congregations in seven denominations (the Church of the Nazarene, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, and United Church of Christ). With a sample of over 300,000 worshippers in over 2,000 congregations, the CLS allows me to examine *congregational culture* and denominational trends more precisely than any previous dataset (Woolever and Bruce 2002).

Preliminary analysis reveals significant fertility differentials across denominations and religious traditions. Fertility among Catholic and Conservative Protestants remains higher than among Mainline Protestants. There is considerable heterogeneity among Protestants, even within religious traditions, such as Conservative Protestantism and Mainline Protestantism. Fertility is remarkably high among small

congregations in small denominations which would be “off the radar” of many surveys. Theology and compositional characteristics each explain significant fertility variation. Theological identity (Pentecostal, Reformed, Liberal, Evangelical, etc.) is significant though it explains less variance than anticipated. There are indications that congregational culture fosters high fertility. No relationships were observed between congregational resources for children or prioritization of children’s ministry upon current fertility. However, I do find that completed fertility has a very strong, highly significant relationship with present fertility, which suggests that congregations are carriers of a natalist culture that is distinct from, and stronger than the influence of theology and composition.

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