Although more women than men have attended religious services and other church events for some centuries across denominations, periodically a denomination views the relative absence of men in the pews as a new problem they must face. Data from a 2002 survey of 2,200 lay persons who are at least titular members of Episcopal congregations located in different regions of the USA are used to explore why men are not as involved in church life as some may want. Survey results indicate that the presence of women in ordained or in lay church leadership does not significantly diminish men’s feelings of being appreciated by their congregations. Rather, both lay men and women feel more valued for their church participation if they are currently involved in a variety of parish activities and if they were elected to the church governing board. Younger men, however, feel more appreciated than older men even if they do relatively little in church, while women’s age is unrelated to their sense of being valued for their participation. Survey comments and other analyses are used to explain these findings.

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 outnumbered men in these congregations (Lindley 1996:19-22). Notwithstanding, some church leaders at the beginning of the 20th century, concerned about the situation of many more women in the pews than men, deplored this as a recent imbalance that needed immediate corrective action (Taves 2002:307).

At the beginning of the 21st century, there are still more women than men in the great majority of congregations in US denominations. Similarly, 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. Some of these church leaders are found in the Episcopal Church. In contrast to conservative Protestant denominations and similar to other liberal Protestant denominations, Episcopal congregations generally do have significantly more women than men as members (Hadaway 2002:16).

There has been 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 as the
culprit, particularly in the prevalence of Sunday sport events. Others put the greater blame on the more equitable role women now have in society and the family, developments which spur women to seek top positions 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 samples across nationalities and religions find that feminine “traits” of caring, generosity, and emotionality 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; thereby ignoring those aspects of the congregation they dislike (Yip 2002) as women have long done in patriarchal churches (Watling 2002; Winter, Lummis, and Stokes 1994).

Social factors and personality traits interact to affect attitudes and behavior, but there are many gaps in attempts to link personality variables with religious behaviors and values. Psychologists Beit-Halami and Argyle (1997:251 et. passim) conclude from their extensive review that religiosity 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 (Stark 2002).

SAMPLE AND METHODS

Perceptions concerning men’s participation in congregations were investigated as part of a larger survey study, conducted by the Committee on the Status of Women in the Episcopal Church, mailed to ordained and lay women and men in eighteen geographically-distributed dioceses during 2002 (see Appendix). The primary purpose of this survey was to investigate whether and 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. 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. 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.)

RESULTS

The questions in the survey dealing with the participation of men in congregations were measure of actual concerns that have been voiced both fifteen years ago and recently within the Episcopal Church, and very likely in most other denominations.
1. On a question of whether the influx of women in congregational leadership roles drives away men, the opinions of survey respondents are quite varied, particularly in their explanations of why the influx of women may have an impact on men’s church participation.

**TABLE 1  
Opinions on Women and Men in Church Leadership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statements</th>
<th>Clergy Women (128)</th>
<th>Clergy Men (155)</th>
<th>Lay Women (1,578)</th>
<th>Lay Men (622)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Most congregational and diocesan positions should be filled by men.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. If women move more into the leadership roles in the church, men’s participation will drop further.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion/Not Sure, &amp; No Answers</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The great majority surveyed (over 80%) of clergy as well as laity of both genders disagreed that “Most congregational and diocesan leadership positions should be filled by men.” At the same time about half of the lay men and women were at best ambivalent about whether: “If women move into more of the leadership roles in the church, men’s participation will drop further.” This suggests it is the extent to which women are in church leadership positions that evokes more apprehension that this will deter men’s church participation.

Survey respondents gave different reasons, however, for why men may withdraw when women fill congregational leadership slots. The following comments from two lay persons in dioceses in different areas of the country illustrate why some feel that there is a causal link between more women in church leadership and fewer men in the pews:

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 in 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?

More who wrote comments in this area expressed their opinion that if men left when women took over most of the leadership, it was not because men were angry, but rather that this gave men a good excuse to leave:
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—much as nursing or being a secretary are usually considered.

My concern with pushing women into upper level positions is that we 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 consider some of the men on their church governing board; 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, the fear that generally an increase in the number of female lay and clergy leaders will reduce the participation of men is unfounded. First, the proportion of females on their congregational governing boards (Vestries) reported by respondents had no impact on whether either laymen or laywomen believed that an increase of women in church leadership would deter the participation of men. (This is true even though Vestry compositions of congregations represented ranged in percent from under 40% to over 75% female). Second, laymen were more likely to disagree with the statement that the increase of women in congregational leadership reduced male church participation if they themselves had a female pastor than if they did not. There was no relationship for laywomen.

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. These older folk grew up in an era where women were rarely in top church positions, which may account for this finding. (No other demographic characteristics of members—such as educational attainment, income, family status—are related to their responses to this question.)

2. On the question of whether men need special attention and affirmation to get them to participate in church, the opinions of respondents are even more mixed and ambivalent.

Two-thirds or more of the clergy and laity of both genders agreed that; “Presently, there is a lot to interest and challenge men in the life of the church.” Apparently, most feel that it is not the fault of their congregational services and programs that relatively few men are involved. However, those surveyed were far more divided on whether: “Men need to be encouraged to have a meaningful involvement in church life more so than women.” About fifty percent of the lay men and women disagreed with this second statement. The rest were at best ambivalent about whether men need more encouragement. (Those laity who were
TABLE 2
Motivating Men to Participate in Church and Being Appreciated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement</th>
<th>Clergy Women (128)</th>
<th>Clergy Men (155)</th>
<th>Lay Women (1,578)</th>
<th>Lay Men (622)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Presently, there is a lot to interest and challenge men in the life of the church. Agree</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Men need to be encouraged to have a more meaningful involvement in church life more so than women. Agree</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Opinion/Not Sure &amp; NA</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In your congregation, to what extent would you agree your participation is appreciated? Agree Strongly</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree Somewhat</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Sure &amp; NA</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree, Somewhat &amp; Strongly</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Neither having an ordained woman on pastoral staff nor having a high proportion of women on the congregational governing board affected lay persons’ opinions on whether men need greater encouragement than women to be active church members. However, their age does affect their views on this. Senior adults of both genders are somewhat more likely than young adults to agree that men need more affirmation than women. In illustration, among the younger lay men under age thirty-five only 20% agreed and fully 60% disagreed with this statement. In contrast among lay men aged seventy-five and older, 43% agreed and 33% disagreed that men need more encouragement than women to participate in church activities.

3. On the question of whether laity surveyed “feel in this congregation that my participation is appreciated,” the answer is they generally do, but particularly if they are active lay leaders, in growing congregations, or simply if they are younger men.

Close to two-thirds of the lay men as well as women, agree “strongly” that their participation is appreciated, regardless of the proportion of women currently on their parish Vestry or whether their congregation has an ordained woman on pastoral staff. Being appreciated by others, however, does take 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 feel their participation in the congregation is appreciated. These are also often the same persons who have been elected to the parish governing board (or Vestry) within the last ten years. Being in a congregation which respondents see as "growing" also enhances laypersons' feelings of being affirmed for their church participation. This is possibly because many of these men and women feel responsible to some degree for the vitality of their congregation.

Being a relatively young adult is important in how valued laymen feel by their congregations, but this is not true for laywomen. In illustration, among those under age thirty-five, 80% of the laymen to 62% of the laywomen "strongly agree" their participation is appreciated by others in their churches. By age seventy-five, only 50% of the men to fully 67% of the women feel "very appreciated" for their church participation. Elderly men describe themselves as less appreciated than young and middle-aged men as a group, probably because
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Laywomen</th>
<th>Laymen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1,512)</td>
<td>(595)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong> (1= under 35 to 6= 75+)</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.124**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On Vestry in last ten years</strong> (0,1)</td>
<td>-.095***</td>
<td>-.164***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># Total Church Activities now</strong> (0-20)</td>
<td>-.152***</td>
<td>-.181***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Church growth</strong> (1= grow to 3= decline)</td>
<td>.148***</td>
<td>.131**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wm lead, men leave</strong> (1= agree to 3= disagree)</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.087*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R-square</strong></td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001

they are. Young men are more rarely seen in services and church events, and hence probably do receive special affirmation for their presence from others in their congregations.

At the same time, other correlations indicate that elderly men are the most opposed to women’s taking top leadership positions in their parishes and dioceses. In illustration, among laypersons under age thirty-five, 73% of the women to 68% of the men said they personally would be “very willing” to have a woman as bishop of their diocese. In contrast, among those who have reached age seventy-five, 56% of the lay women to just 30% of the lay men said they would be “very willing” to have their diocesan bishop be a woman. Although older laypersons of both genders are more likely than those younger to believe that the increase of women in congregational leadership has been pivotal in reducing the number of men in the pews, it is the older men with this view who are more apt to self-select into those congregations which do not have an ordained woman on pastoral staff. Such men are less likely than other men to feel highly appreciated for their church participation. Grouchy old men are not apt to be treated with much esteem by the female majority in most Episcopal congregations.

Regressions run separately by gender for laypersons confirm that although participation in many church activities and being in growing church are important contributors to both male and female members’ sense of being appreciated for their church participation, being elected to the church governing board is somewhat more salient for men than women. Being relatively young remains important in how appreciated men feel, whereas age is irrelevant to women’s sense of affirmation for their church involvement. Even with these other fac-
tors controlled by regression, men who hold that the influx of women in church leadership decreases men’s presence are apt to feel less appreciated than men who reject this notion.

In addition to male members’ relative youth and openness toward women in church leadership, heterosexual orientation was another desirable characteristic listed in a number of written comments on the survey. In describing the kind of men who respondents wished would become more interested and active in their congregations, several respondents commented to the effect that getting gay men involved is not the problem, 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 of course the younger and middle-aged men, e.g.

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.

4. On the question of how congregations can get “real men” (and particularly those who are younger as well as not arrogant, lazy or grouchy) to become more involved and present in church services and activities, the answer seems to be that some measures can be taken which may improve men’s participation, but dramatic improvements are unlikely.

The very prevalence of women in congregations and their favored activities may make it difficult for straight men to make friends easily or to become part of the congregational community. Men apparently do not get the same health and emotional benefits from congregational friendships that women obtain (Krause, Ellison, and Marcum 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” into the church? What about special men’s groups, something like the Promise Keepers—but groups and gatherings which will appeal to mainstream 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 to the 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 said they had never “gained personal and spiritual insights from church related groups composed only/mainly of persons of my gender.”

Although survey results suggest that most men in Episcopal congregations are not going to be drawn to workshops on topics such as “Christian meditation and prayer,” they may be induced to come to education events on other less feminine-attracting topics. Men surveyed were somewhat more attracted to church-sponsored activities that involve fund-raising, raising houses, or other types of direct outreach to the needy in the surrounding community or world. As several respondents commented, however, not all congregations are as proactive as they might be in developing programs more appealing to men:
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 them, 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. The major reason that men are less involved in congregations, as the psychologists cited predicted, have mainly to do with the “feminine” nature of the whole church experience being intrinsically more alien to men’s “masculine” personalities and interests.

Given this generalization, questions can still be (and have been) raised whether congregations currently offer programs, services and activities that might attract men or whether most offerings are too geared to women’s interests. Are men really encouraged to join congregational groups and form new ones, or do members of the female majority subtly resist the kinds of changes many husbands, sons, widowers, divorced and other single men would prefer to see in church activities and mission priorities?

Occasioned by the current “crisis” perceived by some of men’s relative absence at worship services and church events, questions have been raised as well about whether the influx of women into church leadership roles has been pivotal in this “decline” of men’s participation. Recent studies indicate that the absence of men in the pews is not due to the greater proportion of women now in lay and clergy leadership positions.

This present study of the Episcopal Church shows that simply having women in lay and clergy congregational leadership does not in itself deter men who are at least nominally “churched” from participating in their congregations or feeling appreciated for their presence. Other studies of the impact of women in religious or secular leadership generally confirm this result, and advance reasons why most men’s participation is not diminished simply by having women leaders. First, women’s leadership style in contrast to men’s style is both more empowering of others and less directive both for clergy (Zikmund, et al. 1998) as well as for executives, managers, and supervisors in a wide range of organizations and settings (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003). This kind of “transformational” leadership, as some call it, while generally effective for all persons and situations, is especially valuable for maintaining the allegiance of men working in groups or organizations led by women (Eagly et al. 2003). On a more basic level as attested to by Beit-Hallahmi’s (2003) interfaith, interdisciplinary and international review of many research studies, regardless of the gender of the religious leaders, men are not likely to attend worship services and
religious educational events if they can avoid doing so. This empirical generalization is particularly apt to hold of men most concerned with maintaining a masculine social identity.

The findings in this paper suggest that congregations may increase the number of men involved in worship services and programs by offering events and projects with a concrete task focus which will appeal more to men’s agentic 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. Congregations will likely continue to thrive as long as the “real men” support the church financially and approve of their family members attending.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, November 2003, Norfolk, Virginia. This research represents further analysis of data collected for research commissioned and conducted by the Committee on the Status of Women, Executive Council, Episcopal Church. The full report on the larger study, Reaching Toward Wholeness II: The 21st Century Survey (2003), which includes action reports by the eighteen participating dioceses and recommendations to the whole Church, also gives more specifics on study design and the full survey used. This report can be downloaded from: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/women/surveyreport.htm.

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APPENDIX

The key questions used in this paper from the eleven page survey are as follows:

Attitudes Toward Women and Men in the Church (Agree, No Opinion or Not Sure, Disagree)

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

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

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

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

* [bolds were in the survey questions]

Own Involvement in or Perceptions of Respondent’s Congregation

In terms of membership, compared to five years ago, would you say this congregation is: growing, staying about the same, declining?

In this congregation, which of the following positions are filled by women? Check all that apply: (rector, associate minister, vicar, interim minister, senior warden, junior warden, treasurer, etc.)

About what % of the Vestry are women?

Which of the following positions have you held within the last ten years? (List of 22 kinds of church positions including Vestry member.)

Within the last year, what kinds of activities have you participated in on the congregational or diocesan level? (List of 20 kinds of activities.)

I feel in this congregation that my participation is appreciated. (Agree strongly, agree somewhat, not sure, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly.)

NOTES

1. The demographic characteristics of the respondents quoted are prohibited from being given by prior agreement in reporting this data.
REFERENCES


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