Declining Mainline Protestantism in the United States

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Change in church membership and congregations
Religious Service Attendance, 1972-2016

- Percent in a religious service each week (GSS) (3-year moving average)
- Percent weekly attend (time diary. 3 year moving average)
- Percent never attend (GSS) (3-year moving average)
Aging Clergy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Median Head Clergy Age</th>
<th>% of People in Congregations with Clergy &lt;50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AGING CHURCHGOERS

MEAN PERCENT OF PEOPLE IN CONGREGATIONS WHO ARE...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Over 60 Years</th>
<th>Under 35 Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1998: 29% Over 60 Years, 30% Under 35 Years
2006: 35% Over 60 Years, 25% Under 35 Years
2012: 37% Over 60 Years, 25% Under 35 Years
Average Age Difference (years) Between Weekly Attenders and General Population

Aging Churchgoers

- Yearly data from 1972 to 2016 shows a generally increasing trend in the average age difference between weekly church attenders and the general population.
- There are fluctuations over the years, with a notable peak around 1996 and a dip around 2012.

The graph visually represents the aging trend among churchgoers over time, indicating a growing disparity in age betweenattenders and the general population.
Disaffiliation or fewer joining?
Why do people disaffiliate?

Older theories thought people abandoned religion
“Science makes religion implausible.”
“Pluralism increases doubt.”
“Secular life makes religion less important.”

And certainly some people disaffiliate from their religion of birth
Sociologists are increasingly paying attention to decreasing adoption rates. More and more, though, sociologists are looking at why younger Americans are less likely to be religious than older Americans.
Strong or somewhat strong religious affiliation by decade of birth, United States, 1974-2012

Attendance at least monthly by decade of birth, United States, 1973-2012

Knows God exists by decade of birth, United States, 1988-2012

Mainline Protestants growing up
Religious socialization

One line of thinking is that contemporary Americans are less likely to grow up in households where...

...family members attend services regularly

...family members hold the same religion (and so reinforce the same religion)
Declining Religious Socialization

Percent of people with weekly attendance at different ages, and no religion at age 16, by birth year.

- Weekly attendance at age 12
- Weekly attendance of mothers when growing up
- Weekly attendance of fathers when growing up
- No religion at age 16

Birth Year:
- <1900
- 1901-10
- 1911-20
- 1921-30
- 1931-40
- 1941-50
- 1951-60
- 1961-70
- 1971-80
- 1981-90
- 1991-2000
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether mother attends religious services weekly

- Weekly: 25%
- <Weekly: 46%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether father attends religious services weekly

- Weekly: 30%
- <Weekly: 30%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by parents’ religion ("Christian")

- Same religion: 29%
- Different religion: 45%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by parents’ religion

- Same religion: 29%
- Different religion: 39%
Religion and politics
Religion *in* politics

Increasingly, people do not want clergy to influence politics
Increasing Disapproval of Religious Leaders' Political Involvement

- Influence voters
  - 1991: 30%
  - 1998: 37%
  - 2008: 43%

- Influence government
  - 1991: 22%
  - 1998: 31%
  - 2008: 38%

Source: General Social Surveys
Conservatives in politics

Much of the recent decline in religious affiliation has been attributed to a backlash against conservative Protestants in politics (even among those who would not otherwise be conservative Protestant)
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by current political identity

- Conservative: 31%
- Moderate: 28%
- Liberal: 36%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by current political identity (born after 1980)

- Conservative: 26%
- Moderate: 37%
- Liberal: 69%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by current political identity

- Republican: 27%
- Independent: 38%
- Democrat: 33%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by current political identity (born after 1980)

- Republican: 30%
- Independent: 64%
- Democrat: 46%
Religiosity and conservatism

As a result of these processes, religiosity and conservatism are more tightly linked
Increasingly Strong Connection between Attendance and Political Conservatism

(3-year moving average)

Correlation between Religious Service Attendance and...

Conservative political views

Republican party identification
Tighter Connection between Religion and Political Conservatism

Percent conservative or very conservative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Weekly attenders</th>
<th>&lt; Weekly attenders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Religion and social issues
Religion and social issues

Likewise, the ‘religious’ are increasingly conservative on several social issues
Increasingly Strong Connection between Attendance and Social Conservatism
(3-year moving average)

- Premarital sex is always wrong
- Oppose legal abortion in cases of rape
- Homosexuality is always wrong
Tighter Connection between Religion and Attitude about Homosexuality

- **1970s**
  - Weekly attenders: 84%
  - < Weekly attenders: 66%

- **2010s**
  - Weekly attenders: 73%
  - < Weekly attenders: 32%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether homosexuality is 'not at all wrong'

- Not at all wrong: 37%
- Wrong: 29%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether homosexuality is 'not at all wrong' (born after 1980)

- Not at all wrong: 51%
- Wrong: 27%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether abortion should be allowed in cases of rape

- Yes: 28%
- No: 44%
Percent of mainline teens who disaffiliate, by whether abortion should be allowed in cases of rape (born after 1980)

Yes: 48%
No: 22%
The ‘spiritual but not religious’
Growing Minority of "Spiritual but not Religious"

Source: General Social Surveys
Percent of each religious group who identify as 'spiritual but not religious'

- None: 28%
- Jewish: 24%
- Catholic: 10%
- Other: 21%
- Mainline: 12%
- Evangelical: 10%
- Black Prot.: 7%
Percent of mainline teens who identify as 'spiritual but not religious' by whether they disaffiliated later in life

Persistent affiliate: 12%

Adult disaffiliate: 19%
What is ‘spirituality’?

Nancy Ammerman: people mean very different things

...a religious tradition; participation
...a system of ethics
...experiencing God
...active spiritual development
...the mysteries of life
...the meaning of life

...believing in God
...transcendent connection to others
...symbolic rituals
...a sense of awe
...inner sense of self
Spirituality by age

Bengston, Putney, and Harris: older Americans understand (or don’t understand) spirituality very differently from younger Americans

Oldest generation: unclear what spirituality is

Youngest generations: spirituality is a distinct aspect of life, separate from religion
Percent of Americans who feel God's presence at least 'some days' by religiosity and spirituality

- Neither: 34%
- Religious: 73%
- Spiritual: 56%
- Both: 91%
Percent of Americans who find strength and comfort in their religion at least 'some days' by religiosity and spirituality

- Neither: 33%
- Religious: 86%
- Spiritual: 54%
- Both: 96%
Percent of Americans who desire to be closer in union with God at least ‘some days’ by religiosity and spirituality

- Neither: 41%
- Religious: 82%
- Spiritual: 61%
- Both: 95%
Percent of Americans who feel God's love at least 'some days' by religiosity and spirituality

- Neither: 42%
- Religious: 84%
- Spiritual: 67%
- Both: 94%
Percent of Americans who are spiritual touched by the beauty of creation at least 'some days' by religiosity and spirituality:

- Neither: 61%
- Religious: 84%
- Spiritual: 89%
- Both: 95%
Spirituality

We’re still trying to figure out what significance spirituality has, how its distinct, and what long term consequences the ‘spiritual but not religious’ body will have for religion in the US
Wrapping up
Wrapping up

Mainline Protestants are becoming less numerous

This is primarily because the youngest Americans are less likely to identify as mainline to begin with

The youngest Americans are more likely to have parents with different religions who attend religious services less frequently than previous generations
Wrapping up

Disaffiliates are increasingly politically distinct from those who remain in mainline churches: they’re more politically and socially liberal.

The spiritual but not religious are a growing minority, up to 12% of mainline Protestants; what that actually means varies from person to person.
Questions?