

# Cynthia Woolever

## on the United States Congregational Life Survey

By Tracy Schier



Sociologist Cynthia Woolever is the principal investigator for the Lilly Endowment-funded U.S. Congregational Life Survey, a research project that involves more than 2,000 congregations and some 350,000 worshipers. She is currently Professor of Sociology of Religious Organizations at Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary. Previously the Associate for Congregational Studies in the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Woolever has nineteen years' experience working as a consultant with congregations, judicatories and seminaries. She holds her doctorate in sociology from Indiana University.

With Deborah Bruce she authored *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), a presentation of the findings of the Congregational Life Survey and the first comprehensive study of U.S. congregational life across denominations in the new century. As a description of the American religious landscape today, the book provides a portrait of congregational life in four dimensions: spirituality and faith, activities in the congregation, community involvement, and worshipers' vision for the congregation's future. The second book *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) focuses on the many ways congregations are making a difference.

This conversation is edited.

**Q.** As I read about your project it would seem that you are interested in gathering information from church participants to gauge congregational vitality. Can you talk about those attributes that define a congregation's vitality?

**A.** As we moved along in the project we came to believe the word "vitality" didn't capture all that we were trying to convey about congregational life. We use the word "strength" instead because we feel that it includes more than just church growth. So often that is the way "vitality" is used. We are certainly interested in church growth and appreciate its importance, but we wanted to reflect church life in its many complexities and see how churches are meeting their mission.

**Q.** How then do you recognize strength in a congregation and what are the elements of congregational mission that you considered?

**A.** Congregations are strong if they consistently, collectively, and effectively achieve their goals. And so we ask, what are the goals of any strong congregation? What should all congregations be striving to do?

A real congregational strength is imbedded in the behaviors, beliefs, and values of the majority of the worshipers. As a result, a number of worshipers can leave without diminishing this strength. All congregations are strong, but in different ways. We believe all congregations have strengths because in every one something "works." The more congregations focus on what is working and use their strengths effectively, the stronger they become.

First, congregations create spaces and places for emotional bonding. The inclusive, often social activities of the congregation help people build strong ties to one another. Second, congregations universally seek to educate worshipers about the faith and about the behaviors of the faithful. Sometimes this means that congregations offer private schooling to replace the secular school system. Third, worshipers share their faith and beliefs. But there is a quite practical reason to include others. Leaders recognize that without new members to replace those who die or leave, the congregation has a finite future. Fourth, congregations of all faiths serve others, both within and outside their church. Helping others is one way all congregations witness to the world. And finally, a congregation tries to convey to its members and the world that there is ultimate meaning. This is the message of hope. By looking at these possibilities for strength in a congregation—they become qualities or benchmarks—we can see how well any one church is doing.

**Q.** As you look at congregations across the U.S., what are some of the most positive things that you see?

**A.** Worshipers are very positive about their congregations. Most of the worshipers report that they feel the presence of God during their worship services and that these services are

joyful and inspiring. To give you some numbers, 81 percent of worshipers said they experienced God's presence at worship services; only eight percent experienced boredom. So we believe that is a good sign.

I think it is important also that, when people talk about their congregations, they use words like "family" or "my" church. Our research indicated that 79% feel a strong sense of connection and belonging to their church, and almost half report that this feeling is growing. Over two-thirds of the worshipers in our study said that they count at least some of their close friends from among the church membership and an even larger number, 84%, agreed with the statement, "In general, there is a good match between our congregation and our minister, pastor, or priest."

Some people also say that their personal sense of obligation—their responsibilities to work, family and so forth—are bolstered because of their church attendance.

**Q.** As you look at congregations across the U.S. what are the greatest weaknesses that congregational leaders must address?

**A.** Congregational leaders have huge challenges. For example, consider how mobile our society is. For a church just to maintain an even number of worshipers over time is hard work. And mobility is just one issue. Consider how many things compete for people's time—work and family obligations, civic and organizational affiliations, even things like sports participation—all these things compete for Americans' limited time.

Our church leaders need to take some responsibility for addressing such challenges, but a lot of these social factors can simply overwhelm any efforts by a church leader.

Another pertinent issue that many people don't take into consideration is the distance that people are willing to travel for worship. We found that half of all worshipers can arrive at church in ten minutes or less. Some 88% can get to their congregation in 20 minutes or less. And we found that only four percent travel more than a half hour to attend worship services.

**Q.** Can you go back to the problem of our mobile society and give any examples of how churches go about recruiting new members to compensate for those who move away?

**A.** The number one reason people visit a congregation for the first time is because someone they know invited them. Congregations also use a number of other strategies to reach out to nonmembers—mailings, ads, web sites, neighborhood fairs, community concerts or events, door-to-door visiting. What is critically important is what happens when someone visits the congregation for the first time. Will they come back? Our research shows that 2 out of 100 people are visiting for the first time. If they don't find the worship

service appealing or the members warm and welcoming, they won't be back. Rarely do congregations get a second chance.

**Q.** Can you talk about the fact that congregational involvement outside of worship time is not particularly high?

**A.** Actually, we found that, beyond attending worship services, worshipers' level of involvement in congregational life is pretty shallow. This says something about our population being a nation of spectators—people tend to see church as a spectator event. We found that only 44% of worshipers take advantage of the small groups organized by their congregation. This type of participation is higher for Protestants than Catholics. As we say in the first book (*A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*), this finding that the worship service is the “main event” puts a lot of burden on the leaders of the services that the people do attend. It tells us that the planners of worship services need to take great pains in planning the service—the music, the sermon, and so on—since this is the only contact with church that many worshipers have.

We also found that 38% of Protestant worshipers serve in leadership roles in their congregations; among Catholics, one in four serve in such roles.

**Q.** Why do you think this difference exists between Catholic and Protestant congregations?

**A.** There are a number of reasons. Catholic parishes tend to be quite large and so the ratio of members to specific leadership roles is greater. In the Catholic tradition, also, there is a historically centralized leadership structure. The members of a Catholic parish are less likely to be involved in decision-making processes. And yet, when we asked members of all the faith groups if they felt they were presented an opportunity to participate in decision-making, Catholics responded as affirmatively as did Protestants. Perhaps Catholics' expectations for leadership are not as great. Interestingly, also, we found that only six percent of members of congregations of all denominations expressed dissatisfaction about not participating in congregational decision-making.

Even as I bring out these few differences between Catholic and Protestant worshipers I must tell you how much we found a real universality across the faith traditions. Denominations are so alike in so many ways—and it is truly productive for us all to see how we are alike. We found congregations of all sizes and faith traditions that were providing meaningful worship experiences. Size doesn't matter in meeting the spiritual needs of members. Congregations are very similar in their ability to get worshipers to participate in activities beyond attending services. It's always a lower percentage of people than they would like. And most regular worshipers feel they are continuing to grow in their faith. The way congregations are most different is in terms of their numbers of new worshipers. Some congregations have many new people (those who began participating in the last five years) and some congregations have almost none.

**Q.** What can you say about the gender and age discrepancies among worshipers. Can you address that issue?

**A.** We found that 61 percent of worshipers are female compared to the census statistic—51 percent of the U.S. population is female. We also found that, in every age category, there are more women than men attending church. I think it has always been the case that more women went to church. Religious education has historically been considered the mom's responsibility.

What is also interesting, and something we should not feel good about, is that worshipers tend to be better educated than the general population. Thirty-eight percent of worshipers have an advanced or college degree as compared to only 23% in the general population. I say that we should not be happy about this because it may point out that many people are not being served or that class segregation still exists.

**Q.** Can you give instances of congregations that are successfully attracting male membership? What specific techniques are they using?

And also, regarding the educational differential, do you know of churches that are recognizing this and trying to attract members who may not have college or advanced degrees?

**A.** We didn't find any instances of congregations with more than 50% male worshipers. Congregations with higher percentages of male worshipers tended to have more married men, more children, and more people between 25 and 44 years of age. We didn't look at specific programs but I can tell you that these congregations valued programs for children and youth. Their worshipers felt the congregations offered quality ministries in this area. In terms of the educational differential, that is an interesting question. Nothing emerged in our work that would speak to that issue. However, Tex Sample is one author who has written about the need for congregations to be intentional about crossing class boundaries.

**Q.** From all that you have learned in this study, what do you think can be most helpful to seminaries as they develop the congregational leaders of the future?

**A.** The seminaries are doing a good job in many ways. They are helping future church leaders to draw on theology and sacred texts and tradition and church teaching. And they are helping them to learn discernment through the Holy Spirit. I think what might still be missing is the "what is"—as in "what is really going on in congregations today?" There needs to be something else on the table—understanding who is in a church community and what their needs are. Congregational leaders find it easy to think about what ought to be or what should be. They find it much harder to look at what "is" and to describe it honestly.

But you have to be able to know where your current strengths and challenges are before moving toward a vision of what you'd like to become—or what the congregation has discerned God is calling them to be as a community of faith.

Seminaries can help leaders do ministry in context. For example, many seminaries have or are developing courses in urban ministry. Such efforts are essential.

**Q. What else can seminaries do for future congregational leaders?**

**A.** Students who are preparing for congregational leadership, or any other type of leadership in the church, need to know social science facts. What makes for effective ministry in a small town is different from what makes effective ministry in a large city. And strategies that work in a large church probably won't work in a small-membership congregation. Community change of all types – declining population, more racial-ethnic diversity, shifts in the economy – has a tremendous impact on the ministry of congregations. Often congregations are just unaware of how much the changes that are going on around them are influencing their day-to-day lives.

**Q. Can you name some strategies that work in small congregations that don't work in large congregations—and vice versa?**

**A.** It's hard to know where to begin with this question because there are many types of small churches. In general, leadership style and organization is different. Laity are clearly more involved in everything that happens in a small church. Strategic planning doesn't make sense in this environment. Small congregations operate like family reunions. Large congregations have to structure programs and experiences to create the environment that occurs naturally in a small congregation.

**Q. Anything else that seminaries can do?**

**A.** The seminaries need to appreciate that there is a gap between what seminary graduates know and what the people in the pew know. This knowledge gap is very real and seminaries need to address this issue.

We found that the most effective leaders are those who came “from the people,” because they have an authenticity about knowing what it means to be in the pews. Connectivity is extremely important. Leaders must connect with the people. What is true for future pastors is also true for future lay leaders. If they are going to assume roles of leadership they need new, up-to-date knowledge.

What we learned in our study and put in our books can be very useful to many—seminaries, colleges, church leaders, and the people in the pews. We hope that people can strengthen their congregations by applying the factual material that we are able to

present. As we point out, using facts when making congregational decisions does not exclude acting on faith.