

The Secularization of Sunday: Real or Perceived Competition for Churches

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Received: 5 March 2012 / Accepted: 12 October 2012 / Published online: 20 October 2012
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Abstract In a survey of pastors and members of 16 declining congregations in the US and Canada, respondents most commonly identified competing Sunday activities as the primary reason for the decline in Sunday worship attendance. The repeal of “blue laws” that kept stores closed on Sundays has resulted in many more people working or shopping on Sundays, and children’s athletic activities are often scheduled on Sunday mornings at the very time when many churches traditionally have provided religious education. Based on a study of 16 mainline and conservative Protestant congregations in decline, this article considers the effect—both real and perceived—of the secularization of Sunday on congregations with declining worship attendance.

Keywords Secularization · Congregation · Sunday · Attribution · Church decline

In many North American communities, Sunday is quite different than it was a generation or two ago. Blue laws have mostly been dismantled, sports teams routinely practice on Sunday mornings, and malls are full of Sunday shoppers. The traditional deference to church activities on Sunday has largely disappeared; some people in contemporary society may still think of church when they think of Sunday, but even for many believers, attending church has become one of several options on Sunday morning. This article considers how the secularization of Sunday has affected congregations, and especially the perceived effect that the secularization of Sunday has on congregational decline. The data demonstrates that declining congregations are mistaken in their belief that competing Sunday

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activities are the major reason for their decline, although the *perception* in such congregations that Sunday activities are to blame may be a factor in their decline.

Theoretical Foundations

A great deal has been written about the decline of religion in an increasingly secular society (Berger 1969; Hunter 1983; Chaves 1994). For example, to explain what social scientists mean by *secularization*, Hunter says “there is something about modernity that erodes the plausibility of religious belief and weakens the influence of religious symbols in the social structure and culture at large” (Hunter 1983, p. 4) yet in the same paragraph he notes that not all religious groups are affected equally by this phenomenon. Berger argued that “secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality” (Berger 1969, p. 127). Chaves argues that the scope of religious authority continues to decline in secular society (Chaves 1994, p. 750).

At the same time, in keeping with Warner’s discussion of an emerging new sociological paradigm for the study of religion (Warner 1993; McMullin 2010), some rational choice theorists have focussed on competition within religious markets as an explanation of religious growth and decline (Finke 1997; Iannaccone 1997; Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005). The data from this study of declining congregations suggest that the competition for religious consumers is not limited to religious markets.

Part of the challenge that confronts the sociologist who tries to understand these issues is addressed by Jörg Stolz who argues that current social theories of religion (secularization, individualization, market theory) do not adequately address the complexity of the competition between religion and secular alternatives. Although Stolz recognizes that “to church officials and many laypersons alike, it is almost common sense to say that Christian churches in modern societies face tough competition not only from other religious groups but also from all sorts of secular institutions” (Stolz 2010, p. 253), he points out that from a theoretical perspective this competition is quite complex:

“We thus get a feeling that a ‘silent battle’ between secular and religious options is taking place, a relatively silent competition that mainly involves entries and exits from and into the religious domain and that produces currently puzzles sociologists of religion” (Stolz 2010, p. 272).

Although Stolz helpfully articulates important issues regarding competition between sacred and secular activities, the field research from this study leads to the conclusion that there is an additional and very important distinction between *perceived* and *actual* competition between these activities. In declining congregations, the perception of competition from secular activities on Sunday is sufficient to lead members and leaders to believe that the changed social environment has made it impossible for them to reverse the congregation’s decline.

Methodology

The 16 declining Protestant congregations that were included in this study during 2009 and 2010 belong to seven different denominations in the United States (6) and Canada (10) that have experienced substantial declines in both membership and worship attendance. Eight of the congregations belong to mainline denominations and eight belong to conservative denominations. Although most of these congregations each had hundreds of members as recently as 20 years ago, the congregations now range in size from about 30 people in the pews on Sunday morning to two congregations with about 175 people in each. In most of these congregations, the decline in attendance began in the mid-sixties and has slowly and steadily continued. In a few, the decline began quite recently and has been more rapid. In the short time since I completed this research, one of the congregations has closed its doors. A total of 551 congregants completed an eight-page questionnaire about their congregations. Formal interviews were conducted with 21 church leaders (including 16 ordained clergy) and 71 church members participated in 11 focus groups. During attendance at worship services and other events at each of the congregations, copious field notes were recorded.

The Congregations

The congregations in the study were intentionally chosen because they seemed quite dissimilar from one another—and at first glance these 16 congregations might seem to have little in common with each other except that they are experiencing decline. They are located in two Canadian provinces and in two US states. They identify as Anglican, Baptist (three different denominations), Evangelical Free, Presbyterian, and United Church of Canada. Education levels range from one rural Canadian congregation where only one respondent had completed a university degree, to an urban US congregation where 81 % of respondents are university graduates. The mean age of the adult respondents ranged from a low of 50.7 in a Midwestern US conservative congregation to 68.1 at a conservative congregation in eastern Canada. The mean age at the mainline congregations ranged between 56.7 and 63.1. In most of the churches, few young children and even fewer high school youth attended. All but one of the pastors are seminary graduates. In seven of the congregations, the pastor has resigned since I completed my research.

Some congregations follow an established and traditional liturgy for worship; other congregations had less structured orders of service. In nine of the congregations, the pipe organ was the only musical instrument, although in two of those congregations a second worship service at an earlier hour and in a smaller room was accompanied by a small worship band. One church had only a small electronic organ which was of very poor quality or was poorly played. The rest had a worship band (drums, guitars, keyboard); although in one of those congregations the pipe organ alone accompanied one hymn. I was greeted at the door and given a bulletin upon arrival at nine of the congregations; no one was greeting people at the door at the other seven. Some church buildings were obviously in poor repair

(one had buckets in the foyer to catch the water leaking through the roof) while other congregations had well-maintained buildings. Two congregations have multi-million dollar endowment funds, while others are having difficulty paying their bills each month. These dissimilarities make it all the more striking that the responses to questions about decline were remarkably similar among all 16 congregations, regardless of their theological or denominational or geographic differences. In almost every congregation, focus group participants lamented the fact that their own children and grandchildren will not attend with them, and several survey respondents admitted that they no longer attend as often as they used to.

Comparison Congregations

In addition to the 16 declining congregations, two rapidly growing congregations were visited and a clergy interview was conducted at both of them. One of the growing congregations (in a rural Canadian farming community) had only six members as recently as 1995 and now has about 600 worshippers on Sunday. The other (in a mid-sized US city—the same city where four of the declining congregations are located) began as a small group meeting in a living room in the late 1980s and has grown to a weekly attendance of about 2,000 people. The average age of adult survey respondents was 48.1 and 43.4, respectively, which does not take into account the large number of children and youth who were present. Although they are now in a very different size category from the declining congregations, both growing congregations quite recently had fewer people than the 16 declining congregations in the study. Methodologically, the two growing congregations provided a useful test of whether the findings were applicable to all congregations or only to congregations in decline.

Secular Competition as the Explanation for Church Decline

As primary reasons for their congregation's decline, it was anticipated that survey participants would identify their congregation's unwillingness to change, the challenge of being relevant in a changing society, the increasing age of members, or their lack of financial and other resources. That assumption was incorrect. Among both clergy and members in the declining congregations that were studied, the most commonly-cited reason for decline in church attendance is the secularization of Sunday. In response to an open-ended survey question about church attendance, 21.3 % of respondents identified competing Sunday activities as the main reason why people in contemporary society do not attend church. Sunday activities were blamed even more commonly in clergy interviews and focus groups. Many identified children's sports activities on Sunday as the main culprit, while others pointed to the fact that people's work schedules make it more difficult to attend Sunday services. Some people mentioned the fact that stores are open on Sunday. Several people included all three activities in their response.

Although survey respondents identified other possible factors, no other reasons were mentioned as frequently. The general busyness of life was blamed by 17.9 %, while 13.4 % believe people do not attend church because of specifically religious reasons (“People don’t believe they need God in their lives,” “They are not saved,” “Do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” “They have lost focus on God,” “Fear of being confronted with their sins”). Only 8.2 % thought it related to people’s negative attitudes toward churches, and even fewer (6.4 %) thought that people find the church irrelevant. A mere 4.3 % answered that people do not attend church because the church is not doing what it needs to do, and only 3.3 % said that it is because church is boring.

Most notable to this researcher was the finding that most people in these declining congregations believe that the main reasons for the congregation’s decline are exterior to the congregation. They do not think that the congregation itself is implicated in why people will not attend; instead, they believe that things the church and its members cannot control (especially competition from secular activities on Sunday) have led to fewer people attending worship services. Comparatively few members identified problems within the life of the congregation (boring or irrelevant services, little effort to minister to the surrounding community) as reasons why people might not be attending.

Interviews with clergy and discussion in the focus groups reinforced the survey data. In those settings, two related questions were asked. The first referred to society in general: “Many congregations have experienced a decline in attendance and membership. What do you think are the main reasons why churches experience decline?” The second question asked more specifically, “What do you think are the main reasons why fewer people are attending your congregation?” In response to these questions, 8 of the 14 pastors of declining congregations who were interviewed specifically mentioned sports as a competing activity on Sunday morning. Among the clergy, demographic change in the community (a declining population, or ethnic changes in the neighborhood) was the next most commonly cited reason.

The responses of two pastors quoted below (the first at a mainline church, the other at a conservative church) provide some insight about the extent to which clergy think Sunday activities, and sports in particular, constitute a reason for church decline:

When I started ministry ... and really only up until about 15 or 20 years ago, no school, public school, or sports groups would dare schedule practices on a Sunday morning. Now it’s just all over the place. We’re competing with so many things. It’s unbelievable, and it puts incredible pressure and tension on our families. The parents want the kids here, but if they miss practice they don’t play in the game, or if they miss this they’re off. So that whole shift has had a profound impact on worship attendance and participation in the life of the church (pastor 7:1).¹

¹ Clergy who were interviewed are identified by congregation and, only in the case of multiple staff in a single congregation, by order of being interviewed.

[Parents] will make sure Johnny goes to sports, but when it comes to church, I've just seen it over and over again, and even in our own congregation, the families that have children in sports will sacrifice church for the sake of their son or their daughter's sports program, so sports is another huge reason why our church is declining (pastor 1).

Focus group participants also blame sports and work for declining church attendance. The following exchange in a focus group at a mainline church provides an example of opinions:

I think the world has gotten busier. There are just so many other options, particularly if you have children that the world of sports has so interfered. They think nothing of having soccer games on Sunday morning (female 7:6).²

A lot of the families have to work too, just to make ends meet (female 7:1).

True and the stores are open now earlier and earlier and earlier on Sundays and so if you have a job, you will have to work Sundays (female 7:2).

Well I agree with that because when I was growing up the blue laws were against that. You didn't play sports on Sunday. Sunday was a day to go to church. Now it seems that Sunday is just another day of the week (female 7:7).

In eight of the ten churches where focus groups were conducted, Sunday activities such as children's sports were explicitly mentioned as the major reason for the decline of their congregation. A man in a conservative church specifically referred to sports as competition for churches:

Church used to be the center of society and community, and all activities, both social and family, were around the church. And now there's a lot of things going, sports, clubs, and a lot of competitions for families. I know a lot of the sports teams, the practices are all Sunday mornings now, soccer teams, that's what they find a convenient time, unfortunately. That's part of it—there's a lot of competition out there (male 8:1).

In a mainline congregation, participants identified sports, work, and shopping as all affecting church attendance:

The first thing I think of is the activities that are now available for children on weekends, thus tying up the parents, and it's not only on Saturdays, it's certainly on Sundays. That's one reason for decline (male 6:1).

The retail market of course too. Sunday shopping has put a twist on things—people that are employed, people who choose to shop (female 6:2).

At a conservative church, the anxiety of parents was identified:

I think in our society today, people with children are so anxious for their children to become involved and to be kept busy and this sort of thing, and it

² Focus group participants and survey respondents are identified by gender, congregation, and by order of first speaking or by survey number.

seems that all the activities, sports, every sport and whatnot takes place on the weekend, and unless the children go to these things on Saturdays and Sundays, why they can't be a member of the team. And I think that's—I know that's a factor in my own family—that they have to do this sort of thing so that they just can't get there (female 14:4).

What is clear from the survey data, the clergy interviews, and the focus groups is that people in declining churches are convinced that the most important single explanation for the decline in church attendance in society and specifically for the decline of their own congregation is the secularization of Sunday. Time that was once reserved by society for church activities is now busy with many competing secular activities. They believe that children are penalized for not attending sports practices on Sunday mornings, that some people must now work on Sundays, and that people would rather shop on Sunday than attend church. Sunday is no longer sacred; it is “just another day of the week.”

Reasons to Question the Perception

As clear as it is that people in declining congregations perceive competing secular activities as the major cause of decline, it is important to question the extent to which competing Sunday activities actually contribute to congregational decline. There are good reasons to think that the relationship between secular Sunday activities and church decline is much more complex than these clergy and church members realize.

First, not all churches are declining. In fact, many congregations are experiencing substantial growth in spite of competing Sunday activities. The pastors from the two growing churches that were included for comparison purposes answered very differently. They did not vilify secular activities such as sports or shopping in the same way that was evident in interviews with the pastors of declining congregations. They focussed on ways that the church can remain relevant amid changing social circumstances.

Second, it should be asked to what extent secular activities have impacted congregations. If activities such as Sunday sports and Sunday shopping are the cause of much of the decline that the congregations in this study have experienced, to what extent are those activities responsible? Or to ask the question differently, if stores closed on Sunday and Sunday morning sports events were cancelled, would these congregations suddenly be filled with worshippers once again?

Third, it is important to ask why clergy and church members attribute the cause of church decline to an external circumstance—the secularization of Sunday—instead of something about the congregations themselves and how they are relating or not relating effectively to their surrounding communities. My experience when attending these churches would suggest that although competing Sunday activities may contribute to the decline, there may be other reasons within the congregations themselves that make attendance unattractive especially for new and especially younger people.

Fourth, if the secularization of Sunday has contributed to church decline, it is of interest to consider how the affected congregations and clergy are responding. Surprisingly, it seems that few declining congregations are providing more flexible schedules for worship or considering other strategies to respond to the changes that people experience in their weekend schedules.

Growing Churches

The first of two growing churches studied for comparison purposes, referred to here as Hope Regional Church, is located in a medium-sized US city and has an average weekly worship attendance of about 2,000. During the four worship services that I attended at the church (including one on a Wednesday evening and another on a Saturday evening), the congregation was made up mostly of parents and their children; there were relatively few seniors in the congregation.

The pastor who was interviewed mentioned nothing about competing activities as a reason for the decline of churches in society. Instead, he identified three problems that he believes have led to declines in church attendance: he said that congregations fail to be attractional, congregations are not missional, and congregations have marginalized the arts. Notably, he focussed exclusively on *internal* reasons for decline. Although he did not mention competing activities, his response takes for granted that the church must compete for people's time and interest and they do that by being relevant and by communicating clearly to the surrounding society. He did not criticize contemporary societal changes as an affront to church life or as a threat to church attendance. Instead, in light of the changing realities of contemporary society he believes that churches cannot simply sit back and wait for people to come to church. They must attract people, they must articulate a clear mission, and they must use the arts effectively to engage people in worship.

The other growing congregation, Grace Family Church, is located in a rural Canadian community and has a weekly congregation of about 600 worshippers. The pastor responded to questions about why churches decline by talking about how churches are seen to be antiquated and need to change:

Part of it is that [people in society] think that we're just an antiquated structure that has completely no relevance and a message that is irrelevant to where their lives are. And so that the questions that they would have about life, they don't even think that there might be a church that's addressing their questions. So why are they declining? I think part of it is that the church is seen as antiquated because it is antiquated.

Interestingly, this pastor mentioned his personal involvement in sports as something that helps him to stay in touch with his community and with what people are thinking about spiritual issues (he is a hockey coach in the community). When asked about the concerns expressed by other pastors about competing Sunday activities such as sports causing church attendance to decline, his response was immediate: "I don't think it does us any good to fight it angrily; it's a reality of our culture. I think we have to try to provide options for people." He actively encourages people in his congregation to be active in sports organizations:

So it's not like we're going to win against the culture; it's a reality. So we try to partner with people, and help them to understand that. We also try, for me in hockey, I'm pretty engaged in hockey, so we try to partner with them, sports organizations. We have lots of our folks who are coaching so sometimes they get to speak into those organizations as well.

He recognizes that sometimes the schedules of sports and worship services collide, but his concern is the way that parents deal with those realities:

[What] I will say on occasion is to remind people that we're not setting ourselves up against minor hockey or minor ball or whatever, but I challenge our people that when sports and God collide in terms of church, when sports and God collide every Sunday, if sports wins every time you have sent a message to your kids that could damage them spiritually forever. And that you'd better have God win sometimes. I try to make that balance.

The pastor did not express concerns about competing Sunday activities, but he said that he has addressed the issues with his congregation. He does not see it as a battle to be won or lost, but as a reality of contemporary society that churches must address in order to help congregants make decisions about the use of their time.

Secular Activities

There are reasons to question the idea that neither children nor their parents are able to attend worship services because a more secular society has scheduled children's sporting practices and events on Sundays. A 2005 study of Canadian children shows that there has been a recent decline in the percentage of both boys and girls who participate in sports activities, while at the same time there has also been a decline in the number of sports in which boys are involved:

Sports participation of boys has declined from 66 % in 1992 to 56 % in 2005. Over the same time period, sports participation of girls has changed little from 49 to 45 %. Not only are boys now less likely to regularly participate in sports than they were back in 1992, those who do compete are involved in fewer sports—an average of 1.8 sports versus 1.9 (Clark 2008, p. 54).

Bibby's (2006, p. 36) research in Canada and Putnam's (2000, p. 109) research in the United States confirm an overall decline in sports participation.

Another GSS-based study of Canadian children has shown that the children who regularly attend religious services are the most likely to participate in both organized sports and non-sports activities:

Frequent attendance at religious services does not reduce the likelihood that children aged 4–11 will also participate in organized sports, in non-sport programs such as music lessons, or in clubs such as brownies or cubs. In fact the opposite is true: regular [church] attendees were most likely to engage in these three types of activities.... Church-attending children are more likely to be the participants in sports activities—54 % of children who attend church

weekly and 59 % who attend church monthly participate in sports, compared to 49 % who do not attend (Jones 1999, p. 16).

Christian Smith recognizes that this is also the case in the United States:

US teens who are more religiously serious and active are also more likely to be involved in a large number of other programs, clubs, hobby groups, sports, or other organized activities; less religiously active teens tend to be involved in fewer (Smith 2005, p. 116).

The conclusion that the majority of children who attend church regularly (including especially those who attend every week) are involved in organized sports, and that such children are actually more likely than non-attenders to be active in sports and non-sports activities shows that many families are able successfully to combine regular church attendance and sports in their schedules. The comments by the pastor of Grace Family Church (quoted above) support such a conclusion.

Children's sports activities do have some effect on worship service attendance. But if the majority of children who attend church weekly continue to participate in sports, and if the overall percentage of children in society who participate in sports is decreasing, it seems doubtful that competition with children's sports activities is having the kind of direct causal effect on church attendance that is imagined by pastors and members of declining congregations.

In support of the opinion that secular activities have a major impact on worship attendance among the young, Christian Smith argues that sports and other youth activities are more demanding than religion:

Religion clearly operates in a social-structurally weak position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other, more dominant demands and commitments, particularly school, sports, television, and other electronic media. If we conceive of adolescents' lives as bundles of finite interest, energy, and investment, then we can think of the various social institutions that touch adolescents' lives as seeking to lay claim to shares of those resources ... Given religion's limited structured access to typical US teenagers' lives, it is remarkable that as many teens insist on religion's high importance and great influence in their lives as do ... Religion simply occupies a largely losing structural position when it comes to most adolescents' obligations, schedules, routines, and habits. When it comes to institutions possessing opportunities to form the lives of youth, religion is not among the more advantaged players ... For many teenagers, religion is often the thing that gives; school, sports, television, friends, and the like are the things that demand the giving (Smith 2005, p. 161–162).

In fact, Smith says that

Religious interests and values in teens' lives typically compete against those of school, homework, television, other media, sports, romantic relationships, paid work and more. Indeed, in many adolescents' lives, religion occupies a quite weak and often losing position among these competing interests (Smith 2005, p. 28).

Does Smith base these conclusions on the same reasoning as that of people in declining churches? The two pastors of growing churches that were interviewed do not agree that religion has to be the thing that gives, and for the 54 % of the weekly-church-attending Canadian children who are also involved in organized sports, clearly there is a way to do both. As Smith himself points out, the “remarkable” fact is that in spite of the many competing activities that are available, many teens continue to insist on religion’s high importance and great influence in their lives. The two growing churches provide evidence that congregations that effectively engage the surrounding culture continue to occupy a strong structural position in the lives of adolescents.

In addition to competition from sports, respondents mentioned competition from stores and shopping malls. Gruber and Hungerman consider the effect of Sunday retail activity on church attendance in the United States, noting that such activity is the direct result of “policy-driven change” (the repeal of so-called “blue laws”):

Many states have repealed these laws in recent years, raising the opportunity cost of religious participation. We use a variety of data sets to show that when a state repeals its blue laws religious attendance falls and that church donations and spending fall as well (Gruber and Hungerman 2008, p. 831).

With the “blue laws” repealed, there was not only an opportunity for retail shopping on Sunday but the number of people working on Sunday increased substantially. The study by Gruber and Hungerman confirms a strong link between Sunday store openings and a decline in both worship attendance and contributions to congregations:

We begin by using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) on religious attendance to show a very strong reduction in religious attendance when the blue laws are repealed. We also use data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CEX) to document a decline in religious contributions when blue laws are repealed, despite no change in other charitable activity. We confirm these findings using a unique data set of budget data for four major Christian denominations over the past 40 years, which shows a significant decline in church expenditures when the blue laws are repealed. These results do not seem to be driven by declines in religiosity prior to the law change, nor do we see comparable declines in membership or giving to nonreligious organizations after a state repeals its laws. Thus, secular competition does matter for religious participation: increased secular opportunities for work and leisure on Sundays lead to less time at church and lower religious contributions (Gruber and Hungerman 2008, p. 832).

Interestingly, based on their findings Gruber and Hungerman conclude that the repeal of the blue laws did not decrease the *number of people* attending worship services; instead, it decreased the *frequency* of worship attendance:

The result indicates that repealing the blue laws reduced attendance by 0.21 index points, or about 5 % of the sample mean. This is a sizable effect. ... There is, however, a very large negative coefficient on the effect of attending

weekly, which represents a 15 % decline in the prevalence of that category. There are then no effects on attending about weekly, two or three times per month, or once per month, positive and significant effects on attending several times a year or one or two times per year, and no effect on not attending at all. Thus, the results appear to indicate a shift down the distribution: those attending weekly move to lower attendance, raising the prevalence of nearby categories (such as about weekly), but individuals in those categories reduce attendance as well, leading to an offsetting decrease and no net effect, as well as an increased prevalence of rare attendance. The fact that there is no change in the “no attendance” category implies that individuals are not dropping out of churchgoing altogether, but rather that they are simply going less frequently (Gruber and Hungerman 2008, p. 844).

Their conclusion is very important for this research, because the effect of the secularization of Sunday demonstrated by Gruber and Hungerman is not reflected in the experience of the declining congregations surveyed, which leads to the conclusion that their decline is *not* caused primarily by changes in Sunday schedules. The experience of the declining congregations in this study was not that decline was mainly the result of people attending less frequently; they reported that many people—especially young families—have stopped attending entirely except and that when new people attend they rarely return. The conclusions of Gruber and Hungerman are more suited to the two growing churches that recognize that the Sunday schedule has changed and that they must provide more flexible scheduling in order to make it easier for people to attend worship.

Although pastors and congregants of declining churches consider competing secular activities as the primary reason for declining attendance, and although certainly sports activities on Sunday, work schedules, and shopping have impacted people’s schedules, it is unlikely that those external reasons alone explain the complete loss of younger families from church life in these congregations.

Attribution

Secular activities on Sunday morning do have some impact on worship attendance, especially with regard to the frequency of attendance, but they cannot explain the extent of decline experienced by these 16 congregations. The attribution of the decline to changes in the external social environment over leads to the belief that internal changes would be futile, because the congregation and its leaders have no control over the changing social situation. In focus group after focus group, members considered how they might make changes that would attract new people and invariably concluded that nothing could be done.

To phrase these arguments in the terms of Attribution Theory (Weiner 1985), pastors and people in declining congregations attribute the locus of the cause of decline to situations that are external to the congregation. Although they might prefer that congregation size remain stable or even grow, the ability to externalize the reasons for decline provides an important means of maintaining the self esteem of the

congregation as well as the pride of clergy and individual members. The broad consensus among clergy and people in declining congregations that the cause is external reinforces the perception that there is nothing that they can do in response to the changing social environment, and actually augments the attribution bias in these congregations. It has recently been argued that such attribution bias is heightened even more when there is “a sufficiently high degree of in-group identification” (Casterelli 2009, p. 293), something that is quite characteristic of these close-knit declining congregations. Like die-hard supporters of a losing sports team, high identifiers in social organizations are unlikely to accept a negative interpretation of their group’s behavior (Casterelli 2009, p. 294). For people who have been members of a declining congregation for most of their lives, and for whom the congregation is a primary social group, the ability to attribute blame for the congregation’s decline on the secularization of Sunday—an external circumstance—provides an important reason for maintaining commitment to the dying congregation.

Responding to a Secularized Sunday

Resistance to change characterizes these declining congregations and many of their leaders, which makes it difficult for them to respond effectively to the changing social situation, including the secularization of Sunday. The pastor of one congregation said that the traditional Sunday service time is “creating an extra barrier” to attracting new people, but he explained that a lack of change in congregational life “may be the one part of [members’] lives that has remained constant through all the [societal] change so although there are many things that might be done to draw in other members, to make a change to the one thing that is constant seems almost sacrilegious at this point in their lives” (pastor 14).

In one declining mainline congregation the pastor attempted to respond by providing a second Sunday worship service at an earlier hour, which allows people to leave in time for work in retail stores. Although fewer people attend, the mean age of the 22 adult respondents at that early service was 35.2 compared to a mean age of 64.0 among the 75 respondents at the traditional 11 am service time. There were also more children at the early service. The pastor indicated that many people at the early service are new to the congregation, while the main service attracts few newcomers. Yet there is opposition to the early worship service. A focus group member who sings in the choir thinks that people at the early service should attend the later service, even though she realizes that they likely would not:

“Sitting up there in front, and looking out there and sometimes I remember when the balcony was even full and so I think it’s very sad and I keep thinking things will change and maybe if the people in the [early service] were here and then I think the people in the [early service] wouldn’t be here” (female 2:3).

The pastor pointed out that “because of opposition the contemporary service is in a musty basement room with wires hanging from the ceiling” and that “it needs to move to the main sanctuary” (pastor 2) but that change would interfere with the church musicians (organist, choir, handbell ringers) who have traditionally rehearsed in the sanctuary before the main service. Maintaining tradition is deemed

more important by members than accommodating an earlier service that is attracting new and younger people to the congregation. Focus group members also expressed concern that having a second service divides the congregation: “basically right now we are two congregations who don’t meet together for things and get involved with one another” (female 2:5).

Another response to the secularization of Sunday is to place blame. In the same congregation, a focus group member said “There was a time in this town when they did not have any sports activities until afternoon on Sunday. That has certainly changed ... because there hasn’t been anyone to stop them and to complain” (female 2:1). Some focus group members blamed parents for not insisting that children be in church:

We always told our kids, if you want to do sports that’s fine, but Sunday mornings is dedicated to church, and that’s never been an issue in our house, and I know in a lot of people’s homes it has been, and they’d rather pay out \$800 for hockey, and the kids and them never be at church for 6 months of the year (female 11:1).

One focus group member even blamed his congregation’s lack of recreational facilities for their inability to compete with organized sports: “One of our problems is when it comes to young people, or getting young people to come here, we don’t have a gymnasium-type facility where you can hold things that young people are involved in” (male 14:1).

These declining congregations put little if any thought into the three internal elements that the pastor from Hope Regional Church identified as the main contributors to congregational decline: a failure to be attractational, a lack of missional thinking, and the marginalization of the arts in congregational life. Although sports and other Sunday activities do compete with church for people’s time and commitment, the two growing churches demonstrate that congregations that recognize and respond to the changed Sunday environment can compete quite successfully. In order to be attractive to new people, such churches determine to change internally so as not to be antiquated in their worship and so that they engage the culture. The competitive Sunday schedule reflects changes that have taken place in society. Missional churches that intentionally respond to those changes are more successful in maintaining or increasing their attendance than churches that do not change.

C. Kirk Hadaway writes that:

Churches that want to thrive and grow realize that they are in competition with other congregations for participants and with non-church alternatives for time use. So they attempt to make their services more exciting and ‘fun’ through rock bands, praise teams, drama, and multi-media technology (Hadaway 2009, p. 124).

Hadaway recognizes that growing congregations intentionally respond to competition for time use. However, the interview with the pastor at Hope Regional Church suggests that the congregations that compete successfully in the religious marketplace do not seek to make their services “exciting” and “fun” so much as they seek to be relevant and religiously meaningful for congregants and potential congregants by the appropriate and effective use of the arts in worship. That is quite

different. It is not just that old hymns accompanied by a pipe organ are not exciting; it is that the church's traditional use of the arts is often perceived to be boring and antiquated by people in contemporary society. For that matter, congregations who are thoughtlessly using contemporary songs accompanied by rock bands may be equally irrelevant and unattractive. It is more than a matter of musical style: it is about the meaningful use of the arts in worship.

My observation about the worship services at the declining congregations would be that the use of the arts in worship was traditional, was generally of poor quality, and was limited to music (there was no use of dance, drama, or visual arts). Even in congregations where the quality was somewhat better, it still seemed boring and antiquated. The music was mentioned in only one focus group. When one woman said "Music has to change" (female 5:6) another member quickly changed the topic to a discussion of "a lot of ethnic groups" with "different kinds of beliefs" and other "outside influences" (female 5:1). Later when a focus group member said "You have to offer something, emotionally or spiritually, musically" (male 5:1) his comment was immediately dismissed as referring to "entertainment." It is not that the decline in these congregations would stop if they only improved the music; it is that in these declining congregations the arts have been marginalized.

Hadaway also argues that

Sunday morning is not sacred time because the church is no longer sacred to the larger community. Going to church is a leisure activity that must compete with other leisure activities within the service sector of the economy. Religion has become a commodity that some people enjoy consuming and others do not (Hadaway 2009, p. 128).

Society no longer considers Sunday to be sacred—Sunday has been secularized. The congregations that are competing successfully in this changed environment are precisely those that have recognized the reality of this major social change. What also should be noted is that such congregations also no longer consider Sunday sacred, thus freeing themselves to schedule additional worship services at alternative times such as Saturday or even in the middle of the week, and they recognize that they must "compete" for people's time by providing a relevant and meaningful worship experience.

In the declining congregations in this study, several survey respondents were indignant about Sunday being "just another day of the week" and longed for things to be as they once were. One 70-year-old male in a mainline congregation wrote that he was "wishing for the days of old (not so old) when [his church] was full of people on Sunday" (male 6:212). Although the declining congregations recognized that there are competing activities on Sunday morning, only two of them even provide a second worship time (which in both cases is also on Sunday morning). None of the declining congregations—unlike both Grace Family Church and Hope Regional Church—provide an alternative time for worship for people who work on Sunday or take children to sports activities.

Conclusions

Although the pastors and members of the declining congregations attribute the decline in membership and attendance primarily to external social change over which they have no control, such an attribution is not supported by the data. The decline of these congregations is not characterized by a decline only in the frequency of attendance, which Gruber and Hungerman show to be the effect of Sunday retail activity. The decline in these congregations is mainly characterized instead by the loss of many members, including most of their younger members, and an inability to attract any new members.

The continuing growth of the two comparison congregations demonstrates that churches that recognize and understand the changed religious market can compete effectively. Instead of blaming the changed social environment, these congregations intentionally make internal changes in order to remain religiously meaningful and relevant. With Sunday no longer considered sacred as it once was, the freedom to offer worship services on other days of the week may even provide new opportunities for such congregations to grow.

Organized sports activities affect church attendance. Pastors and members of the declining congregations responded by blaming society and by blaming parents, and with a desire to return to a time when Sunday was sacred. The result is that families whose children are involved in sports stop attending. When pressured by the congregation to choose church over sports, they choose instead to leave church. In contrast, the pastor of Grace Family Church readily admits the effect of sports on frequency of church attendance and understands that Sunday is no longer sacred, but his response is to get involved as a hockey coach and to encourage his members to give leadership in community sports activities. Although some children and youth miss worship services because of sports, the congregation is not losing those families. They are not forced to choose, but instead are supported in their effort to navigate a busy Sunday schedule where sports schedules and worship service times may conflict.

The attribution of decline to the secularization of Sunday affects the congregation's response to decline in two ways. First, in the thinking of leaders and members it alleviates any need to consider making changes in the life of the congregation in order to be relevant in the changed social environment. If the problem is perceived to be external to the congregation, members believe that such changes would prove futile so no attempt is made to compete in the changed religious marketplace. Second, since change is perceived to be the cause of the problem, it leads to an even greater resistance to change. These congregations have become characterized by an unwillingness to change—most are unwilling to utilize new technologies, to support an alternative service time, and to change worship and music styles. In a world where so much has changed, a congregation's resistance to change can become an important source of comfort for its members while making it increasingly irrelevant to the surrounding social environment.

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