

Comparing Personal Religious Practices Across the Generations

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Abstract

About 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org) conducted by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April 2001. Congregations were selected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago using hyper-network sampling to be representative of congregations of all denominations and faith groups across the country. All worshipers in each participating congregation completed a survey in worship, providing extensive data about individuals actively involved in religious life in America. Survey topics included worshipers' faith background and current membership, their participation in activities of the congregation, and their values regarding congregational life.

Using data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, personal religious practices were compared among worshipers in different age groups (Gen Y, Gen X, Boomers, and Older Persons). Practices examined include traditional indicators of religious life such as private prayer, Bible reading, and saying grace before meals, as well as alternative expressions of spirituality such as meditation, reading New Age books, and visiting religious Web sites. It was hypothesized that younger worshipers would be less likely to be involved in traditional religious practices and more likely to be pursuing alternative religious practices. Support was found for the former, but not for the latter. Few worshipers in any age range pursue alternative practices on a regular basis. Further, generational differences were found to be less important predictors of religious behaviors such as worship attendance and private devotions than other factors.

The Sample

We contracted with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to identify a random sample of U.S. congregations attended by individuals who participated in the General Social Survey (GSS) in the year 2000. All GSS participants who reported that they attended worship at least once in the prior year were asked to name the place where they worshiped. Since the GSS involves a national random sample of individuals, congregations identified by GSS participants comprise a national random sample of congregations. NORC researchers verified that each nominated congregation was an actual congregation and then invited each congregation to participate in the project. Of 1,214 nominated and verified congregations, 807 agreed to participate (66%), and 434 returned completed surveys from their worshipers (36%). (Congregations that chose not to participate gave many different reasons.) Surveys were given in worship at the end of April 2001. Worshipers in these congregations, representing all 50 states, completed 122,287 attendee surveys, which are the primary source of the findings reported here.

For generational analyses, respondents were divided into four groups based on their self-reported year of birth:

Group	Year of Birth	Age	Number	Percent of Sample
Gen Y	Born 1975-1998	15-26	11,354	10%
Gen X	Born 1965-1974	27-36	13,580	12%
Boomers	Born 1946-1964	37-55	43,663	39%
Older	Born before 1946	56 plus	44,418	39%

Table 1
Where do Young People Attend?
Larger Percentages in Larger Congregations

	< 100 in Worship	100-350 in Worship	More than 350 in Worship
Gen Y	8%	9%	10%
Gen X	8%	10%	12%
Boomers	33%	36%	40%
Older	50%	45%	38%

Table 2
Where do Young People Attend?
Larger Percentages in Catholic Parishes and Conservative Protestant Churches

	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Historically Black	Other
Gen Y	10%	7%	13%	9%	10%
Gen X	12%	8%	14%	13%	9%
Boomers	38%	36%	41%	41%	38%
Older	40%	49%	32%	36%	43%

Table 3
Demographics by Age Group

	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
Gender:				
Female	58%	62%	61%	62%
Male	42%	38%	39%	38%
Education:				
Not a college graduate	85%	51%	52%	70%
College graduate	13%	34%	30%	17%
Graduate degree	2%	15%	18%	13%
Marital Status:				
Currently married	13%	68%	78%	67%
Not married	87%	32%	22%	33%
Children:				
Some	23%	68%	88%	92%
None	77%	32%	12%	8%
Race-ethnicity (mark all that apply):				
White	66%	66%	77%	87%
Hispanic	22%	21%	13%	8%
Black	6%	7%	5%	3%
Asian	7%	6%	5%	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%	1%	1%	1%
Some other race	3%	2%	1%	2%

Table 4
Generational Differences in Congregational Activities and Experiences

	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
Time attending current congregation:				
Visiting	8%	7%	5%	5%
5 years or less	46%	60%	37%	21%
6-20 years	40%	22%	39%	25%
More than 20 years	6%	10%	19%	49%
Previous congregation (those attending 5 years or less):				
First-timer	11%	10%	7%	4%
Returnee	14%	21%	20%	14%
Switcher	20%	15%	18%	16%
Transfer	56%	55%	56%	66%
Worship attendance:				
Weekly	70%	68%	78%	86%
One to three times a month	18%	21%	16%	9%
Less often	12%	11%	6%	5%
Participation in small groups:				
Sunday school, religious education	24%	22%	26%	16%
Prayer groups, Bible study	14%	16%	20%	21%
Social groups, fellowships	23%	21%	27%	30%
Participation in outreach/service activities:				
Community service	15%	12%	19%	22%
Evangelization	10%	10%	12%	15%
Neither	74%	74%	67%	62%
Leadership roles:				
Committee or task force	2%	5%	8%	8%
Lead or assist in worship	9%	8%	14%	14%
Choir member, leader, musician	8%	6%	7%	6%
Any leadership role	28%	29%	41%	40%
Giving to the congregation:				
5% or more	24%	36%	45%	57%
Less than 5%	46%	58%	52%	40%
Do not contribute	30%	7%	4%	3%
Membership in congregation:				
Yes	64%	68%	79%	83%
No, but in process of joining	4%	5%	2%	1%
No, but regularly participate	17%	15%	11%	7%
No	14%	12%	8%	8%
Change in congregational participation:				
Participate more in last 2 years	32%	35%	30%	20%
Participate the same	33%	36%	47%	58%
Participate less in last 2 years	16%	9%	12%	13%
Not applicable (coming less than 2 yrs.)	19%	19%	10%	9%
Growth in faith in last year:				
Much growth through congregation	26%	34%	33%	33%
Much growth through own activities	16%	14%	14%	16%
Much growth through other groups	11%	7%	6%	6%
Some growth	40%	39%	40%	37%
No real growth in faith	7%	6%	6%	8%

Figure 1: How Often do You Experience the Following During Worship?

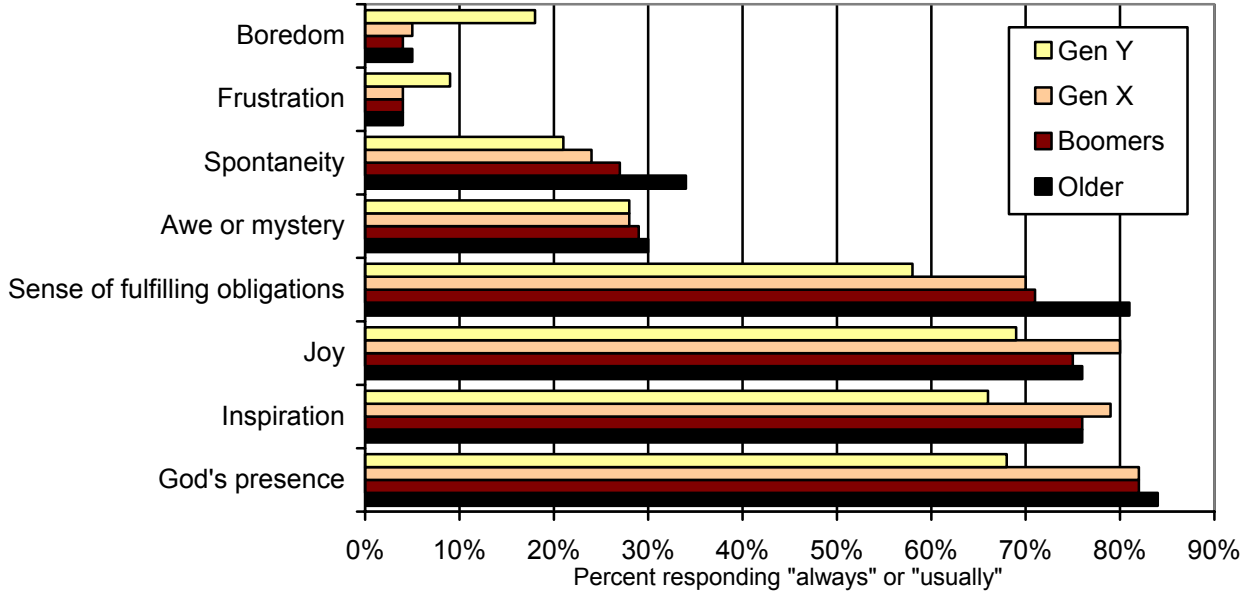


Figure 2: Generational Differences in Preferences for Music in Worship

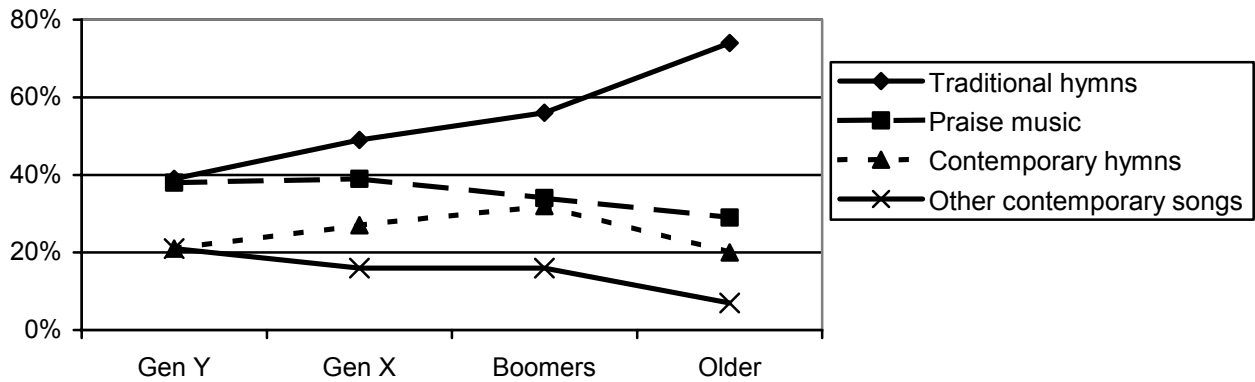


Figure 3: What Do You Most Value in Your Congregation?

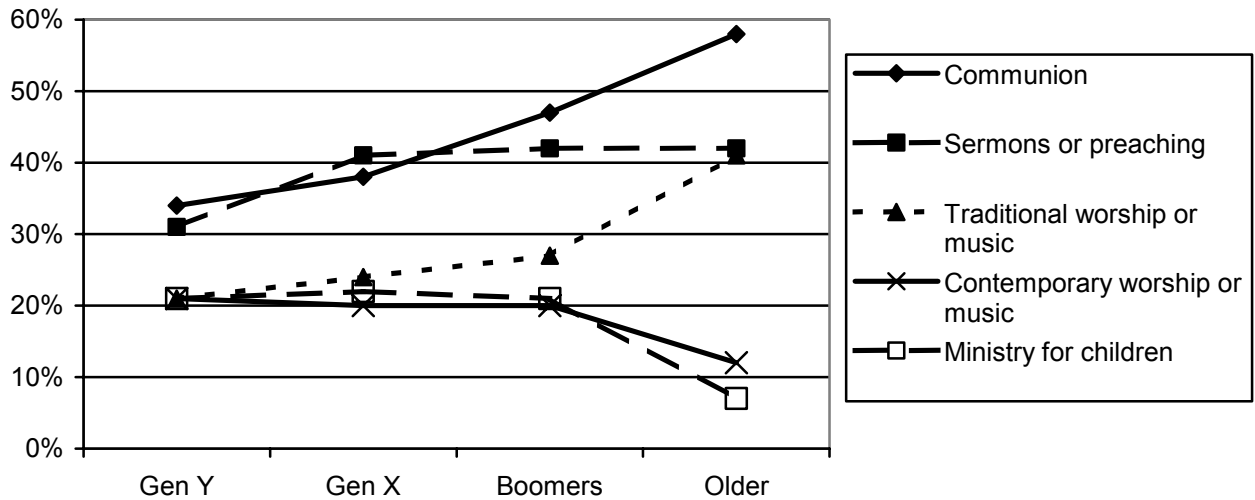


Table 5
Generational Differences in Personal Spiritual and Religious Practices

	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
Frequency of personal devotions:				
More than once a week	49%	56%	64%	69%
Occasionally to weekly	29%	28%	25%	22%
Less often or never	22%	16%	12%	9%
Pray privately: *				
Weekly or more often	74%	70%	80%	83%
Never	5%	—	2%	2%
Say grace before meals: * ns				
Weekly or more often	57%	51%	57%	49%
Never	10%	5%	6%	6%
Pray with family or friends: * ns				
Weekly or more often	36%	35%	37%	30%
Never	15%	17%	23%	22%
Read religious books or other materials: *				
Weekly or more often	14%	15%	24%	25%
Never	27%	21%	16%	13%
Private Bible reading: *				
Weekly or more often	19%	17%	23%	27%
Never	18%	17%	21%	22%
Watch or listen to religious programs: *				
Weekly or more often	25%	15%	20%	17%
Never	39%	36%	29%	22%
Bible reading with family or friends: * ns				
Weekly or more often	5%	6%	6%	6%
Never	39%	49%	48%	56%
Attend a prayer group: *				
Weekly or more often	4%	1%	3%	6%
Never	42%	60%	60%	57%
Visit religious Internet sites: * ns				
Weekly or more often	1%	2%	3%	3%
Never	59%	65%	64%	70%
Shop at Christian bookstores: *				
Weekly or more often	1%	2%	2%	1%
Never	43%	36%	30%	35%
Read new age books: * ns				
Weekly or more often	3%	2%	2%	1%
Never	79%	83%	83%	86%
Practice Eastern meditation: *				
Weekly or more often	—	2%	4%	1%
Never	87%	92%	88%	92%
Seek help from horoscope, tarot, fortune teller: *				
Weekly or more often	2%	3%	2%	1%
Never	76%	84%	90%	96%
Use psychic healing, crystals, or channeling: * ns				
Weekly or more often	—	1%	1%	—
Never	94%	98%	96%	97%

* Item answered by sub-sample of entire sample; n=1,182.

Table 6
Other Generational Differences

	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs: * Very important or important	74%	89%	90%	96%
Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? * Yes	89%	96%	96%	95%

* Item answered by sub-sample of entire sample; n=1,182.

Figure 4: Have You Experienced God Through . . .

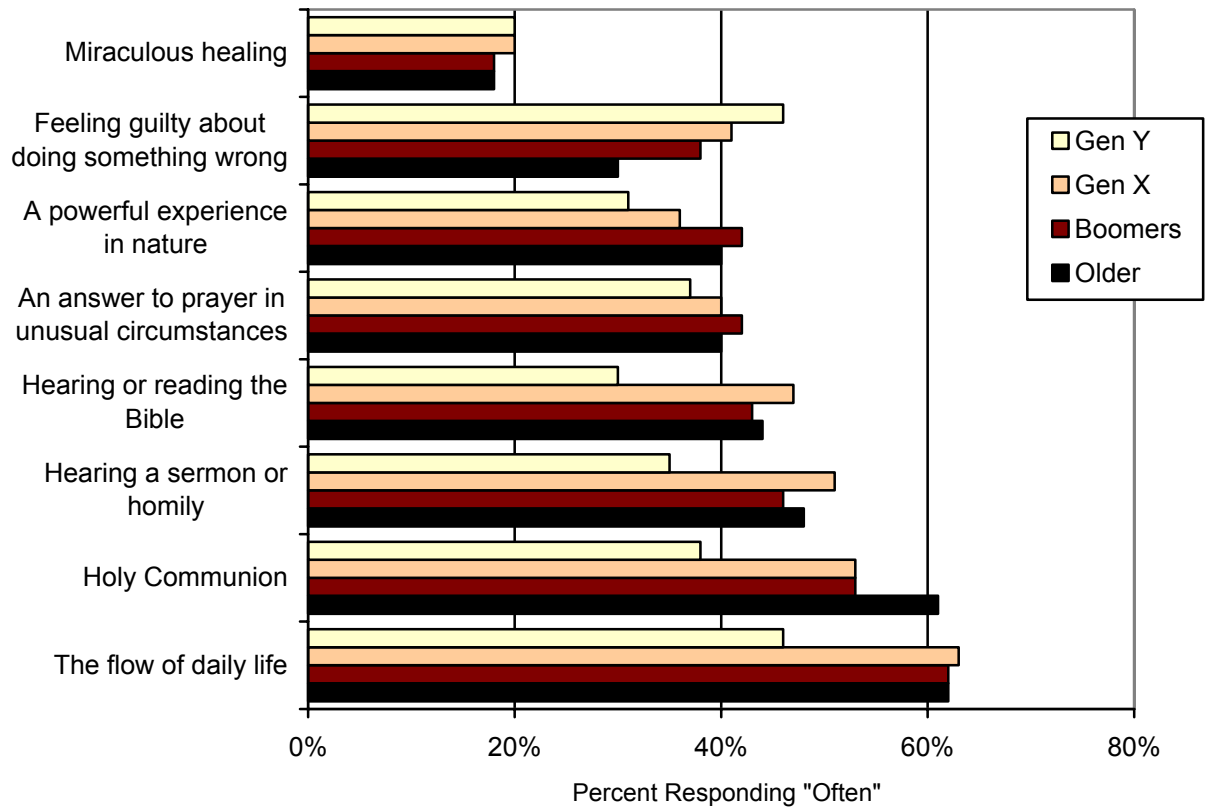


Figure 5: Worship Attendance as a Function of Congregational Membership, by Generation

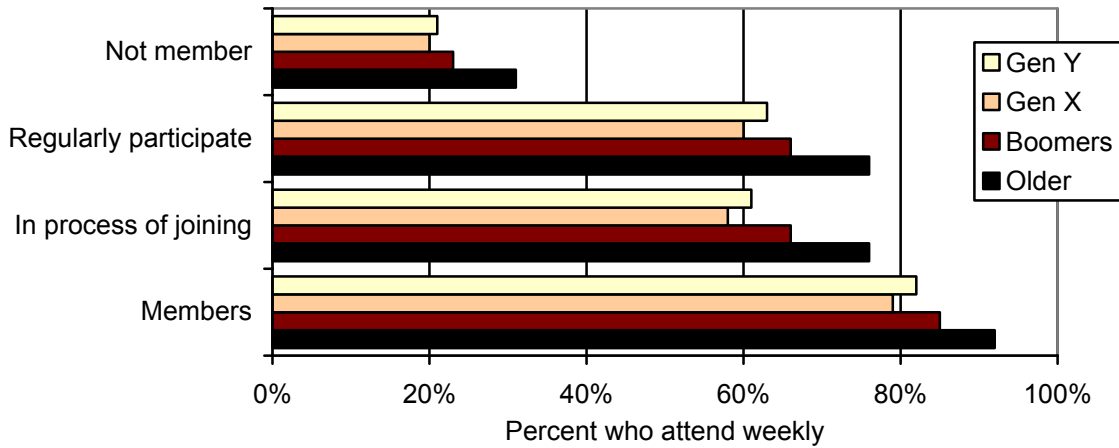


Figure 6: Frequency of Private Devotions as a Function of Congregational Membership, by Generation

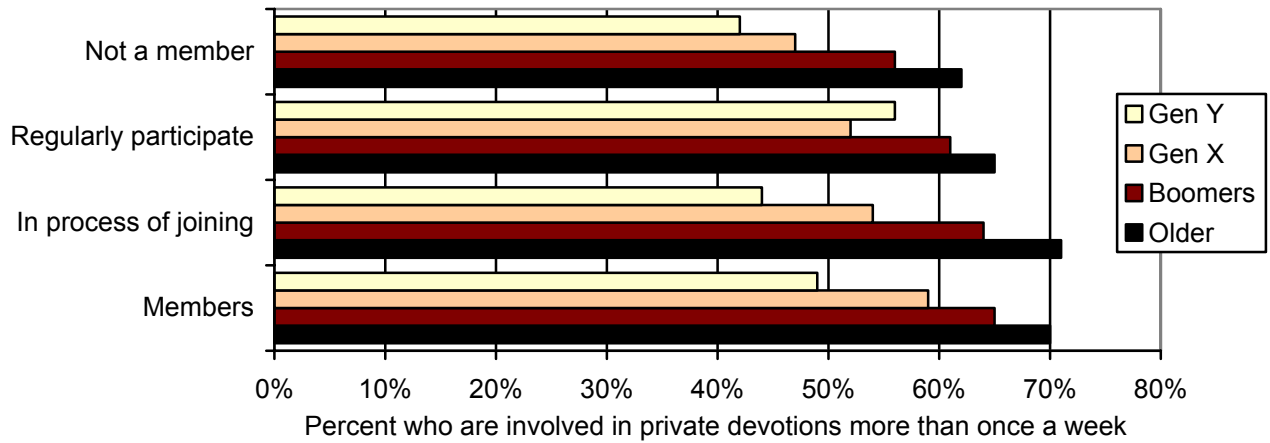


Table 7
Predicting Frequency of Worship Attendance

Dependent Variable: How often do you go to worship services at this congregation?
 Range 1-7, where 1="this is my first time" and 7="more than once a week"

	Standardized Beta Without Age Group		Standardized Beta With Age Group	
Personal Demographics:				
Employed	.062	***	.048	***
Has children	.015	***	-.029	***
Gender (1=female; 2=male)	.008		.004	
<i>Age Group</i>	—	—	.109	***
Congregational Characteristics:				
Den 1 (Catholic)	-.020	*	-.024	**
Den 2 (conservative Protestant)	.010		.012	*
Den 3 (mainline Protestant)	-.123	***	-.130	***
Congregation's size	-.012	**	-.011	*
Congregational Involvement:				
Currently a member	.323	***	.320	***
Length of time attending this congregation	-.189	***	-.211	***
Involved in small groups	.119	***	.124	***
Holds leadership role in the congregation	.104	***	.100	***
Congregational Experiences:				
Worship helps with everyday living (R)	-.144	***	-.132	***
Has close friends in the congregation	.080	***	.083	***
Experienced conversion/faith commitment	.006		.012	**
Feel inspiration in worship (R)	.049	***	.036	***
Feel boredom in worship (R)	.036	***	.018	***
Feel sense of fulfilling obligations in worship (R)	-.035	***	-.029	***
Feel frustration in worship (R)	-.025	***	-.021	***
Experience joy during worship (R)	.018	***	.008	
Feel God's presence in worship (R)	-.015	**	-.013	**
Feel spontaneity in worship (R)	-.014	**	-.004	
Feel mystery or awe in worship (R)	.003		.000	
R ²	.279	***	.288	***
Significance of R ² Change				***

(R) = reverse scored

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001

Table 8
Predicting Frequency of Private Devotions

Dependent Variable: How often do you spend time in private devotional activities (such as prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone)?
Range 1-6, where 1="every day or most days" and 6="never" (R)

	Standardized Beta Without Age Group		Standardized Beta With Age Group	
Personal Demographics:				
Employed	-.046	***	-.034	***
Has children	-.011	*	.041	***
Gender (1=female; 2=male)	.098	***	.101	***
<i>Age Group</i>	—	—	-.119	***
Congregational Characteristics:				
Den 1 (Catholic)	.118	***	.126	***
Den 2 (conservative Protestant)	-.007		-.007	
Den 3 (mainline Protestant)	.059	***	.070	***
Congregation's size	.006		.005	
Congregational Involvement:				
Currently a member	.030	***	.033	***
Length of time attending this congregation	-.023	***	.000	
Involved in small groups	-.059	***	-.064	***
Holds leadership role in the congregation	-.050	***	-.047	***
Congregational Experiences:				
Worship helps with everyday living (R)	.147	***	.133	***
Has close friends in the congregation	-.009		-.013	**
Experienced conversion/faith commitment	-.068	***	-.075	***
Feel inspiration in worship (R)	-.022	***	-.018	**
Feel boredom in worship (R)	-.065	***	-.044	***
Feel sense of fulfilling obligations in worship (R)	.010	*	.003	
Feel frustration in worship (R)	.029	***	.027	***
Experience joy during worship (R)	.006		.017	**
Feel God's presence in worship (R)	.116	***	.114	***
Feel spontaneity in worship (R)	-.014	**	-.025	***
Feel mystery or awe in worship (R)	.054	***	.059	***
R ²	.136	***	.146	***
Significance of R ² Change				***

(R) = reverse scored
 * p<.05
 ** p<.01
 *** p<.001

Data Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey (2001): Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce. Louisville, Kentucky: U.S. Congregations and Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).