

# Generational Differences in Personal Religious Practices

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## Abstract

About 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey 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 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 predict religious behaviors such as worship attendance and private devotions, but to be somewhat less important than some other factors.

## The Sample

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago identified 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%). (A wide variety of reasons were given by congregations that chose not to participate.) 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:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Year of Birth</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
Gen Y	Born 1975-1998	15-26	11,354	10%
Gen X	Born 1965-1974	27-36	13580	12%
Boomers	Born 1946-1964	37-55	43663	39%
Older	Born before 1946	56 plus	44418	39%

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

	<b>&lt; 100 in Worship</b>	<b>100-350 in Worship</b>	<b>More than 350 in Worship</b>
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**

	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Mainline Protestant</b>	<b>Conservative Protestant</b>	<b>Historically Black</b>	<b>Other</b>
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**

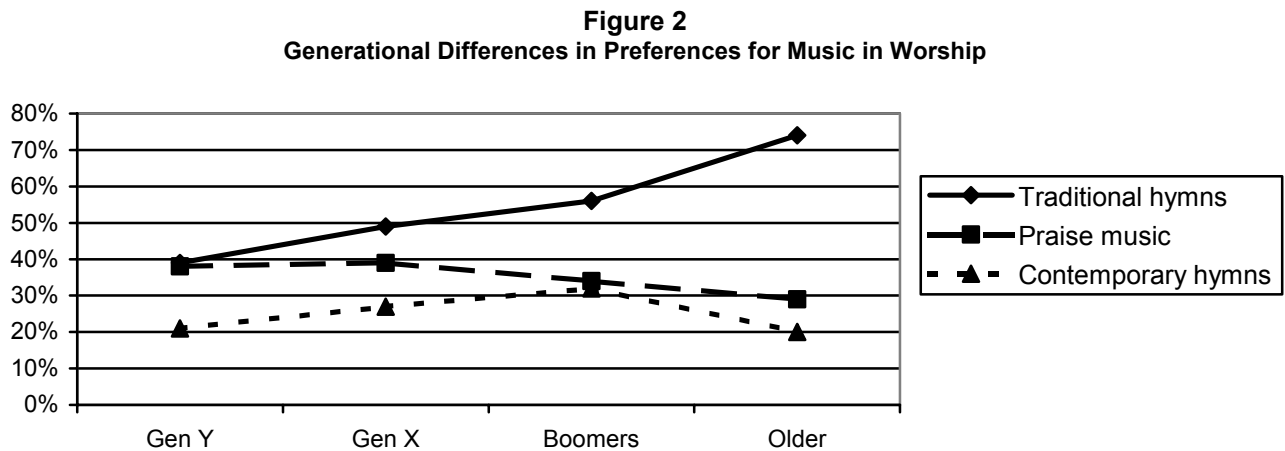
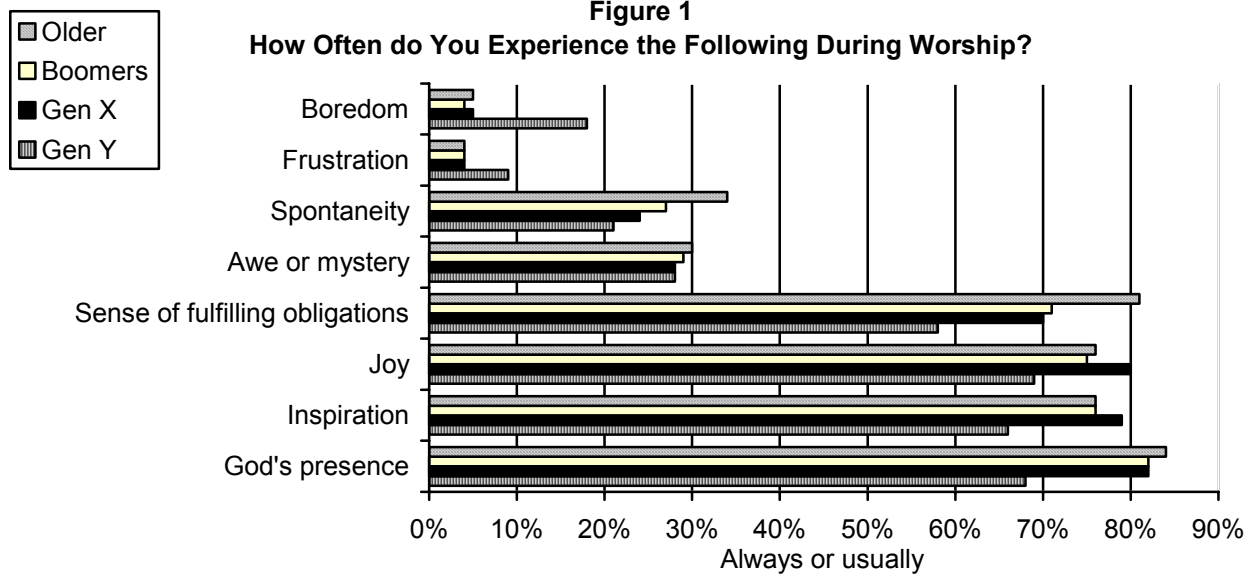
	<b>Gen Y</b>	<b>Gen X</b>	<b>Boomers</b>	<b>Older</b>
<b>Gender:</b>				
Female	58%	62%	61%	62%
Male	42%	38%	39%	38%
<b>Education:</b>				
Not a college graduate	85%	51%	52%	70%
College graduate	13%	34%	30%	17%
Graduate degree	2%	15%	18%	13%
<b>Marital Status:</b>				
Currently married	13%	68%	78%	67%
Not married	87%	32%	22%	33%
<b>Children:</b>				
Some	23%	68%	88%	92%
None	77%	32%	12%	8%
<b>Race-ethnicity (mark all that apply):</b>				
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**

	<b>Gen Y</b>	<b>Gen X</b>	<b>Boomers</b>	<b>Older</b>
<b>Time attending current congregation:</b>				
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%
<b>Previous congregation (those attending 5 years or less):</b>				
First-timer	11%	10%	7%	4%
Returnee	14%	21%	20%	14%
Switcher	20%	15%	18%	16%
Transfer	56%	55%	56%	66%
<b>Worship attendance:</b>				
Weekly	70%	68%	78%	86%
One to three times a month	18%	21%	16%	9%
Less often	12%	11%	6%	5%
<b>Participation in small groups:</b>				
Sunday school, religious education	24%	22%	26%	16%
Prayer groups, Bible study	14%	16%	20%	21%
Social groups, fellowships	23%	21%	27%	30%
<b>Participation in outreach/service activities:</b>				
Community service	15%	12%	19%	22%
Evangelization	10%	10%	12%	15%
Neither	74%	74%	67%	62%
<b>Leadership roles:</b>				
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%
<b>Giving to the congregation:</b>				
5% or more	24%	36%	45%	57%
Less than 5%	46%	58%	52%	40%
Do not contribute	30%	7%	4%	3%
<b>Membership in congregation:</b>				
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%
<b>Change in congregational participation:</b>				
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%
<b>Growth in faith in last year:</b>				
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%

**Table 5**  
**Generational Differences in Corporate Worship Experiences and Preferences**

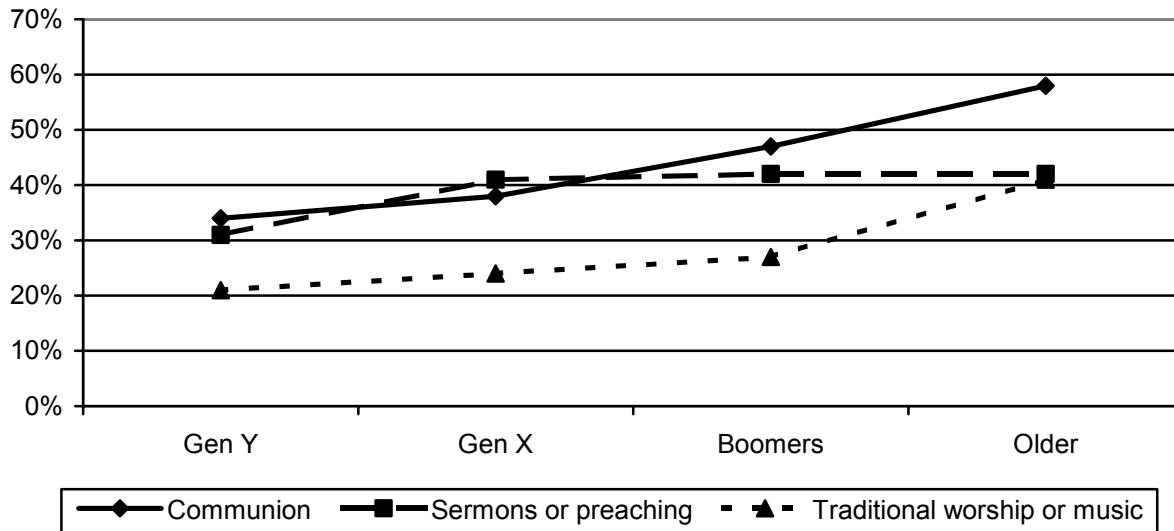
<b>During worship always or usually experience:</b>				
God's presence	68%	82%	82%	84%
Inspiration	66%	79%	76%	76%
Joy	69%	80%	75%	76%
Sense of fulfilling obligations	58%	70%	71%	81%
Awe or mystery	28%	28%	29%	30%
Spontaneity	21%	24%	27%	34%
Frustration	9%	4%	4%	4%
Boredom	18%	5%	4%	5%
<b>Music preferences (mark two):</b>				
Traditional hymns	39%	49%	56%	74%
Praise music or choruses	38%	39%	34%	29%
Contemporary hymns	21%	27%	32%	20%
Other contemporary music or songs (not hymns)	21%	16%	16%	7%
Sung responsorial psalms	6%	10%	10%	12%
Classical music or chorales	8%	8%	9%	11%
Music from a variety of cultures	10%	10%	10%	8%
African-American gospel music	10%	7%	6%	3%



**Table 6**  
**Generational Differences in Congregational Evaluations**

	Gen Y	Gen X	Boomers	Older
<b>Satisfaction with what is offered for children and youth:</b>				
Satisfied or very satisfied	57%	62%	62%	63%
<b>Most valued aspects of the congregation (mark three):</b>				
Holy Communion/Eucharist	34%	38%	47%	58%
Sermons and preaching	31%	41%	42%	42%
Traditional style of worship or music	21%	24%	27%	41%
Contemporary style of worship or music	21%	20%	20%	12%
Ministry for children	21%	22%	21%	7%
Reaching the “unchurched”	22%	16%	13%	16%
Wider community care; social justice emphasis	14%	16%	16%	14%
Bible study, prayer groups, discussion groups	16%	16%	14%	13%
Practical care for one another in times of need	11%	11%	13%	15%
Social activities; meeting new people	20%	15%	11%	12%
Openness to social diversity	16%	12%	11%	7%
Prayer ministry for one another	8%	7%	9%	10%
Congregation’s school or preschool	7%	11%	11%	5%
Adult church school	6%	7%	7%	6%
<b>Good match between pastor/priest and congregation:</b>				
Agree or strongly agree	78%	84%	84%	87%

**Figure 3**  
**What do You Most Value in Your Congregation?**



**Table 7**  
**Generational Differences in Personal Spiritual and Religious Practices**

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

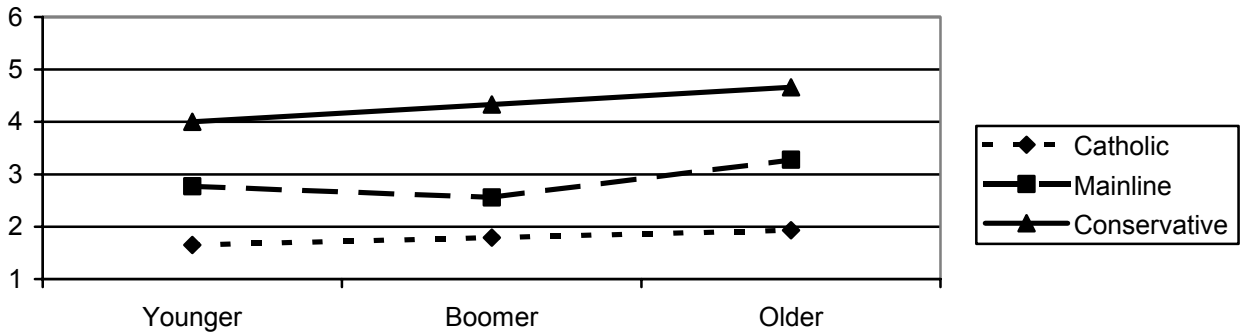
\* Item answered by sub-sample of entire sample; n=1,182.

**Table 8  
Other Generational Differences**

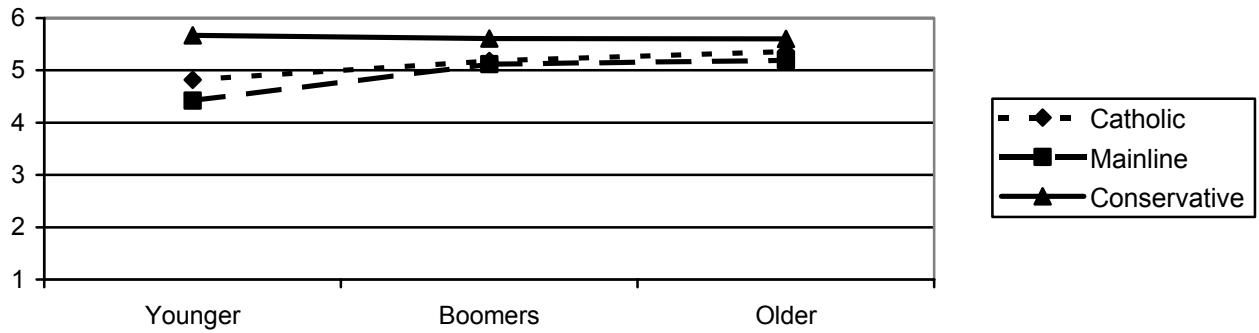
	<b>Gen Y</b>	<b>Gen X</b>	<b>Boomers</b>	<b>Older</b>
<b>SELF-IMAGE</b>				
<b>Importance of religious or spiritual beliefs: *</b>				
Very important or important	74%	89%	90%	96%
<b>Do you consider yourself a spiritual person? *</b>				
Yes	89%	96%	96%	95%
<b>SHARING FAITH</b>				
<b>Willingness to talk about your faith:</b>				
Seek opportunities to do so	15%	15%	16%	17%
Do so if it comes up	58%	62%	61%	57%
Hard to talk about my faith	16%	12%	12%	11%
My life and actions are enough	10%	10%	11%	14%
No faith	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b>Willingness to invite others to worship:</b>				
Have done so in last 12 months	44%	49%	49%	43%
Willing, but haven't done so	34%	34%	35%	38%
Not willing	7%	6%	7%	8%
<b>EXPERIENCING GOD</b>				
<b>In the daily flow of life: *</b>				
Often	46%	63%	62%	62%
Occasionally	43%	32%	35%	34%
<b>A powerful experience in nature: * ns</b>				
Often	31%	36%	42%	40%
Occasionally	43%	43%	42%	42%
<b>Answer to prayer in unusual circumstances: * ns</b>				
Often	37%	40%	42%	40%
Occasionally	40%	48%	47%	48%
<b>Feeling guilty about doing something wrong: *</b>				
Often	46%	41%	38%	30%
Occasionally	28%	44%	51%	56%
<b>Miraculous healing: * ns</b>				
Often	20%	20%	18%	18%
Occasionally	20%	27%	27%	31%
<b>Eucharist/Holy Communion: *</b>				
Often	38%	53%	53%	61%
Occasionally	25%	30%	35%	27%
<b>Hearing or reading the Bible: *</b>				
Often	30%	47%	43%	44%
Occasionally	44%	38%	44%	37%
<b>Hearing a sermon or homily: *</b>				
Often	35%	51%	46%	48%
Occasionally	44%	43%	47%	42%

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

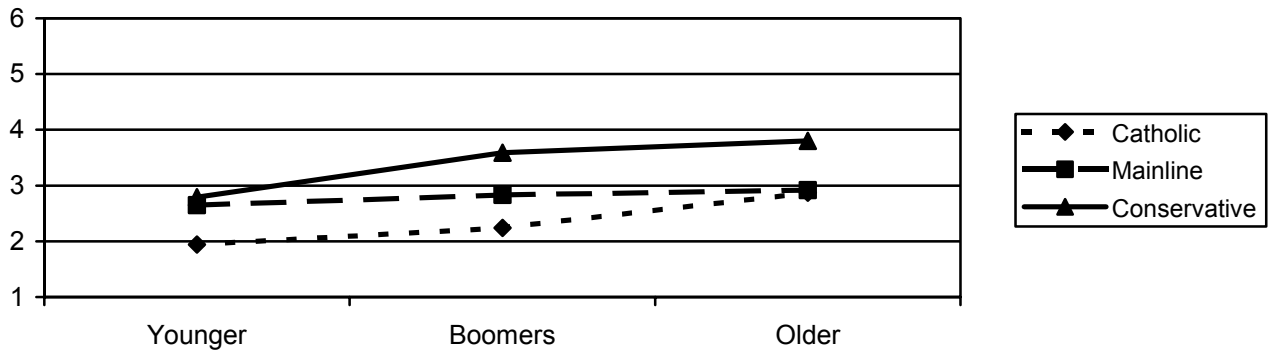
**Frequency of Bible Reading by Generation and Faith Group**



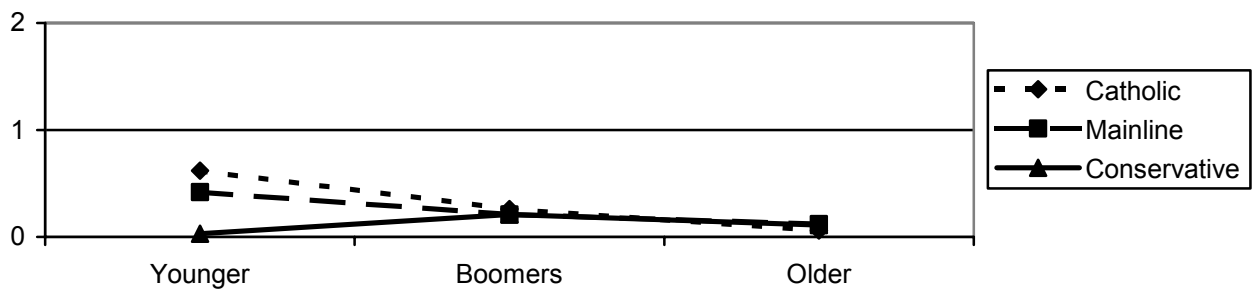
**Frequency of Private Prayer by Generation and Faith Group**



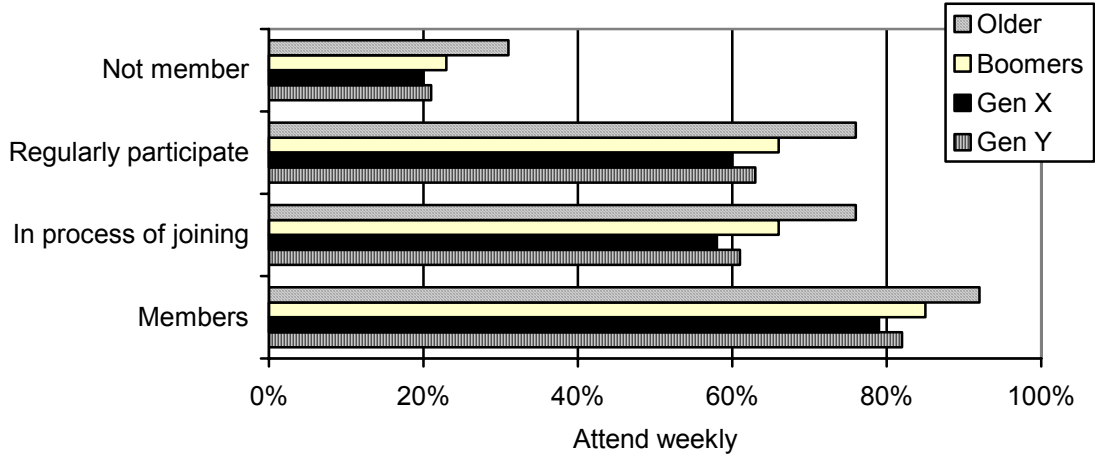
**Reading Religious Materials by Generation and Faith Group**



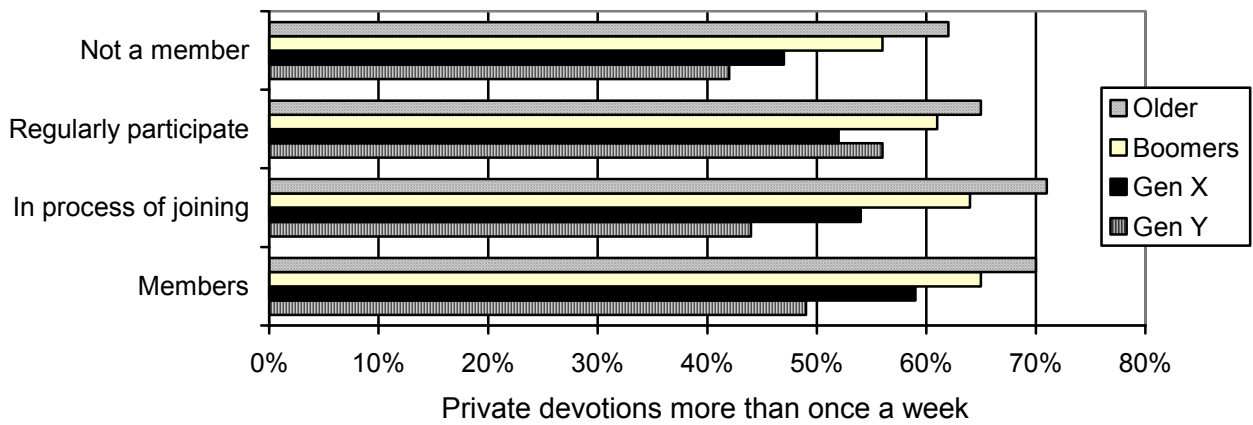
**Seek Help from Tarot Card/Horoscope by Generation and Faith Group**



### Worship Attendance as a Function of Congregational Membership, by Generation



### Frequency of Private Devotions as a Function of Congregational Membership, by Generation



## Predicting Frequency of Worship Attendance and Frequency of Private Devotions

**Worship Attendance:** 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"

**Private Devotions:** 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)

	Worship Attendance				Private Devotions			
	Standardized Beta Without Age Group		Standardized Beta With Age Group		Standardized Beta Without Age Group		Standardized Beta With Age Group	
<b>Demographics:</b>								
Employed	.062	***	.048	***	-.046	***	-.034	***
Has children	.015	***	-.029	***	-.011	*	.041	***
Gender (1=female; 2=male)	.008		.004		.098	***	.101	***
Age Group	—	—	.109	***	—	—	-.119	***
<b>Congregational Characteristics:</b>								
Den 1 (Catholic)	-.020	*	-.024	**	.118	***	.126	***
Den 2 (conservative Protestant)	.010		.012	*	-.007		-.007	
Den 3 (mainline Protestant)	-.123	***	-.130	***	.059	***	.070	***
Congregation's size	-.012	**	-.011	*	.006		.005	
<b>Involvement:</b>								
Currently a member	.323	***	.320	***	.030	***	.033	***
Length of time attending this congregation	-.189	***	-.211	***	-.023	***	.000	
Involved in small groups	.119	***	.124	***	-.059	***	-.064	***
Holds leadership role in the congregation	.104	***	.100	***	-.050	***	-.047	***
<b>Experiences:</b>								
Worship helps with everyday living (R)	-.144	***	-.132	***	.147	***	.133	***
Has close friends in the congregation	.080	***	.083	***	-.009		-.013	**
Experienced conversion/faith commitment	.006		.012	**	-.068	***	-.075	***
Feel inspiration in worship (R)	.049	***	.036	***	-.022	***	-.018	**
Feel boredom in worship (R)	.036	***	.018	***	-.065	***	-.044	***
Feel sense of fulfilling obligations in worship (R)	-.035	***	-.029	***	.010	*	.003	
Feel frustration in worship (R)	-.025	***	-.021	***	.029	***	.027	***
Experience joy during worship (R)	.018	***	.008		.006		.017	**
Feel God's presence in worship (R)	-.015	**	-.013	**	.116	***	.114	***
Feel spontaneity in worship (R)	-.014	**	-.004		-.014	**	-.025	***
Feel mystery or awe in worship (R)	.003		.000		.054	***	.059	***
R <sup>2</sup>	.279	***	.288	***	.136	***	.146	***
Significance of R <sup>2</sup> Change				***				***

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