

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### Mission Possible: More Men in the Pews

Women make up the majority of churchgoers. While about half of the U.S. population is female (51 percent), a larger percentage of worshippers (61 percent) are female.<sup>1</sup> Why is this?

#### Seven Misconceptions about Men and the Church

One man—in the pulpit—is often the most highly visible person on Sunday. Perhaps that diverts our attention away from who sits in the pews—lots of women. Inaccurate assumptions keep church leaders from taking any steps toward attracting and welcoming the missing male demographic.

**1. There are more women in church because women live longer than men.** This is partly the case because women in the U.S. live longer than men by an average of five years. It is true that the percentage difference climbs highest for worshippers 65 years of age or older (63% are women). The percentage drops to its lowest for worshippers 15 to 24 years of age (57% are women). However, in every age group, females still outnumber males in the pews.

**2. Just as many men attend but women go much more often.** Neither part of this statement is true. Women are only *slightly* more likely to attend worship on a weekly basis than men (62% of frequent attendees are women).

In addition, women outnumber men even among those who attend worship services less often (59% of less frequent attendees are women).

The church gender gap shows up in other areas of church life, too. Men are less likely to participate in small groups (such as Sunday school, prayer or Bible study, and social activities), community service, or evangelism outreach efforts. Men take on fewer lay leadership roles than women as well.

Research shows that one in five married worshippers regularly attend alone. Most of these worshippers are women. This male absence pattern led one observer to quip: “Mom may be wearing an impressive diamond ring on her left hand, but the man who gave it to her is nowhere to be seen.”<sup>2</sup>

**3. More young men attend conservative Protestant churches.** The *highest* percentage of men attending worship

services occurs among worshippers ages 15 to 24 in Catholic parishes (56% are women; 44% are men). In addition, the *lowest* percentage of men in the pew also occurs in Catholic parishes—among attendees age 65 and older (64% are women; 36% are men).

Yet the gender imbalance remains remarkably consistent across age groups and faith traditions—ranging from 56% to 64% women in the pews. For Catholics and mainline Protestants, the percentage of women in the pews tends to rise slightly as worshippers age.

**4. Two out of three churches are small and women prefer attending small churches.** Women always outnumber men, regardless of church size. However, larger Protestant churches—those with more than 500 worshippers—attract the highest percentages of men (43%, which is higher than the 39% average across congregations of all sizes).

**5. But these national statistics don't take into account regional differences. Don't Southern women go to church more often than anyone else does?** The percentages of male and female worshippers do not vary much by region of the country either. In fact, the *highest*



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percentages of male worshipers, based on region, are in the South (an average of 43% male attendees in this region compared to 39% nationally).

**6. Okay, but aren't there some churches with more men than women?** Nationally, eight out of ten churches are “gender-gapped”—where the percentage of women in the pews exceeds the male percentage by more than 10 percentage points. Two out of three (66%) conservative Protestant churches are gender-gapped. The numbers of gender-gapped congregations are highest for mainline churches (86%) and Catholic parishes (93%).

Only 2% of all congregations attract more men than women. If a church or parish achieves a 50/50 ratio, this gender balance places them in the top 98% of all congregations in their ability to connect with men.

**7. But this gender imbalance is something new, right? Isn't there an ever-widening gap between the number of male and female churchgoers?** As far back as we have records, this is not new. Gender ratios hover around 60% women to 40% men for church participants. For at least the past 700 years observers have noted the lack of men in church.<sup>3</sup>

### What Can Be Done?

David Murrow (*Why Men Hate Going to Church*, Thomas Nelson, 2011) offers some thought-provoking reasons for why many men avoid church. He asserts that often churches devalue male strengths and ignore their needs. His other insights include these observations:

**The modern church culture is built to reach women, children, and seniors.** Murrow believes that the development of children's ministry bolstered women's commitment to the church. A parallel ministry draw for men does not exist. Interestingly, as more women and fewer men attend, churches cater even more to women's needs and desires. Then, even fewer men attend. Yet he does not recommend starting a men's ministry program—but re-thinking existing ministries to make them more male-friendly. In effect, he calls for small changes rather than an extreme church makeover.

Murrow advises leaders to consider men's needs when planning any event or activity. Create opportunities for men to gather without women present. Recruit men for projects that make use of their gifts and skills. Finally, he recommends steering clear of any hint of feminine spiritual superiority.

**Men find worship services boring.** Research reveals that men who attend worship services experience more frustration and boredom than women attendees. Fewer men say they feel God's presence, or find inspiration or joy. Murrow lists possibilities for making worship more interesting for men: use humor, laughter, appealing music, and masculine imagery; keep it short; do some-

thing unexpected; make it challenging; use language that denotes strength; start and end on time.

He feels that most changes should occur in the background. “Churches that create a healthy masculine environment do not become heavily male.”<sup>4</sup> Murrows asserts that as churches make men feel more welcome, they attract women as well.

**Churchgoers tend to be verbal, studious, and sensitive.** Murrow argues that the average woman tends to develop the skills that match church culture. Obviously many men excel in these ways too. But most church activities require mastery of these abilities for participation (for example, Bible study, praying aloud, talking in small groups). Anyone—male or female—required to devote themselves to things they're not good at, will find a way to escape.

**Drapes, doilies, and other feminine decor deter men.** Imagine the gendered decor of a hair salon frequented by women vs. the very masculine barbershop. Where does your church decor fall along that continuum? Murrow suggests that leaders create an imaginary male character who tours your church. This male figure doesn't have to be a John Wayne type who exhibits rugged masculinity. An unchurched male relative, neighbor, or coworker will work. Examine everything the church does. Would this male be interested, intrigued, feel welcome and comfortable?

### The Bottom Line

Is it possible for more churches to connect better with men? *Yes*—and some churches are already doing so. Just as warnings of “mind the gap” alert British passengers to exercise caution as they step from the platform into the train car, churches need to heed the warning to mind the gender gap.

1. Statistics cited from Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's going Where and Why*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010). And Cynthia Woolever, et al., “The Gender Ratio in the Pews: Consequences for Congregational Vitality,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 27, no. 1 (April 2006): 25-38.
2. David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 14.
3. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 36-38.
4. Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 174. Discussion questions are free at [www.churchformen.com/guides](http://www.churchformen.com/guides).