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Eternal Insurance—No Boys Allowed!

Understanding Gender Disparities in Church Attendance through a Study of Churches in
Hartford, Connecticut

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Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

If you peeked into a typical Protestant church service, what might you observe? First there could be prayer, as the Believers address God the Father in the name of His one Son, Jesus Christ. Then perhaps songs would follow—some proclaiming God’s greatness, others worshipping a loving Savior, and all utilizing masculine terms to do so. To elaborate a bit more on this man who died to pay the penalty for sins, a message might then discuss how his resurrection sparked a change so great in those who knew him that their zeal for sharing his Good News would eventually build a body of Believers—a community simply called the Church—that would change the world in countless ways. Furthermore, if thorough (and if not, the fact is easily discernible anyway), the message might also note that almost all of these early Church founders were men. In fact, a quick look around the sanctuary would likely reveal that most leadership positions are still (and possibly deliberately) held by men as well. Yet before these observations start lending credit to those who decry Christianity as a patriarchal institution defying egalitarian progress, a final baffling observation must be acknowledged: women far outnumber men in the pews. Why is this? And is it as true in Hartford, Connecticut as it is in most Protestant Churches of the modern Western world? This thesis peruses existing research on a gender gap that has long characterized the Christian Church and studies how that knowledge aligns with the reality of four Protestant churches in the “Insurance Capital of the World” today.

INTRODUCTION

Aside from any anticipated doctrinal commonalities, nearly all Protestant churches¹ of the Western world have one obvious thing in common: more women in the pews. Confirmed with an indisputable wealth of research, this reality proves prominent across the full spectrum of Protestant denominations, in almost every Western country, and throughout numerous past centuries. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey reports that women currently make up about 61% of the average church gathering (as cited in Aune, Sharma, & Vincett, 2008), while surveys done by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reveal that “women are the majority in 21 of the 25 Christian denominations” (as cited in Grossman, 2008). Similarly, the Barna Research Group (2011) found in their latest State of the Church Series that around 44% of women in America attend church during a typical week, as compared to about 36% of men.

Moreover, countries around the globe report parallel tales. Rosemary Radford Reuther writes that “In Germany, France, Norway, and Ireland women are 60 to 65 percent of the active churchgoers. In Korea, India, and the Philippines, women are 65 to 70 percent of the active churchgoers” (as cited in Podles, 1999, p. 26). Podles (1999) not only confirms these disproportionate ratios from countries such as France, England, Spain, Italy, and particularly those of South America but also establishes the fact that they are not simply a modern phenomenon, but have in fact persisted from farther back than even colonial America. Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that women’s greater likelihood of attending church is just one piece of their overall greater religiosity (Murrow, 2005), which makes them more likely to pray (Walter, 1990), read the Bible, report religious experiences, claim themselves as church members, express a belief in God, and display numerous other Spiritual indicators

¹ For the remainder of this paper, I will refer to a weekly gathering of Christian believers with the lowercase term “church” and the collective body of Believers worldwide with the capitalized version (“Church”).

(Francis, 1997). Most remarkable though is the fact that this prominent female presence exists in what is consistently identified as a patriarchal institution where leadership roles are still dominated by men (Bruce, 1996). As Pevey, Williams, and Ellison write (1996), “paradoxically, large numbers of women remain active in Conservative Protestant churches, despite the fact that they appear ideologically and organizationally inhospitable to women” (p. 174).

Clearly an intriguing topic with countless important implications, the general trend of women outnumbering men at church has proven persistent—and perhaps paradoxical—enough to attract the attention of many scholarly minds all hoping to unravel the tangled reasons for it. My part in that effort will be first to condense existing explanations into a theoretical outline and second to determine how those explanations align with a sample of mainline Protestant churches in Hartford, Connecticut. This paper will consequently begin with a literature review that divides existing research into two general trains of thought: those that consider the gender disparity to stem more from the characteristics of women (deeming them “made for the Church”), and those that attribute it more to characteristics of the Church (deeming it “made for women”). Together these two collections encompass various theories; the first includes psychological theories, gender role theories, and deprivation theories, while the second simply includes feminization theories. A brief explanation of my own research methods—namely observing services and interviewing pastors of four Hartford churches—will follow. Finally, the paper will conclude with a description of my findings and an in-depth discussion of how well my sample churches aligned with the conclusions perpetuated by academic literature.

THEORETICAL OUTLINE

PART 1: WOMEN ARE MADE FOR THE CHURCH

Psychological Theories: Within the collection of research arguing that women are made for the Church, numerous psychological theories ascribe woman's penchant for attending church to her innate feminine qualities—those characteristics that, whether derived from biology or socialization, differentiate her from her equally unique male counterpart. Focusing mainly on gender orientation and risk-taking, such research has found a list of differences between men and women that seems virtually endless. Not only do women seem biologically more prone to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear (as well as the internalized conflict disorders that often accompany such emotions), but are also naturally program-oriented, less aggressive, better at verbal communication, and inclined to multi-task (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Francis, 1997; Murrow, 2005; Bruce, 1996). On the other hand, men appear not only to have a harder time listening, sitting still, and working in groups (which leaves them more prone to disorders related to acting-out), but are also naturally project-oriented, more aggressive, better at spatial perception, and often more adventurous (Miller & Stark, 2002; Francis, 1997; Murrow, 2005).

Similarly, women are more likely to be dependent, nurturing, people-oriented, compliant, socially sensitive, responsive, and other traits that generally make them more relational compared to men who are more often independent, goal-driven, emotionally inexpressive, task- and object-oriented, focused on justice, and controlling—all of which leads them to value accomplishment more than interpersonal connections (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Francis, 1997; Murrow, 2005). According to Carol Gilligan, “females tend to develop a pragmatic ethic of care concerned with the well-being of real individuals, while males tend to develop an ethic of justice concerned with abstract principles” (as cited in Walter & Davie, 1998, p.650). Others

highlight the idea that women have always been the gatherers of society while men have been the hunters—explaining why women tend to be so good at multi-tasking and living with fluid goals while men love the feeling of conquest and working toward a well-defined and recognizable purpose (Murrow, 2005). Overall, such consistent support for this plethora of gender differences has urged many researchers to probe for a connection between innate gender traits and disproportionate church attendance.

Gender orientation: Indeed, research based on psychological theories has uncovered at least two notable connections that use inherent gender differences as evidence that women are more likely to attend church simply because they are better designed for it. This first one expounds on the idea that church attendance is actually based more on the gender orientation of individuals (in other words, whether they display more “feminine” or “masculine” traits) than on their biological sex—determining that more feminine people have a greater affinity toward attending church services (Francis & Wilcox, 1998; Thompson & Remmes, 2002; Walter & Davie, 1998; Miller & Stark, 2002). This femininity is associated first and foremost with an emphasis on relational traits (Reich, 1997), such as being “affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, compassionate, eager to soothe another’s feelings, warm, tender, and loving toward children” (Walter & Davie, 1998, p. 651).

These traits, as well as the many others mentioned above, have been shown to correlate directly with increased religious experiences and church attendance (Thompson & Remmes, 2002). For instance, women may find it easier to follow Scriptural mandates about relying on Christ and surrendering to God simply because they find it more acceptable—and often even encouraged—to be dependent on others (Walter, 1990; Walter & Davie, 1998). Similarly, the fact that women tend to be more relational makes them much more likely than their autonomous

male counterparts to accept the idea of being in a relationship with a loving and intimate male God—an image so central to the Protestant Church (Mollenkott, 1983). Along these lines, Walter (1990) writes that “whereas a relationship with Christ may fulfill a woman’s desire for relationship, it directly confronts a man’s desire for independence” (p.79).

Furthermore, feminine traits like compassion and nurturance fit naturally into the doctrines of hospitality and kindness toward enemies, unlike the “male aggression and refusal to forgive [that] hardly accord with Christian faith” (as cited in Walter 1990, p.80). Such attributes have been connected with greater levels of religiosity, which encompasses church attendance (Miller & Stark, 2002). Even woman’s natural tendency to feel guilt makes her more prone to attend church, where such feelings are assuaged through messages of forgiveness that might simultaneously react against man’s macho pride to make him feel belittled or patronized (Walter, 1990; Francis, 1997). Research further supports such arguments by showing that clergymen tend to have higher femininity scores on personality tests and even that homosexual men and heterosexual women are more religious than heterosexual men and homosexual women (Sherkat, 2002; Miller & Stark, 2002; Bruce, 1996; Francis, 1997). Though treated with doubt by some researchers, such gender orientation arguments retain an attractive intuitiveness that nonetheless brings such arguments to the forefront of research on why more women attend church than men.

Risk-taking: Closely related to these gender orientation ideologies, currently one of the most promising speculations for this puzzling reality correlates women’s disproportionate church attendance with their inherent risk-aversion. Studies that contribute to this line of thinking demonstrate that while women tend to avoid risks and lean toward comfort, safety, and delayed gratification, men are largely risk-takers who deal poorly with delayed gratification (Stark, 2002; Miller & Stark, 2002). In his book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, David Murrow (2005)

elaborates on this gender difference by noting that women tend to be more security-oriented by valuing things like stability, harmony, predictability, and protection while men tend to be more challenge-oriented by valuing action, conflict, change, and competition (p.15-20). Though criminologists staked a longstanding claim on these specific gender differences after discovering blatant connections between risk-taking tendencies and crime rates, more recent research has additionally begun to show that “the parallels between irreligious and criminal behavior are striking” (Stark, 2002; Miller & Stark, 2002).

Such research contends that rejecting the commands of God and denying His existence is risky behavior chosen for the sake of getting instant gratification through ungodly conduct (Miller & Stark, 2002); in this way, Stark (2002) notes that “irreligiousness is simply another form of risky behavior to which certain kinds of men are given” (p.504). In fact, a connection between “physiology and faith” (Stark, 2002, p.504) also seems possible, since things like testosterone levels and risk-taking tendencies seem to be related as well (Miller & Stark, 2002). Overall, ample evidence supports the idea that women attend church to avoid the risk of God-given consequences for disobedience and disbelief—just as their risk-taking counterparts more naturally avoid the constrictions that church offers in exchange for security (Stark, 2002; Miller & Stark, 2002). These arguments combine with the fuller gender orientation arguments to show that in psychological theories, “the pattern that emerges from a wide range of studies is that masculinity thwarts people from embracing spirituality, whereas femininity promotes religious experience” (Thompson & Remmes, 2002, p. 521).

Gender Role Theories: Taking a step away from the idea that women attend church because of who they *are*, this second group of theories based on women being made for church focuses intently on what women *do* in an attempt to ascertain how their roles in society could

affect their proclivity to attend church. On one hand, the socially assigned responsibilities of both genders are in many ways heavily contingent on separate sphere ideologies that have long influenced our culture by dividing men and women into public and private spheres of life. Solidified particularly when the Industrial era summoned more and more men into the workforce, women have traditionally been appointed as the primary keepers of family and home—a role that ultimately became heavily entwined with the Church (Bartkowski, 1998). Yet in the last half century, secularization has begun dismantling these distinctions in a way that allows an increasing percentage of women to step into roles once set apart for men—thereby theoretically nullifying any impact that gender roles might have had on church attendance. Intent on deciphering any nuggets of insight from these realities, the following theories investigate both traditional separate spheres and the process of secularization to determine how gender roles may relate to church attendance.

Separate Spheres: As Western men and women dutifully split into their public and private spheres, numerous other factors combined to beget the eventual—and seemingly perpetual—privatization of the Church. State governments began taking over many public responsibilities (such as welfare and education) previously claimed by religious organizations (Aune, 2008), while industrialization began simultaneously drawing men away from the Church (Bartkowski, 1998). Since the economic role of provider encouraged men to enter the secular workforce, women withdrew into their homes and family lives to assume the domestic role of caregiver (Carroll, Hargrove, & Lummis, 1983; Miller & Stark, 2002)—a role that proved designed to absorb religious activities (Walter, 1990; Francis, 1997). Therefore, “As men were drawn into commercial life, religion became the province of women—and throughout the colonies, beginning first at the close of the seventeenth and continuing on into the eighteenth

century, the proportion of women to men in church memberships rose to at least two, and often as high as three or four, to one” (as qtd in Walter, 1990, p.84). By the time fundamentalists began trying to counteract an early 20th century emphasis on androgyny, the Church had already been so privatized that entreating women to return to their role as guardian of the private sphere inadvertently exacerbated church gender disparities by essentially also imploring them to attend church (Bartkowski, 1998).

Considering the many ways that church acted as an extension of the private sphere (Francis, 1997), perhaps the most natural is that women positioned in family-centric modes could easily transition into numerous roles within what Christiano (2008) calls “the life of the congregational ‘family’” (p.195). After all, the skills and responsibilities inherent to being a mother included teaching morality, caring for the spiritual wellbeing of her family, and purifying family members (mostly her husband) who were polluted by the outside workforce—all of which could be accomplished in part through the purifying moral teachings found at church (Miller & Stark, 2002; Walter, 1990). In fact, even while many studies show that having children increases the likelihood that both men and women will attend church (Walter, 1990; de Vause & McAllister, 1987), some maintain that “most fathers still do not measure up to the spiritual footprint of their parenting counterparts” (Barna Research Group “The Spirituality of Moms...” 2007). The role as caregiver also gives women more experience with birth, death, and human frailty in general, which makes them “closer to the sacred than men” (Bartkowski, 1998, p.235). Moreover, lacking the responsibilities of a full-time job outside the home could make church more relevant due to their extra free time, fewer social connections (and therefore a greater need for them), and often greater economic need as well (Bruce, 1996; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). In the end, arguments within these gender role theories all note that women’s structural

location as domestic caregivers gives them a stronger connection to religion because of its historic ties to the family (Fenn, 2003; Francis, 1997). Of course, some dissenting studies have shown that career women are just as religious as non-working women (Walter & Davie, 1998; Lazerwitz, 1961) and—perhaps most intriguingly—that “contrary to expectations, where female socialization is less traditional, the effect of gender on religiousness is actually greater” (Miller & Stark, 2002, p.1411). Yet even with such discrepancies, these theories still unravel another portion of the tangled explanations for disproportionate church attendance.

Secularization: To test the overall spectrum of gender role theories, many researchers have strategically examined how church attendance rates respond to rising secularization—what some call “the process whereby the sacred loses its significance” (Aune, Sharma, & Vincett, 2008, p. 1) —and its consequent erosion of traditional separate spheres. With countless liberation efforts, medical advances in childbirth, and new labor force opportunities (Davie, 2007), the past century has drastically changed for women as they enter what was once man’s assigned space: the workforce (Aune, 2008; Christiano, Swatos, & Kivisto, 2008). If domestic roles do indeed affect church attendance, then women who enter the labor force should become less tied to religion and therefore attend church less (Aune, 2008; Walter & Davie, 1998). To a certain degree, such a connection is difficult to find—in large part due to the fact that studies consistently show similar levels of religiosity between working and non-working women (Walter & Davie, 1998; Francis, 1997). However, some evidence reveals that as more women enter the workforce, less attend church (Francis, 1997; Davie, 2007; Aune, 2008; Fenn, 2003). De Vaus and McAllister (1987) even found that “women who work full-time are less religious than women who are full-time housewives; and that the religious orientation of women in the workforce is very similar to that of men in the workforce, although women who work full-time

actually attend church less than men who work full-time. On the other hand, unemployed males are the least religious of all” (as cited in Francis, 1997, p.84).

Considering the large proportion of female churchgoers, such trends understandably appear to negatively affect church attendance overall. As this trend of ‘detraditionalization’ continues and women keep exchanging—or even combining—traditional roles in the private sphere for those within the public sphere, church attendance will continue to decline sharply as it has since the liberation movements of the past few decades (Aune, 2008). Aune (2008) summarizes these theories by noting that “The processes of modernity have constructed religion as private and as feminine, but in late modernity this pattern is eroding as women’s lives become more diverse. Women who remain in family-centered roles are most likely to retain a conventional religiosity, while those most involved in the public sphere are least likely to be affiliated to Christianity” (p.288). Such research all contributes to theories that connect what men and women *do* (instead of who they *are*) to church attendance by testifying that adults operating in their traditionally assigned spheres are more likely to attend church than their secular counterparts.

Deprivation Theories: Stemming directly from these psychological and gender role theories, this third and final theory concerning women being ‘made for the Church’ investigates how women use the Church as a source of empowerment to amend the deprivation they experience in relation to men within almost every aspect of life. Who women *are* psychologically and what they *do* within society tends to give them lower status physically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Regarding who women are from a psychological standpoint, such deficits come in many forms: lesser physical strength, greater involvement in birth and death (Walter and Davie, 1998), proneness to negative emotions like fear and guilt

(Simmons & Walter, 1988; Walter, 1990; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Francis, 1997), greater dependence on others through either learned helplessness or actual need (Miller & Stark, 2002), and many others. In addition to these challenges, women face other difficulties solely because of their unique roles in society, such as greater economic need (Walter & Davie, 1998; Walter, 1990), more difficulty getting involved in the workforce (Miller & Stark, 2002), lack of available leadership positions (Fenn, 2003), lack of an empowered voice in society (Miller & Stark, 2002), fewer outlets for creating change (Walter & Davie, 1998), and lower political status (Miller & Stark, 2002). Furthermore, both internal and external deficits can be especially manifest in family dynamics, such that both who a woman is and what she does combine to make her position less valued within the home. Recognizing this reality, the research in this collection of deprivation theories argues that women respond to such disparity by finding powerful liberation through God and the Church—turning to religion more often than their more self-sufficient counterparts to compensate for their greater needs.

Empowerment: Beginning with internal needs that women may mitigate by attending church, perhaps the most obvious is that of physical vulnerability. Not just bodily weaker than men, women also have more intimate and frequent experiences with birth and death, which theoretically increases their awareness of mortality and often their fear of it—ultimately urging them to assuage such fears through religion just as wartime trauma might drive men to faith (Walter & Davie, 1998). Similarly, women’s greater sensitivity to guilt brings them more quickly to what is ultimately the greatest prerequisite of any faith—accepting that one is a sinner in need of forgiveness—and allows them to receive the full weight of God’s grace more freely (Walter & Davie, 1998). Likewise, the Church provides a social outlet for women whose need for intimacy and community would otherwise go unmet in society. Yet it is more than just a social network, in

that "...for women more concerned with connection and relationship than with hierarchy and power (Gilligan 1982), the female fellowship of the church empowered them even though the office-holding men monopolized the glory..." (as cited in Walter & Davie, 1998, p. 645).

Women can easily meet their needs for connection and relationship by attending church (Ozorak, 1996) simply because it provides a place to "opt for intimacy and security over independence, and for community over individuality" (Rose, 1987). In these ways and more, a sizeable collection of research has shown that women turn to church as a way to empower themselves in the face of deprivation based on who they are physically, emotionally, and socially.

In terms of deprivation created by women's structural location in society, having a role dedicated predominantly to family and home instead of provision through the workforce can present women with challenges related to financial dependence, lower wages, and fewer job opportunities. Yet many turn to the Church to find temporary relief from this economic vulnerability (through charity, financial aid, refuge opportunities, etc.), as well as avenues for permanently escaping economic disparities—using their church essentially as an internal job market or as a source of educational advancement (Walter & Davie, 1998; Walter, 1990). In fact, a study by Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975) even found that wives commit more to religious activities at times when their husbands' income exceeds their own, implying that a possible explanation for women's greater church participation stems directly from their lower market wages. Further research reveals that "many more women join religious orders in those continents such as South America and Africa where there is little education for women, and poor alternative career prospects (Ebaugh, 1993)" (as cited in Beit-Hallahmi, 1997, p. 64).

Along these lines, a related—and perhaps even more important—form of empowerment deals with the many issues arising within patriarchal societies that consider men to be more

valuable than women. As with economic vulnerability, lower social standing prompts women to find not only temporary comfort in the Church but also ways of moving up to a more valued position (Miller & Stark, 2002). Walter (1990) speaks well to this idea by noting that a “religion which proclaims that all human beings are equally loved by God because they are all his children is more immediately attractive to those who are not accorded love or respect by the world” (p.82). Even beyond this benefit, Scripture thoroughly exemplifies God’s immense compassion for those relegated to society’s lowest ranks, which—when combined with His habit of reversing roles—provides women with hope that their Creator has indeed provided them with “a discourse apt for the relatively powerless to deploy against the powerful” (Fenn, 2003, p.58). Contrary to society, church settings often even prefer the unique qualities and skills of women, such that an “emphasis on the authority of feeling, intuition, and experience in religious matters empowers women to attain a spiritual and institutional power denied them elsewhere” (Fenn, 2003, p.71). Surveys show that this emphasis frequently leads women to attain otherwise inaccessible leadership roles, especially as more denominations permit the ordination of women (Fenn, 2003; Bartkowski, 1998; Aune, 2008). Such expansion is still a struggle overall, but even during this ongoing challenge, religion fundamentally increases women’s “positional power and political status” simply by providing them a voice to implement change through effectively (and perhaps ironically) speaking God’s Word to claim value and justice (Bartkowski, 1998, p. 4).

More than strengthening women’s roles and identity though, being part of the Body of Believers drastically empowers women by affecting their fundamental source of deprivation: their relationship to men. Proving quite contrary to the idea that religion is an “agent of male domination” (Fenn, 2003), research shows that adhering to the Scriptural image of a male God actually encourages men to heed women—in large part because men have proven much more

likely to follow a man than a woman (Murrow, 2005). As such, using the Word of God makes women more likely to be heard in their efforts to “mobilize religious values” that exhort men to a higher calling (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996, pp. 188-89). Though first compelling a woman to “step down” by relinquishing power to her husband, such values simultaneously demand that he “step up” and use that power in the best interest of his family (Rose, 1987; Kim, 2011); her submission therefore benefits her and her family by raising the standards for her husband’s family commitment, his responsibility as provider (emotionally as well as financially), and his role as servant leader (Aune, 2008; Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Rose, 1987; Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Coats, 2009; Walter & Davie, 1998). Thus a seemingly patriarchal system “decisively shifts the domestic and religious priorities in a direction that benefits women and children while morally restraining the traditional autonomy of the male and the selfish or irresponsible exercise of masculine power” (Fenn, 2003, p.54-55). Even for women whose husbands are not involved in religion, “the church provides the moral and social equivalent of family and offers them a role as guardians of the community’s moral heart” (Fenn, 2003, p.56). In these ways, the Gospel heals the relational disparity that underlies every other form of female deprivation (Kim, 2011) and surpasses nearly every governmental gender equality initiative (Fenn, 2003) by empowering women not only with a voice that is heard and heeded, but a more true sense of worth and value.

In all of the discussion about how women seem made for the Church, research clearly affirms that they find many advantages to being part of a body of Believers. A study of church-going women who accepted traditional gender roles exemplifies some of these advantages:

“...[T]hey reaped the benefits of moral, spiritual and familial constancy, which helped them to deal with relativism and modernism in the secular culture. In addition, supportive female enclaves, existing as subcultures within the larger congregations, provided both

escape from male domination and empowerment through opportunities for leadership and teaching (Brasher, 1998)” (as cited by Bryant, 2006, p. 616).

Such gains are so prevalent in studies investigating gender and religion that many researchers have found themselves pondering the profound final idea that women may have found in the Church a strength greater than any of their weaknesses. Such strength comes from the fact that their more fragile security and under-emphasized value makes them more receptive to the Gospel (Simmons & Walter, 1988), which—if true—delivers abundant and eternal life (John 10:10,28 New International Version [NIV]). Unable to cover up their vulnerabilities as men do through masculine strength, pride, autonomy, and power (Simmons & Walter, 1988; Walter, 1990), women find a greater reward than men could ever claim; in their temporal poverty, they find eternal spiritual wealth that not only alleviates their physical situation but also offers salvation from every kind of bondage (Walter, 1990; Luke 4:18 NIV). Just as Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom of heaven is for the “poor in spirit” (whom I have also heard referred to as the “losers of life”), so it seems logical to assume that women who attend church because of who they are, what they do, and their consequential lower positions in society actually end up being the greatest winners of all (Matthew 5:3 NIV; Walter, 1990).

THEORETICAL OUTLINE

PART 2: CHURCH IS MADE FOR WOMEN

Feminization Theories: Contrasting with research that attributes women’s church attendance predominantly to what women are like, another entire spectrum of research considers certain church characteristics to be the determining factor in disproportionate gender

involvement.² Just as any living organism tends to change shape as it grows, so the Protestant church has taken on a variety of different forms during its bi-millennial existence—including a plethora that relate to gender. Beginning as early as the Reformation, Christianity began establishing a greater focus on individualism that involved transitioning from Latin to local languages, complex choir songs to easy hymns, and power held by religious professionals to a laity with influence; yet perhaps most influentially, “a personal emotional response to the figure of Jesus and his sacrifice replaced the correct professional performance of the ritual of the Mass as the major expression of religion” (Bruce, 1996, p. 138). Similarly, Baptist evangelicalism of the early eighteenth century shifted Christianity again toward a focus on individual emotional relationships with God and away from rigidly traditional Puritanism (Bartkowski, 1998).

Such doctrinal shifts also involved a new way of seeing God, such that believers steadily emphasized less about his judgmental traits and more about his loving and comforting traits (Fenn, 2003). In fact, a study by Roof and Roof (1984) confirmed other research theories (Nelsen, Cheek, & Au, 1985) in finding that even while Americans continued to see God more in paternal terms, they were becoming increasingly likely to associate Him with nurturing “healer” terms instead of instrumental “king” images (p. 202-203). In viewing God with these softer qualities, the Church also became more relational and comfort-oriented over time—thereby drawing women to church while simultaneously repelling men (Nelsen, Cheek, & Au, 1985; Fenn, 2003). This phenomenon has led to two correlated collections of thought employed to explain women’s greater church attendance: an increasingly feminized church that appeals more to women, and a stark absence of men that then perpetuates cyclical gender disparity.

² Clearly a certain “chicken or the egg” effect arises from this distinction, but I hopefully elucidate what distinctions do exist further along the way.

Feminized Church: Research based on the idea of an increasingly feminine church reveals first and foremost that the Church has always altered between periods of greater femininity and greater masculinity. In the early twentieth century, “fundamentalists successfully masculinized evangelical religion” by encouraging men to be soldiers of Christ instead of just economic warriors (Bartkowski, 1998, p.14). In the late twentieth century, John Eldredge (2001) also provoked a similar shift toward bold masculinity through his book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul*—a response to the “responsible and ‘feminized’ expectations of Promise Keepers’ ideal of servant leadership and involved fatherhood” (Gallagher, 2005, p. 137). Yet even during periods of these “hypermasculine” movements, many churches still needed “to rely quite heavily on women's labor power, time investments, and financial donations” simply due to a literal lack of manpower (Bartkowski, 1998, p.13). Eventually privatization caused what was once a “martial” faith to lose a great deal of its social and political power as it became relegated primarily to the private sphere (Carroll, Hargrove, & Lummis, 1983; Aune, Sharma, & Vincett, 2008), allowing it to begin “recovering and reactivating its pacifist, feminine, and relational codes” in an overarching trend toward feminization (Fenn, 2003, p. 78).

Thus “domesticated” through an unyielding connection with the feminine “issues of home, family, and life style,” American religion quickly saw a great influx of female involvement (Carroll, Hargrove, & Lummis, 1983, p.41). Before long, women truly became both the primary consumers *and* suppliers of Western Christianity—shaping it to match their needs and producing “the trivialization and ‘sentimentalization’ of religion, as it became a matter of the emotions and lost all power to engage critically or intelligently with modern socioeconomic developments” (Fenn, 2003, p.77). Though still led almost entirely by men, the faith became

increasingly saturated in women's values (Murrow, 2005), such that even its portrayal of God took on more feminine characteristics that revolved around "non-instrumental relationships based on love, trust, and care" instead of the more active masculine traits like judging, directing, and leading (Fenn, 2003, p.78; Christiano, Swatos, & Kivisto, 2008; Roof & Roof, 1984).

Worship styles reflected these feminized beliefs with a disproportionate use of feminine themes (ie. communication and intimacy), imagery (ie "bride of Christ" illustrations), and language (ie. inclusive terminology that uses fewer masculine pronouns) (Murrow, 2005).

Along with its bent toward emotional tenderness without any intellectual aggression (both of which are represented in the Bible), churches also rarely add men's ministries to the usual bundle of opportunities for women and children; in fact, the faith trades Christ's masculine traits like blunt offensiveness and power for feminine characteristics like meekness and submission, while seeming to consider feminine holiness more appropriate than any kind of male version (Murrow, 2005).³ Needless to say, churches that cater so heavily to the feminine side of humanity will obviously attract more women than men as they find it more relevant, more comfortable, more appealing, and more receptive (Fenn, 2003; Bruce, 1996; Francis & Wilcox, 1998). These reasons all combine to bolster the idea that women have such disproportional church attendance simply because Protestant church services exhibit a lopsided array of feminine characteristics.

Absence of Men: Virtually this entire gamut of reasons for why women are drawn to church can double as reasons for why men do *not* attend, and this has led many researchers to look more closely into how an absence of men at church contributes to women's overpowering presence there. As David Murrow (2005) writes, "today's church has developed a culture that is

³ In the sense that masculine passion for justice tends to be quenched while feminine passivity and endurance tends to be honored

driving men away”—a culture that caters to its majority of women (p.14). Where men specialize in applying abstract moral principles to concrete situations, women make moral judgments based on relational and interpersonal implications; similarly, women are more likely to opt for democracy and dialogue over hierarchy and authoritative decisions, which all combine to create a spiritual culture of only comfort, safety, and compassion that directly vies against man’s inherent desire for challenge, risk, and justice (Christiano, Swatos, & Kivisto, 2008). Fenn (2003) explains that a Christian “emphasis on the importance of love, peaceableness, and self-sacrifice has always been ill-suited to the cultivation of power and machismo and to the sustenance of purely functional relationships” (p. 78). Furthermore, this feminine bent creates church services that deter men in countless ways: stressing surrender and relationships, lacking absolutes, using a more “horizontal” approach to finding God in trivial things instead of a “vertical” focus on greatness, giving the impression that women will outshine them, and imparting the idea of needing a boring—or impossibly super-human—Christian lifestyle...to name a few (Murrow, 2005, p.115-132). With their overabundance of ministries for women and children (Gallagher, 2006), churches often make it seem that they do not need more masculine skills, or even that they scorn masculine traits like delegation, efficiency, and manual labor (Murrow, 2005); even the pulpit is no longer reserved for men as more women enter seminary and, ultimately, more church leadership positions (Murrow, 2005).

Although Christianity will always contain elements that repel all of humanity due to its self-defying nature, the elements currently being most emphasized by the feminine church are some of those most apt to repel men in particular. On one hand, some research has found that men avoid religious functions due to feeling they would have too much “reforming” to do if they converted—to some extent understanding the gravity of their depravity (Kim, 2011, p. 598). Yet

in many other ways, such moral inadequacy actually decreases men's motivation to change, since much of it comes from things that directly define them as masculine. Fenn (2003) explains that "Much of what the church expects of [men] would stigmatize them as unmanly among their unconverted peers" (p. 55), while Murrow (2005) describes it simply by stating that men's religion *is* their masculinity. Part of that difficulty arises from the idea of being in an intimate relationship with a male God (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Mollenkott, 1983), but a great deal of it stems from the fact that very few men—having built up a strong façade of pride and independent strength—will allow themselves to concede that they have a problem, which ultimately becomes their greatest problem (Walter, 1990). Fenn (2003) also writes this:

Though the Pentecostal gender paradox is one that benefits both women and men, certain indications, such as the predominance of women in the movement (they constitute around two-thirds of all adult evangelicals) and the greater propensity for backsliding among male converts (Bowen 1996), suggest that women stand to gain more and that men find the cost of the benefits they gain higher than they can always sustain. (p. 56)

The great difficulty that men have in yielding their masculine pride through going to church is certainly in part their responsibility and their loss, yet a great deal of that also stems unarguably from the feminine bent of current church culture (Walter, 1990).

As part of a cycle in which women continue to step into the places left empty by men, which then makes men even less likely to try stepping up, the problem seems likely to intensify (Murrow, 2005). Yet recent data also shows that—perhaps due to secularization—women are steadily becoming less involved in religion, to the point that author and researcher George Barna (2011) speculates that the declining support of women may make "ministries respond by increasing the male-friendliness of the proceedings...and [make] men ...pressured to upgrade

their church involvement” (para. 6). Such attempts to make church more masculine include focusing on Scripture’s vision and high purpose, emphasizing the challenge involved in living as God desires, embracing greater efficiency, developing ministries geared toward men, and above all emphasizing a structure of discipleship⁴ in which men lead men toward Christlikeness in every aspect of their lives (Murrow, 2005). Though still just a growing reality, churches with a greater balance of these characteristics will undoubtedly attract more studies to determine how qualified that strategy may be—ultimately adding to this collection of research arguing that church attracts more women simply because it was made for them and by them.

METHODS

Taking this compendium of research into consideration, my additional work has since been to determine answers to three simple questions:

- In a small sample of churches in Hartford, Connecticut, do women outnumber men in the pews?
- According to the pastors and my own observations of those churches, what explains any gender imbalances?
- And finally, how do these experiences compare with theories already found in academic literature?

In order to solve such queries, I spent four consecutive Sundays visiting a different church in Hartford: Emanuel Lutheran (ELC), Redeemer Hill (RHC), South Congregational (SCC), and Central Baptist (CBC). I chose all four based on how easily I could access them (the first two

⁴ Discipleship could be described as fellowship with a purpose—a sort of mentoring with the intent of encouraging and equipping another person to grow. As such, it meets both women’s desire for relationships and men’s desire for purpose.

meet in my neighborhood—Frog Hollow—and the last two in nearby Downtown Hartford) and the fact that they are all mainstream denominations (Redeemer Hill is loosely South Baptist). I was also specifically interested in Central Baptist for its uniquely international membership and Redeemer Hill for its identity as a young church plant.⁵ Each visit included attending all relevant services and often spending time fellowshiping with church members during breaks in between; ELC and SCC both had an earlier traditional service and a later contemporary service, while RHC had only one service and CBC had only one service predominantly in English.

To gather the most thorough amount of information possible, I combined both documenting observations (to provide the perspective of an “outsider”) and interviewing pastors (to collect insights from “insiders”). The observations consisted of tallying how many adult⁶ men and women attended each service, as well as recording the sermon topic, detailed sermon notes, and descriptions of the service style. My roommate accompanied me during each visit to confirm or correct my own observations and assist during three of the four interviews. Two of these interviews took place immediately after the final service each Sunday, while both the third interview and only solo interview took place several days after their respective church visits due to scheduling conflicts. To arrange this, I simply approached the pastors after their first or only church services to introduce myself, explain my reason for being there, and ask to discuss their thoughts regarding why women seem more apt to attend church than men; after doing so, all were enthusiastically open to the idea—often even expressing shared curiosity.

Each subsequent interview took the form of a guided conversation in which I engaged the pastors (and, in one case, also the pastor’s wife) in relaxed dialogue while making sure to touch

⁵ RHC has actually been my home church since September and is the only church I have ever seen with more men than women—a fact that actually helped to prompt this thesis. To provide some objectivity, I brought non-members along on my ‘visit’ there to help remove bias from my observations.

⁶ “Adult” referring to anyone who appeared to be over the age of twelve

on these topics: characteristics of their church (history, strengths, challenges, etc.), the demographics of their congregation (average member's age, length of attendance, professions, reasons for coming, etc.), any apparent gender role disparities within their church (roles, involvement, apparent religiosity, etc.), and ultimately what they considered to be main factors in whatever gender norms they had described. To discuss the result of these interviews, I follow this general interview outline by introducing each church in terms of its characteristics, history, strengths and weaknesses, and finally how its pastor explained gender norms at their church and often within Christianity as a whole. I then compile these findings—supplemented by some of my own observations—to determine how the experiences of these four churches in Hartford align with the four theories already propounded by academic literature.

FINDINGS

1) Emmanuel Lutheran Church: Frequently reminded of its presence due to hourly bells chiming almost directly into my windows, I easily made Emanuel Lutheran Church my first church visit. Its impressive amount of stone and stained glass gave way to a friendly family of greeters as my roommate and I entered for the first of two services, quickly landing amidst a good number of families and elderly folks spread rather thinly in a large sanctuary. There were 65 women and 51 men at the service, which was highly liturgical with a great deal of standing, reading in unison from the bulletin, and singing hymns to an organ accompanist. The second service, which followed after a brief coffee break downstairs, was intentionally more “contemporary” and differed mostly in being small (with only 11 women and 7 men), having a praise band (with drums, bass guitar, piano, and singers), and involving much less formal regalia. Despite such differences though, both services revolved around a sermon about God's wisdom

being foolishness to those without faith—including comments about our tendency to trivialize Jesus' sacrifice on the cross instead of believing it, as well as a challenge to open ourselves up to letting God in.

Directly following these experiences, my interview with Associate Pastor EJ Sweeney enriched my firsthand observations with a description of Emmanuel Lutheran's specific background. Founded in 1889 by Frog Hollow's Swedish immigrants, the church has essentially always accommodated predominantly white, upper-middle class Believers who have since moved almost entirely to the surrounding suburbs—making ELC a “suburban church in an urban area.” Having peaked at 5000 members in the 1950s, church membership has currently dwindled to about 900, with roughly 300 attending weekly over the span of three services⁷ and regulars coming only once every 1-2 months. Even with such nominal commitment, the church attracts people with its comfortable and family-friendly environment. Yet its leaders consider such congregational healthiness to be very temporary—perhaps only lasting for another few decades until the church dies out completely. In fact, the pastor even said that some of its most fundamental identities (such as Lutheran, as an obvious example, or Liberal Evangelical) are beginning to fade out of existence entirely.

One of the greatest challenges faced by Emmanuel Lutheran Church is its desperate need to change. Motivated not only by shrinking attendance but most importantly the call to glorify God in everything they have, the church has nonetheless faced many roadblocks in its attempt to become more relevant to its surrounding community. Though providing a very comfortable place for its current members through a strong emphasis on fellowship, it presents the exact opposite to newcomers, skeptics, and people from the surrounding neighborhood; for instance, few families

⁷ I learned later that ELC has a very early morning prayer service that follows a similar, but more basic, format to its main traditional service

of the kids earnestly engaged in weekly basketball nights at ELC will come on Sundays because of its conventional style (local cultural groups tend to want more expressive settings, whereas a black woman actually left ELC after being scolded too frequently for making people uncomfortable with her sermon responses). Similarly, the new contemporary service has received such a dearth of support from the church community that outsiders recoil even more. Overall, comfort outweighs challenge, such that even preaching blunt truth does not penetrate the cultural static of American feel-good Christianity or convince many members to deviate from “who we [Lutherans] are” by outwardly displaying their faith through even non-liturgical prayer, not to mention evangelizing. Recognizing such reluctance to leave comfort zones—an action that currently, although temporarily, seems unnecessary in lieu of financial strength—as a great struggle for the church, the pastor nonetheless concluded that it thereby brings hope in knowing that the greatest strength of any body of Believers is ultimately its inadequacy and consequent need to trust in a miraculous God.

With remarkable parallels, such background knowledge related directly to Pastor Sweeney’s insight on why more than 60% of churchgoers at Emmanuel Lutheran are women; first and foremost attributing this disparity to an emphasis on fellowship, which he had earlier deemed one of ELC’s greatest strengths, he proceeded to assert that such an emphasis was simply one of many ways the church invests heavily in creating a culture of comfort, warmth, and friendliness that helps to nurture its members. Evidence of this attribute, which the pastor suspects to be appreciated more by mothers than by fathers, emerged at other points in the interview as well, as when the pastor mentioned that the church exudes “lots of niceness” and focuses much more on dependency and needing salvation than on risk or anything that would appeal to a more masculine mindset. Interestingly, he also noted that the men most likely to “get

it” are those who have been through addiction and hard times—who have strongly felt their weakness. Yet in addition to discerning what ways this reality stems from moral therapeutic deism (American feel-good Christianity), even leaders who desire dialogue about challenge and mission have had to wrestle with finding the balance between conveying spiritual challenges without pushing people towards a works-based faith, or likewise using masculine war language without encouraging violence.

In these ways and more, ELC seems to communicate better with women than with men, which prompts many women to step up into leadership roles—even to the point of burn out—and find a great deal of success within the church; as the pastor observed, churches attract women by offering them a place to use strengths they have honed at home (ie. relational ability, nurturance, patience, organization skills, etc.). In contrast, he hypothesized that men may avoid church to avoid the potential failures that would ensue from being brought out of their element.

Particularly in the sermon’s emphasis on God’s power to save the weak, the need to accept instead of trivialize Jesus’ sacrifice, and the view of Jesus as taking hold of us “powerfully, lovingly, gently, and eternally,” my observations proved many of these assessments quite viable. Emmanuel Lutheran seems to be a nurturing and secure place that attracts and communicates well with women while offering them an outlet for successfully using their strengths—all while deterring men by not meeting their unique needs or properly handling their fears of inadequacy.

2) Redeemer Hill Church: Also in the Frog Hollow neighborhood but contrasting greatly with my experience at Emmanuel Lutheran, my second visit was to Redeemer Hill Church. After a short stint in the City Steam Brewery downtown, they recently moved their Sunday morning service to the Lyceum Conference Center in Billings Forge—an inviting medium-sized room lit with abundant natural light. The 22 women and 30 men at church that day

appeared to be mostly young adults displaying a mixed array of dressy and casual appearances, with the pastor combining jeans and a dress shirt; the worship team (comprised of keyboard, acoustic guitar, cello, and singers) also showed a variety of styles and played a mix of contemporary songs and hymns. The sermon was actually given by a guest speaker⁸ (the founder of Love 146—a ministry that RHC supports in its dedication to ending child sex slavery and exploitation) who spoke mainly about how God’s immeasurable love and justice play into the terrible issue of child trafficking. Starting with the point that “the Church was never meant to be a lifeboat,” he spoke of how Christians are sent out to share God’s Good News in action and words to those most in need of it—specifically through these key concepts: perspective, tenacity, audacity, forethought, and celebration. In addition to this lengthy energetic message, the service also included a corporate reading from the Hiedelberg Catechism, various announcements, communion (which included the opportunity to give in baskets near the bread and grape juice), and a benediction sending everyone to live out their faith at all times and in all ways.

After meeting with Pastor Joe Fisher (who prefers being called Pastor Joe), I learned that although the concept for RHC had begun as early as September 2010, that first year involved mostly training as their meeting size and regularity steadily increased during a long preparation process that culminated in their first official “launch” in September 2011. Technically founded within the Southern Baptist Congregation, it nonetheless rejects the typical hyper fundamentalism of that denomination and instead associates more with the North American Missions Board, while working closely with the Acts 29 church-planting network dedicated to sparking local churches that adopt whatever form will help them best serve their area. For

⁸ Considering the anomaly of the service, I did another observational visit to RHC a few weeks later. The sermon by Pastor Joe was part of a new series on Gospel Communities in Mission, which discusses what it looks like to be part of the Body of Christ by living in community with fellow believers with the intent of showing God’s love to each other and the community around you. That Sunday, general attendance had decreased but the gender ratios actually rose in favor of men: 20 men and 14 women (41%).

Redeemer Hill, that form is still taking shape, but the goal is clear: make the Good News about our Savior Jesus Christ known to the people of Hartford. In fact, Pastor Joe noted that one of the church's greatest strengths—in addition to having friendly, welcoming people—is its clear purpose; unlike many churches, it exists for a reason and not simply because it has always existed. Indeed, the church is very young, both in how long it has existed and in what demographics it attracts: mostly educated young singles. Though this demographic brings a great number of strengths to the mission (such as passion, energy, and flexibility), it also brings some weakness with it as well—particularly a lack of faithful commitment and a level of disorganization that can limit effectiveness. Nonetheless, RHC certainly seems to be on the right track as it continues to grow and invest in its city—standing out among the other churches with youthfulness and a gender imbalance (if any) that actually favors young men.

Focusing heavily on how church leaders reflect both gender traits and gender roles in their attributes and teachings, Pastor Joe ascribed this uniquely balanced situation to a church that closely follows God's design and therefore relates to both men and women. To begin with, he has found that most men like to be active doing things—particularly involvement in something greater than themselves—and therefore find it difficult to relate to the majority of pastors who tend to be exclusively “cerebral” instead of hands-on or action-oriented. Instead of being invited into the “risky adventure that the Church should be” through reliance completely on the Holy Spirit as a kingdom is formed, the call to be a Christian has become a call to comfort, a “come to my bosom” in which many worship songs sound more like “prom songs for Jesus.” In contrast to this, Redeemer Hill pursues a clear purpose—bringing God's justice and love to the city of Hartford—that involves continuous and exciting “launch” stages as it grows, all while led by a pastor exhibiting a healthy mix of academic knowledge and hands-on interests.

In fact, Pastor Joe also attributed the abundance of men at RHC simply to the fact that the pastor *is* a man, and specifically one who emphasizes adhering to Scriptural gender roles. Firmly believing that God designed men and women to each have separate but equally necessary roles, the pastor noted that more egalitarian churches who have removed the dividing line between genders often pave the way for women to enter “man’s role” and for men to fall away from lack of a role. He even deemed that women who step into men’s place are effectively taking both Genesis curses upon themselves by carrying the burdens of caregiver and breadwinner as men step out of the picture. The pastor mentioned that men also tend to have a harder time following a woman pastor than women have following a man—similar to how guys avoid “girl” activities but girls often take part in “boy” events—which makes them less likely to attend church if the pastor is even simply feminine. Furthermore, church plants usually attract people who identify some form of role model in its leaders and members—typically those who are ten years younger to ten years older than the pastor, and especially the many men who desire discipleship but have not yet found a good source of it. The demographics of RHC confirm that idea, since almost all of the attendees are within ten years of the pastor’s age and have found the church most appealing for its discipleship role—not just its quality fellowship. Overall, Pastor Joe’s general approach seems to attribute most gender proportions to what gender role ideals and Scriptural purpose the church emphasizes, as well as how such ideals are embodied by the church leaders.

3) South Congregational Church: Shifting back to a more established church, my third visit was to the South Congregational Church that meets for two services every Sunday in Downtown Hartford. Its first service was in an impressively large, ornate main sanctuary, where about 28 women and 17 men in formal attire sat dispersed among hundreds of pews. With an order of worship similar to that at the Lutheran Church, the service included various calls to

worship, hymns, responsive readings, and unison prayer. The sermon, entitled “Heavenly Minded,” stemmed from the story of Jesus freeing a demon-possessed man and explained that those who have had a liberating “mountain top” experience with God have been brought there not for the purpose of staying in a perpetual Spiritual high, but to go from that point and show the mountain to others as well. As such, the pastor exhorted believers not to be “so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good” and challenged Christians to discard all idols apart from the one God who alone can satisfy completely. Wearing less ceremonial garb, he gave essentially the same sermon (although with more of an emphasis on Spiritual warfare and being willing to give up everything to follow Jesus) during the second service as well, which met in a smaller side chapel and took a more relaxed format with more casual dress, songs led by piano, less rote liturgy, and the pastor even playing drums. With 21 women and 18 men, its attendance rate was also very similar but comprised mostly of people less than 50 years old instead of the elderly majority in the first service. According to Pastor Adam Sanderberg, the congregation is about 60% white and normally has about 70% women and 30% men, with most falling within a retired blue-collar middle-class cohort. Although some members started coming based on word of mouth, many belong to families that have attended the church for generations and continue to come largely out of habit or tradition.

Strongly characterized by such longstanding tradition, South Congregational Church was founded in 1670 by a group of Pilgrims that split from the First Church of Christ founded by Reverend Thomas Hooker⁹—making it the second oldest church in Hartford. In fact, the past 341 years have involved little change for SCC in terms of location and leadership (Pastor Sanderberg is only its 16th minister), and any adjustments have—until recent decades—been mostly positive.

⁹ The same Reverend Thomas Hooker who formed the first English colony in Hartford.

Even described as “*the*” church of Hartford while financially supported by Faye Rentschler (widow of Pratt & Whitney founder, Frederick Rentschler) in the 1960s, the church peaked at about 1600 members in 1979 and has since declined to about 250 members and an average of 100 churchgoers every week. Predicting that SCC will fade completely within the next few decades, Pastor Söderberg attributes this great challenge to a combination of things: urban Protestantism declining in favor of secular humanism, the city’s reputed danger and the church’s reputed tedium repelling people, and finally God possibly abandoning a denomination that has proven prone to dilute doctrine.

To try remedying this situation, the church has lately endeavored to “bloom where planted” by initiating changes that might interest demographics like young adults and Hartford residents. Yet numerous failed attempts at compromise ultimately led the church to introduce a completely separate contemporary service last summer—an avenue that seems to be semi-successful yet places them in danger of becoming two separate church bodies. Furthermore, increasing awareness of upcoming financial need has exposed an overall reluctance to trust God’s provision and to step out in faith, such that church leaders appear hesitant to accommodate incoming demographics that would be less able to contribute monetarily. Nonetheless, the pastor concluded that the main lesson in these struggles has so far been that the strongest attraction to any church is the light that shines from hearts that have been changed through an encounter with Christ, which therefore implies their need to concentrate solely on restoring inward faith in Jesus (albeit without “navel gazing”) while trusting God to resolve any outward issues. In fact, positive changes have already taken place as God replaces detrimental people with beneficial people in the congregation, while allowing the church to enjoy new (and successful) weekly family

programs, the imminent start of a men's ministry, hosting a Summer Hartford Project to involve youth, and particularly a new partnership with a Haitian church.

To explain why women outnumber men at South Congregational, Pastor Söderberg covered a full spectrum of possibilities. He began by noting that our culture conditions men to be out of touch with their feelings, such that anything even remotely emotional like Church or a relationship with God deters them. Similarly, being told not to do something often makes men do it anyway, which causes an obvious issue when Christianity is errantly preached as a list of rights and wrongs. Available roles at church are also often filled by women already or simply appear too feminine in the first place, which leads men to consider church just a “woman's thing.” Pastor Söderberg spoke strongly against this phenomenon, noting that women could stop taking men's jobs if men truly fulfilled God's intended roles for them. The pastor even highlighted the idea that women should not be in the military, not due to inadequacy, but simply because men should desire above all else to protect something as precious as their female counterpart. In fact, he attributed part of the gender imbalance to the idea that women are seizing this chance to lead because our society has not sufficiently honored and encouraged them throughout history. Though he finds it particularly strong in the Church, the pastor considers this feminine drive to have stemmed directly from a feminized cultural shift that is steadily making men obsolete by removing their role as provider, their leadership, and even acceptance of their masculinity. Attending church certainly finds no place in the ideal manly-man image, and, if dared, often leads to more reprimands than encouragement—ultimately making men stop trying.

4) Central Baptist Church: My fourth and final church visit, which happened to land on Palm Sunday, was to Central Baptist Church on Main Street. Its main service—the only service primarily in English—was in a large old sanctuary and attended by about 56 women and

45 men. Like all of the churches except Redeemer Hill, this one used programs to map out a very traditional liturgy that involved a great deal of standing, sitting, corporate reading, group prayers, hymns, and even a short parade around the sanctuary with palm branches. In sharp contrast to the other churches though, CBC incorporated many international aspects into the order of worship: Scripture readings in four languages, a song by members of the Karen community, and even an entire sermon by the Karen pastor (which I later learned is based on the same passage as the English message but otherwise independent). The English message (titled “When We Shout ‘Hosanna’ Do We Know What We Are Saying?”) was based on Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and taught that our cries to Jesus should not be just exclamations of joy but an expressed desire for our Savior to make us new. Overall, each part of the service was relatively short and low-tech—in part because of a malfunctioning (although little-used) sound system.

Although the church has existed since 1790, its phenomenal changes in the last half century prove worthy of almost exclusive elaboration; having had a mostly white congregation for almost 200 years, the demographics at CBC quickly—and unintentionally—began to shift in the 1960s to reflect a more multicultural reality as greater numbers of immigrants began settling in the city. Currently, a large portion of its 200 members come from Vietnamese, Karen, Jamaican, and Haitian communities throughout the Greater Hartford area. As well as contributing to the main service in English, the Vietnamese and Karen members (many of whom still struggle with language barriers to some degree) also have additional Sunday services and many special ministries throughout the week.

Moreover, the different immigration waves represented by each community give the church great age diversity as well. For instance, the Karen community started coming from Burma to Hartford’s South End only about four years ago due to the State Department’s

Resettlement Program, which means that their community comprises mostly young families; the Jamaican community, on the other hand, started immigrating to Hartford (which has the 2nd largest Jamaican population in the United States) 50 years ago, and many of those members are middle-aged. Similarly, the church's European faction is comprised almost entirely of people over 60 years old. Such diversity spills over into residential areas as well, in that older members generally commute to the church from nearby towns, while about 40% of the congregation—a relatively large percent, especially considering its non-residential location—lives in Hartford. Age and nationality demographics contribute to the church's doctrinal standpoints too, in that most of the older whites fall into a more liberal or centrist category, while many of the internationals would be considered more evangelical. Yet in this theologically mixed mainline church, most hot topics are avoided for the sake of living comfortably together in peace.

Clearly, diversity is one of this church's great strengths. Quite different from merely glorified segregation, CBC's impressively integrated array of cultural groups would allow newcomers of virtually any background to find a comfortable home there. Yet most importantly, this multicultural factor also singlehandedly seems to nullify key challenges faced by the other two traditional churches; its unique demographics make the church more relevant to both families and members of the surrounding communities, which eliminates any fear of going extinct as well as consequent efforts to avoid that fate. In fact, Pastor John Endler specifically mentioned that his congregation feels no need to introduce contemporary elements into their services, and actually deems it something that would conflict with who they are¹⁰ and potentially cross the line into "worship entertainment." Part of this traditionalism actually entails another asset too in the form of owning a large downtown building that is frequently used by many

¹⁰ CBC actually has the third largest organ in Hartford

community groups like basketball clubs, support groups, union meetings, a full-time preschool, etc. Yet this asset also creates some challenges, such as the huge cost of building maintenance and the fact that being downtown prevents the church from being as effective as it might be if it were in a more residential area. Despite potentially sharing such location difficulties with SCC and building issues with both SCC and ELC, Central Baptist nonetheless proves to be a very distinctive church overall.

Such unique international influences of course comprised a great deal of Pastor Endler's conjectures about the gender realities at his church. He explained that many cultural groups adhere to traditional gender roles that expect the man to be in charge, which frequently translates to attending church. This notion then led him to speculate that attendance may be more balanced in other countries and therefore carry over into church attendance when groups arrive in the United States. However, the pastor was quick to explain that though the church may show closer attendance rates due to traditional gender roles at home, gender roles within the church itself have been purposefully democratized. In its attempt to be progressive, the American Baptist Church (ABC) denomination freely ordains women and allows both genders to pursue any role they desire; more often than not, the pastor has seen that freedom lead wives into leadership roles and husbands merely into membership—thereby reversing the traditional roles they practice at home. Nonetheless, the pastor has the sense that many in his congregation would still be uncomfortable with women in roles any higher than associate pastor. In terms of gender imbalances as a whole, Pastor Endler highlighted the idea that our patriarchal society has convinced men to feel that they are strong enough not to need church and that women simply use it as a crutch for their weakness. In addition to that hypothesis, he also inferred a doctrinal influence as well, in that his experiences in more conservative churches entailed less men in part

due to avoiding anything that would oppose what people wanted. On the other hand, the more evangelical or liberal churches—of which the “theologically mixed” CBC is one—have shown closer gender proportions.

DISCUSSION

This great array of insight collected through observations and interviews at these four churches certainly answers my first two research questions and leads directly into a discussion of the third. Averaging an attendance of 59.3% women, the three most traditional churches (ELC, SCC, and CBC) all had more women than men (60%, 58%, and 60% respectively), while RHC (comprised of only 47% women) stood out as the only church attended by more men than women—with an almost even number of both, in fact. Including this dramatically lower percentage with the others brings the overall average to about 56%—a reality still quite similar to the statistically “typical” Western Protestant church. To explain this striking phenomenon, the four pastors touched on a conglomerate of topics that ranged between everything from an obsession with comfort and condemnation of machismo to role monopoly and atonement for societal neglect. Such explanations were often supported by descriptions—and my observations—of their churches as well. But how do these experiences compare to the four most prevalent research theories? As already suggested in each church introduction above, many of my findings show a mix of supporting, neglecting, and rejecting research that exists on the topic, while even contributing new ideas at times. Following will be a brief discussion that highlights a recap of each theory and how it fared in comparison to my sample churches.

Psychological Theories: Condensed dramatically, psychological theories all argue that women are more likely to attend church because their feminine qualities (ie. being

dependent, nurturing, relational, risk-averse, etc.) are better suited for it than typical masculine traits (ie being independent, task-oriented, risk-taking, etc.). Along these lines, every church mentioned that emphasizing comfort and “feeling” instead of challenge and “doing” directly related to women outnumbering men in the pews. Emmanuel Lutheran openly admitted that its teachings focus—or are perceived as focusing—more on topics like dependency, being rescued, experiencing God’s love and embrace, etc. than anything to do with the risk or challenge of following God’s call and seeking His kingdom above all else. Possibly also a product of how American culture is centered on constant comfort, the congregation even invests so heavily in fellowship and “niceness” that it successfully crafts a place drenched in feminine qualities like nurturance and friendliness. The pastor of Central Baptist also noted that more centrist denominations who seek to be theologically neutral for the sake of comfort tend to have fewer men, while the pastor of South Congregational noted that men avoid church because it encourages them to take on feminine traits like being in touch with their feelings. Observing that people join church bodies with leaders and members they can respect and relate to, the pastor of Redeemer Hill reasoned that a prevalence of feminine pastors logically leads to a prevalence of churches that attract women but repel men. As such, Redeemer Hill stands apart from the other churches by aiming to sacrifice comfort for the sake of being a welcoming gathering of people driven by taking risky action to fulfill a set purpose—an aim that seems to contribute in large part to its distinct abundance of young men.

Gender Role Theories: According to gender role theories, women have easier access to church roles simply because church has long since been removed from men’s public sphere (the workforce) and relegated to women’s private sphere (the family and home)—thereby incorporating all of the related responsibilities at which women excel. Furthermore, the process

of secularization is marked by women holding an increasingly large share of men's role as well, which ultimately makes both genders less likely to attend church. As the greatest proponent of this theory, Redeemer Hill intentionally preserves traditional gender roles that they believe God ordained for the greatest good. Asserting that men should form the church's headship under Christ, the church draws a careful dividing line between genders so that the roles—and inherent responsibilities—of each can be shared. Challenging men to step up into their calling as servant-leaders allows women the security needed to fulfill their own high calling instead of leaving men without a place by assuming their roles—all of which culminates in a balance of women and men. This correlates directly with research observing that obedience to traditional gender roles actually begets greater gender balance at church. Similarly, Pastor Endler indicated that culturally traditional gender roles seem to contribute to men's increased church attendance, while I propose that the democratized roles within Central Baptist counteract this contribution to create their continued gender imbalance. As Pastor Sanderberg of South Congregational mentioned, men choosing to follow God's call to active leadership would eliminate the need for women to take the burden of fulfilling both responsibilities; yet men see every role filled at church and therefore just leave everything up to women. As such, these three churches all pinpointed some form of gender role theory by discussing the fact that traditional gender roles are an important component to balanced church attendance in large part because it is perhaps the only way to assure both that men have roles and that they step up into them.

Deprivation Theories: Taking on parts from both these ideologies, deprivation theories claim that church gives women opportunities to lead, exercise unique skills, benefit from having God's voice, and call their male counterparts to higher standards, which allows them to compensate for—and sometimes even reverse—the many challenges inherent to being internally

and externally “lesser” than their male counterparts. Though well established in academic literature, this theory received very little affirmation by all of my sample churches. Pastor Sweeney of ELC proposed that women step into openings quickly and often well past the point of burn-out because they find success at church in using skills they have honed at home but cannot exercise in other ways. Similarly, the pastor of South Congregational confessed that women may step into church leadership roles because our society has not adequately honored or encouraged them over the years. With these observations, it seems that church offers women a place to find value and appreciation that they may not otherwise find in society. Yet on the other hand, the pastor of Central Baptist also noted that our patriarchal society considers the Church to be a crutch that only women need, thereby driving away men who consider themselves too strong to need such extra support. As such, these observations—though relatively meager—do show at least mild support for deprivation theories.

Feminization Theories: Last but certainly not least in terms of experiential support, feminization theories call into question the overpowering degree of feminine characteristics that mark modern worship services and stem from a feminization of how we see God and our relationship to him. Appearing increasingly sentimentalized and domesticated in its emphasis on feminine issues, worship has become irrelevant—perhaps even repugnant—to men in its apparent conflict against masculinity. Pastor Sweeney specifically highlighted ELC’s disproportionate ability to communicate with women, as well as the difficulties inherent to using more masculine language—particularly conveying challenge without falsely emphasizing works, utilizing war language without propounding violence, and even talking about a missions statement that is anything but concise. Yet he also mentioned a successful “Doubting Thomas Society” that creates space for people—particularly men—to wrestle through questions about

Christianity. Likewise, Pastor Sanderberg recognized the practicality of bridging the gap between Church and men since entire families are statistically more likely to attend church if the father comes. In fact, SCC is launching its first men's ministry very soon, in order to reach out to men in a way they can relate to—attempting to discredit the idea that attending church opposes being a “manly man” and entails being shot down more often than not. To avoid such issues, one of Redeemer Hill's structural differences (besides avoiding “prom songs to Jesus”) involves choosing elders not by nomination but according to qualification and calling—reserving the office for those who aspire to it instead of those simply performing a duty imposed by others. Such structural changes reveal churches trying to offset their feminine tendencies with characteristics to which men can relate.

New Theories: Although most findings fit rather neatly into at least one (if not quite a few) of the four main theories in my broad theoretical outline, a few new ideas popped up that deserve recognition. To begin with, combining a bit more research with a closer look at Pastor Joe's comment about church plant attendees generally being within ten years older or younger than the pastor reveals that age may also factor into church attendance. Research shows that most churches have both gender gaps and age gaps, in that teens and young adults are the least likely age cohort to attend church (Gallup, 2002). Moreover, writers like Murrow suggest that these gaps actually happen for the same reasons—namely that men and young adults are both challenge-oriented (valuing things like adventure, risk, variety, etc.) and women and older adults are both security-oriented (valuing things like safety, predictability, preservation, etc.) (Murrow, 2005). Even if only slightly true, these generalizations could supplement many psychological theories in explaining why churches that attract young adults with characteristics like younger pastors and more challenge-oriented traits would also attract more men every Sunday.

Along these lines, another original concept that both Redeemer Hill and Central Baptist touched on is the idea that theology influences church attendance as well. Both pastors remarked on experiencing greater gender balance in more traditional churches than in more “progressive” churches, and research affirms this with ample evidence showing that more orthodox sects tend to have more men. For example, many more Orthodox Jewish men attend synagogue than women “possibly because the norm emphasizes male religious attendance” (Lazerwitz, 1961, p. 308), and even as early as the first Puritan settlements in America, gender gaps were prevalent with the only exceptions being “the Eastern Orthodox (perhaps), the Jews (definitely) and non-Christian religions” (Podles, 1999, p. 26). More recently, ratios from a 1989 poll show that the more egalitarian Episcopalians (one of the denominations most open to ordaining women) topped the charts with a 1.39 ratio of men to women, while the much more traditional Catholics (who still prohibit the ordination of women) fell at the bottom with a 0.96 ratio, followed directly by the equally traditional Lutherans with a 1.00 ratio (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, p. 141). In fact, mainstream sects (Iannaccone, 1994), new religious movements, and non- and parareligious beliefs like astrology and telepathy all have tremendously higher sex ratios than most traditional religious (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). The same book also details how non-working men in America (therefore those adhering less to what is still the traditional male role of provider) attend church less than employed men (those in more traditional roles), just like women who adhere less to traditional roles by working full-time are less likely to attend church than their non-working female counterparts (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; de Vaus D. A., 1984). Possibly just another piece in the gender role puzzle, this association between traditionally more conservative theology and its egalitarian, democratized counterpart nonetheless adds more insight into some of the reasons causing women to attend church more than men.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Found both academically and anecdotally, the commonly observed reality of women outnumbering men in church is clearly present even in my small sample of churches in Hartford. Despite coming from different backgrounds and denominations, the three oldest and most traditional of my four churches revealed a disproportionate number of women attending their Sunday morning services, while the only church with a majority of men identified strongly as a young church plant just beginning to grow in size. When asked to explain these varying gender realities, all four pastors gave an abundant number of reasons—also accompanied by my own observations—that aligned well with the great deal of research that has hitherto explored the convoluted topic. In greatest support of gender role and feminization theories, they also spoke a good deal to psychological theories but only mildly touched on deprivation theories—even beginning to introduce new theoretical themes as well. Personally most intrigued by deprivation theories positing that women find a home more easily in the Church because of God’s partial affinity for the “least of these,” I was mildly disappointed by the lack thereof during my interviews and observations. Yet this sole source of disappointment could perhaps reveal a path for further investigation—an obvious necessity considering that many uncertainties still exist in determining why God’s kingdom (if it looks anything like the Western Protestant churches of today) consists primarily of women.

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