

ABSTRACT

Religious Participation during the Quarter-Life Crisis: Examining the Relationship between Congregations and Emerging Adults

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The transitional years experienced by emerging adults (ages 18-24) are characterized by an evident decrease of religiosity. Emerging adults consistently report lower levels of prayer, strong affiliation, religious service attendance and religious identity compared to their older counterparts (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). While the significance of this pattern has been recognized, very little empirical research has addressed the role of religious congregations in the lives of emerging adults. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the relationship between congregations and emerging adults. Using a variety of quantitative techniques, I investigate: 1) characteristics related to discontentment with congregations during emerging adulthood, 2) characteristics associated with a congregation's ability to attract emerging adults, and 3) emerging adults' social embeddedness within congregations. Applying congregational research addresses an important gap in the study of emerging adult religiosity. Findings of each study are discussed, as are implications and suggestions for future research.

Religious Participation during the Quarter-Life Crisis: Examining the Relationship between
Congregations and Emerging Adults

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Emerging Adulthood and Religious Engagement

Emerging adulthood is an extended period of development during the late teens and early twenties. This season of transition continues to increase as social trends delay adulthood. The ages at which an emerging adult gets married, pursues parenthood, finishes higher education and settles into long-lasting job stability continues to be delayed later and later in life. This season between adolescence and adulthood is marked by mobility and exploration, as individuals experience freedom from both parental control and freedom from responsibility to a spouse or children. The transition is characterized by a quest for self-identification of one's values and beliefs, as well as an exploration of possible life directions (Arnett, 2004). While identity development is a priority during adolescence (Erickson, 1968), many contemporary developmental psychologists agree that identity formation not only continues through emerging adulthood, but it even intensifies (Waterman, 1999). Emerging adults are an important age group for the study of religion and spirituality. The cognitive, physical and socioemotional development of emerging adulthood creates a key period of religious and spiritual development, as does the diverse and changing social contexts that must be navigated during this time (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

Even though it is a key period of religious development, the transitional years experienced by emerging adults (ages 18-24) are characterized by an evident decrease of religiosity. Emerging adults consistently report lower levels of prayer, strong affiliation, religious service attendance and religious identity compared to their older counterparts (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). There is a growing body of research on the religious lives and spirituality of emerging adults. The vast majority of the existing literature studies religious decline of emerging adults from a micro-level perspective, examining what social factors contribute to an individual's decline of religious behavior and salience during emerging adulthood. The possible culprits of religious decline previously examined are behavioral effects, life course, higher education, and weak religious socialization.

Religious socialization tends to focus on engagement during youth, parental effects and peers. Additionally, researchers suggest that religious congregations are important to religious socialization during emerging adulthood. Mayrl & Uecker (2011) write, "Active participation in congregations provide young adults with role models, social networks, spiritual experiences and regular exposure to religious beliefs that are thought to reinforce their religious commitments" (p. 185). While their significance has been recognized, very little empirical research has addressed the role of religious congregations in the lives of emerging adults. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the relationship between congregations and emerging adults, specifically focusing on the issues associated with congregations attracting and retaining emerging adults. Using a variety of quantitative techniques, I investigate: 1) characteristics related to discontentment with congregations during

emerging adulthood, 2) characteristics associated with a congregation's ability to attract emerging adults, and 3) emerging adults' social embeddedness within congregations. Applying congregational research will address an important gap in the study of emerging adult religiosity.

Trends in Emerging Adult Religiosity

The trend of waning religiosity experienced by emerging adults has been fairly consistent for the past few decades. Comparing the age cohort of 18-25 in 2006 to the same age cohort in 1972, Smith & Snell (2009) found a slight increase in identification as a religious liberal and in claiming no religion. The 2006 cohort of emerging adults also appears to experience a very small decrease in religious service attendance compared to emerging adults in 1972. On these few measures, emerging adults in the United States have become slightly less religious over the last quarter century, but emerging adults today are no less religious than those of previous decades on other measures such as Biblical literalism and strong religious affiliation. They even display a slight increase in daily prayer and belief in life after death (Smith & Snell, 2009).

A closer look at historical trends makes evident differences among Christian religious traditions. Most noteworthy and most relevant to the current study is religious service attendance. According to national survey data as reported in Smith & Snell (2009), over the past quarter of the century, evangelical Protestants and black Protestants both exhibit a slight increase in service attendance among emerging adults. Conversely, for the same age cohort, service attendance has fallen 15% among Mainline Protestants and 10% among Catholics. Between 1995 and

2006, strong affiliation with their religious tradition has raised among black Protestants more than 10% and among evangelical Protestants about 5%. The same measure shows much more modest change among Mainline Protestants who experience a slight increase of a couple of percentage points and among Catholics who decrease a couple of percentage points. Examining the four traditions separately reveal that religious decline among emerging adults varies greatly across the traditions (Smith & Snell, 2009).

There are many speculations as to why emerging adults experience such religious decline during their transitional years. One of those speculations addressed by researchers is normative deviation and cognitive dissonance. That is, emerging adults are torn between following their peers' deviant lifestyles and following the rules encouraged by religion (Uecker et al., 2007). Among emerging adults, measures of religiosity is inversely associated with behaviors such as excessive alcohol use (Engs & Mullen, 1999; Wechsler & McFadden, 1999), more hours spent "partying" (Bryant, Choi & Yasuno, 2003), and marijuana use (Bell, Wechsler, & Johnston, 1997). Religious attendance is also negatively correlated with nonmarital sex, frequent alcohol consumption, and marijuana use. However, the relationships between these behaviors and religious salience and disaffiliation are weak (Uecker et al., 2007). Furthermore, it is difficult to draw any conclusions from the relationship between service attendance and problematic behaviors because they are expected to have a bidirectional relationship (Uecker et al., 2007). Contrary to what people would generally assume about young people choosing to

sew their wild oats instead of continuing to sew into their faith, support for cognitive dissonance theory is fairly weak and inconclusive.

Closely tied to religiosity is emerging adults' decisions to marry or cohabitate. While marriage is strongly tied to increased or sustained religious participation during emerging adulthood, cohabitating is associated with decreased service attendance, decreased religious salience, and increased likelihood of disaffiliation (Uecker et al., 2007). Cohabitation effects could have greater implications on today's decline in religious participation compared to generations past because more and more couples are choosing to cohabitate before getting married or sometimes instead of getting married (Arnett, 2004; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2005). Furthermore, trends of delaying marriage may affect religious participation among emerging adults as the median age for tying the knot moves later and later into adulthood.

Higher education is also often assumed to be a major culprit of decreasing religiosity among emerging adults. Not only is the lifestyle of a college student assumed to be un conducive to religious commitment, but Mayrl & Uecker (2011) write that many researchers speculate that the cognitive effects of higher education could make students' religious beliefs more complex, individualistic and independent, and less orthodox. Substantial evidence suggests both of these assumptions are only misconceptions. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies beginning in the 1990s revealed an increase in religiosity during college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While emerging adults as an entire cohort exhibit decreased religiosity and become more liberal with their religion, college students

do not experience an especially significant change compared to their non-student counterparts (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). In fact, emerging adults who do not go to college show the highest rates of religious decline, including decreased service attendance, decreased religious salience, and disaffiliation from religion (Uecker et al., 2007).

A great amount of research suggests that religious socialization during youth is one of the strongest factor (possibly *the* strongest) in predicting the religious participation of emerging adults (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Petts, 2009; Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith & Denton, 2005). Religious socialization agents such as parents (Smith & Snell, 2009; Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Uecker and Ellison, 2012), religious congregations (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011), religious education (Uecker, 2009), and peer groups (Gunnore & Moore, 2002; Barry et al., 2010) have been shown to have important lasting effects on religious behavior throughout emerging adulthood, with the strength of these effects depending on religious tradition (see Vaidyanathan, 2011).

A final explanation of low service attendance in particular can possibly be found in the idea that emerging adults simply do not feel like they belong in a religious congregation. Researchers have speculated that it could be that emerging adults just feel out of place or uninterested in congregations that heavily target families, often excluding single and/or childless young adults (Uecker et al., 2007). Emerging adults can generally enjoy a religious service and fairly regularly attend a religious service without ever feeling like they belong there. Young people may not necessarily feel uncomfortable or unwelcome among religious congregations. They

may even tend to have very positive attitudes toward them, often calling them “friendly”. However, they rarely feel like they belong or feel “at home” in religious services. They are much more likely to feel social belonging from family, friends, college, or at a job (Smith & Snell, 2009). The idea that service attendance suffers from its failure to provide a religious “home” for emerging adults has been examined very little, if at all, by scholarly research.

While emerging adults do appear to be less religious during their transition to adulthood, emerging adults are not nearly as secularized as assumed. Smith & Snell (2009) write, “Most of them do not appear to abandon their faith, decide that it is entirely unimportant, or radically alter their beliefs. Most appear to retain or perhaps soften the subjective aspects of their religions and simply... downplay their faith as a salient and publicly practiced part of their lives during these years” (p. 147). Emerging adulthood is characterized by an overall decline in professed importance of religious faith in life, but the decline in public participation is much more severe (see Lee, 2002). Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) support this notion, concluding that as religious activity among emerging adults decline in the first year of college, their value of incorporating spirituality in their lives increase. The trend of increasing spiritual beliefs coupled with decreasing religious participation is not exclusive to college students. Service attendance decreases for 69 percent of the general population of emerging adults, while only about 20 percent show a decreased religious salience and only 17 percent disaffiliate from religion altogether (Uecker et al., 2007). Another study indicated that regular service attendance experiences a 24.7% decrease between youth and emerging adulthood, whereas

non-attenders increases by 24.5%. Changes in religious salience and belief in God are much more modest (Smith & Snell, 2009). Thus, religious salience experiences a decline during emerging adulthood, but it is not major and does not compare with the decline in service attendance. Emerging adults seem to express interest in religion and be open to religion but their lack of religious participation seems to be inconsistent with their professed interest. Because the decline in congregational participation appears to be much greater than private religious engagement, this study focuses on the relationship emerging adults have with congregations.

Congregations

The present study shifts its focus from the micro-sociological perspective to bring forth a fresh perspective that draws upon congregational research. This study recognizes the centrality of congregations to the study of religion. A congregation is a local group of people who meet regularly for religious purposes (Miller, 2002). Whitney and King (2014) describe congregations as “formal assemblies of individuals who are guided by common doctrines who gather for common religious worship, education, and fellowship” (p. 134). Congregations bring people together to engage in expressing and transmitting religious meanings. The function congregations invest most of their resources and involve most of their members in is producing and reproducing religious meanings through ritual and religious education (Chaves, 2004).

Congregations are a central component of religious life and provide a breeding ground for personal and collective transformation (Ammerman & Farnsley, 1997). Congregations are an important part of the foundation of what

Berger (1967) calls a “plausibility structure” within which beliefs can be taken for granted. Individuals’ plausibility structures are socially constructed and require social confirmation, often provided by congregations, to persist. Without the social ties, community and religious education offered by a congregation, one’s plausibility structure is weakened making lack of commitment and/or complete exit highly probable (Berger, 1967).

Stark and Finke (2000) also discuss the importance of congregations, writing that religion depends on the group processes and the vigorous efforts made by religious organization to maintain a high level of commitment. They write, “Individual religious commitment is rooted in social support and reinforcement... the high levels of involvement exhibited by participants in some religious groups are generated by the group itself, that enthusiasm engenders enthusiasm” (141).

Several important findings of existing research point to the need for examining the role congregations play in emerging adult religiosity. The first finding is that public participation of religious engagement experiences a much greater decline than private participation. Some researchers speculate how emerging adults’ views and experiences of organized religion might affect their public and private religiosity (see Uecker et al., 2007, Smith & Snell, 2009, and Whitney & King, 2014) but again, it is only speculation. Given that service attendance suffers more than other religiosity measures, it is important to examine more closely the relationship between religious organizations and emerging adults.

The second finding in existing research that this study finds very important is that the emerging adult cohort is not completely secularized. Not all emerging

adults experience decline in religion. In fact, in recent years evangelical Protestants and black Protestants churches are doing better in retaining and attracting the emerging adult cohort compared to previous years in the past quarter century (Smith & Snell, 2009). Also as previously discussed, some studies conclude that more college students experience increase rather than decrease in religiosity (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Lee, 2002). Some religious organizations, including congregations, are doing something right to attract and retain emerging adults. This study will examine what contributes to a congregation's ability to attract and retain emerging adults.

Finally the last existing finding that this study builds off is that emerging adulthood is a crucial time for religious development. As parents start to have less affect over an emerging adult's identity, congregations and the peers that attend those congregations begin to have even more opportunity to impact one's religious socialization. Whitney and King (2014) describe religious congregations as ecologies for identity development, providing structure and resources that shape emerging adults' beliefs and worldviews. Not only do congregations address ideological and moral issues, but they provide a social and transcendental context that encourages emerging adults to connect with others and often, the Divine (Whitney & King, 2014).

Recognizing that service attendance suffers more than any other measure of religiosity, that congregations can play a role in their service attendance, and that congregations can impact one's life during a key period of religious development should not only be of interest to sociologists, but also to religious leaders.

Historically, trends have shown that adults typically return to organized religion after getting married and/or having children (see Farrell, 2011). However, the trend of delayed marriage is of concern because their extended recess from religion is expected to result in lower confidence in religious organizations (Hoffman, 1998) and without their community and plausibility structure intact, it is easier to doubt religious beliefs and teachings (Berger, 1967). In other words, the longer they are gone, the further they will go from religion and the less likely they are to return. Additionally, their lack of desire to marry someone of the same faith may be an indicator of how little value they place on their faith. One quarter of emerging adults say that it is very or extremely important to them to marry someone from their own religion, while more than half said that that it is not very important or not important at all (Smith & Snell, 2009). Not only is the length of their absence detrimental to their religious socialization, but their absence during a crucial period of development should be of concern to religious leaders. For emerging adults who do not engage in development and maturation at all during this period, or for those who navigate development without a community of emotional and structural support such as a congregation, they are more likely to find themselves “lost in transition”, leading to a myriad of potential consequences such as immorality, consumerism, substance abuse, unsatisfying sexual experiences, and civic and political disengagement (Smith et al., 2011). Not only will the individual suffer these consequences but a generation plagued by these symptoms could have a societal impact. The study will not only address the gap in the study of emerging adult

religion, but also inform religious leaders on how to address the generational gap they may be experiencing in their congregations.

Research Agenda

Examining religiosity during emerging adulthood, this study is focused on the relationship between religious organizations and emerging adults. Following the work of a number of leading researchers in the study of emerging adulthood and religion (Uecker et al., 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009), this study defines emerging adults as adults aged 18-24. Compared to young adults in their late 20s, emerging adults aged 18-24 are especially characterized by religious decline and overall instability. Young adults in their late 20s tend to begin increasing their religious engagement, potentially due to marriage and having children, completion of higher education, or settling down into more stable careers (Arnett, 2004; Smith & Snell, 2009). Additionally, the season of 18-24 appears to show substantial differences developmentally and in brain maturation, compared to both adolescence and older adulthood (Paus, 2009), making this a prime season for religious and identity development (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

Chapter Two will draw upon Waves 1 and 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion to explore the characteristics related to discontentment with congregations during emerging adulthood. Building from studies that examine religious socialization factors (Smith & Snell, 2009) and religious perceptions of emerging adults (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011), this longitudinal analysis will examine how characteristics of adolescence affect emerging adults' perceptions of organized religion. Controlling for adolescent demographics, religious tradition, higher

education, and life course effects, I test the influence of parents and religious characteristics during the teenage years on emerging adult's later perceptions of organized religion. I expect adolescent religious engagement and parental effects to reduce the likelihood for negative perceptions of religion during emerging adulthood.

Using the United States Congregational Life Survey, Wave 2 (USCLS), Chapter Three examines the presence of emerging adults in a congregation. This study aims to answer the question, what factors attract emerging adults to a congregation? First, the offering of service activities to assist people in need in their community, in the United States, and internationally are expected to be associated with increased proportion of emerging adults in a congregation. Second, opportunities for social growth in a congregation will be examined by aggregating individual-level data to create congregational-level variables measuring proportion involved in a small group, proportion with close friends in the congregation, and proportion feeling a strong sense of belonging. I expect congregations offering a strong social context will be more successful in attracting emerging adults.

This study will control for characteristics of the congregation including congregation size, year founded, contemporary music, ethnic diversity, education of attenders, geographical region, and religious tradition. US Census data is also used to control for county population and proportion of county population that is ages 18-24. USCLS data are ideal for the studies in Chapters Three and Four because it includes both attender data and congregation-level data. In Chapter Three, attender data is aggregated to create congregation-level variables to illustrate a more robust

picture of each congregation. The offering of first and second level data also affords the opportunity to execute multilevel regression modeling, which is crucial to Chapter Four exploring how characteristics of both the individual and the congregation affect an emerging adult's social embeddedness within a congregation. A number of studies have used USCLS data to examine how congregations impact their attenders based on both individual and congregational characteristics (e.g. Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Scheitle & Finke, 2008; Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; Stroope & Baker, 2013).

Chapter Four uses the USCLS to explore the relationship between emerging adults and their social embeddedness within a congregation. It is possible, as Uecker et al. (2007) briefly suggests, that emerging adults attend religious services substantially less than other age categories because they feel "out of place in, or turned off by, religious communities that focus heavily on children and parents, to the exclusion of single and/or childless young adults" (p. 1686). This chapter will use multilevel regression modeling to explore this possibility by examining subjective sense of belonging and likelihood of having close friends in the congregation for emerging adults compared to adults ages 25 and older. It is expected that emerging adults will have lower sense of belonging and fewer close congregational friends compared to their older counterparts.

This study will also examine moderating effects that increase emerging adults' sense of belonging and congregational friendships. Based on Martinez and Dougherty's (2013) study on majority-minority effects, it is expected that emerging adults' social embeddedness will benefit from an increased proportion of

individuals in their same age cohort (18-24) in their congregations. Stroope and Baker's (2014) work on social embeddedness leads to this study's expectation that emerging adults will be more likely to experience a strong sense of belonging in their congregations when they have close friends in their congregations. The same work also suggests that emerging adults' will be more likely to experience a strong sense of belonging when they attend congregations in which attenders have fewer close friends in the congregation (Stroope & Baker, 2014). This is rooted in the idea that attenders with fewer close friends in the congregation may feel uncomfortable in congregations where everyone seems to already have close friends in the congregation, appearing to be unavailable for new friendships (Olson, 1989). Finally, social embeddedness for emerging adults is expected to increase for those who are married and with the number of years the individual has been attending the same congregation (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013). This study will control for personal and religious demographics of the individual including sex, age, race, education, marital status, children living at home, service attendance, congregational membership, exclusive theology, and personal devotion. Congregation-level controls include congregation size, geographic region, and religious tradition.

Chapter Five will draw upon the themes of the entire study to highlight areas for future research and include a discussion on what the future may hold for emerging adults and their religious participation. In closing, I will discuss implications for religious organizations.

CHAPTER TWO

Emerging Adults' Perceptions of Organized Religion

Introduction

The previous chapter has examined what possible factors contribute to the decline in religiosity and in what ways religiosity decreases during emerging adulthood. One important detail about the religious decline of emerging adults that is worthy of further discussion is that while religious participation decreases, the decline for spiritual beliefs and/or salience does not suffer from the same age effect—at least not as severely (Lee, 2002; Bryant et al., 2003; Uecker et al., 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). If religious salience remains for emerging adults, it may be assumed that it is not religion itself that is unappealing to emerging adults, but it is organized religion that becomes increasingly unappealing during their transitional years. This study begins with a discussion on the attitudes emerging adults have toward organized religion, and then examines possible roots of feelings of alienation from organized religion. Using longitudinal analysis, this study examines how emerging adults' attitudes about organized religion are potentially shaped by socialization processes starting in adolescence including their religious engagement and parents.

Negative Attitudes against Organized Religion

Increased or sustained personal religiosity paired with decreased service attendance may suggest that young people are interested in personal religion, but they are less interested in organized religion. Popular books aimed at pastors and

other Christian leaders advocate this same message, emphasizing the assumption that emerging adults are not interested in organized religion due to their strong negative attitudes against organized religion¹. However, Smith & Snell (2009) argue that assumptions made by such popular Christian literature are probably based on personal experiences or very limited qualitative data and therefore are probably not representative of even the majority of non-attenders. Using quantitative data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, they show that emerging adults actually tend to have a favorable view of organized religion. A large majority (79 percent) said that they have a lot of respect for organized religion in this country; only 29 percent say that organized religion is usually a “big turn-off for me.” Eighty percent said they have very positive feelings about the religious tradition in which they were raised. Not all feedback about organized religion was overwhelmingly positive. The majority of emerging adults (68 percent) agreed that “too many religious people in this country these days are negative, angry, and judgmental.” When asked about how positive or negative they feel about religion in this country, emerging adults were more undecided compared to other questions about organized religion. The majority (55 percent) felt positive, but about one quarter was ambivalent, reporting “neither” positive nor negative feelings (Smith & Snell, 2009).

Another study indicated that the vast majority (about two-thirds) of older adolescents are not hostile toward organized religion, while a significant minority (about 15 percent) do express feelings of alienation toward organized religion. Another 15 percent is disengaged or uninterested and does not have strong feelings

¹ For example, see Kimball, 2007, Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, and Kinnaman, 2011.

for or against organized religion (Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003). Smith & Snell (2009) admit that a larger segment of emerging adults feel alienated from religious faith and organized religion compared to teenagers, but they argue overall emerging adults' feelings of alienation are greatly overestimated by popular Christian literature.

Public Religious Participation is No Longer Necessary

Emerging adults seem to dismiss the idea that they need organized religion to be religious or to practice good morals. Emerging adults often view religion as the institution that teaches good and bad, right and wrong. They often assume after an individual learns these lessons, they no longer need organized religion (Smith & Snell, 2009). They are now equipped to make their own decisions about what is right and wrong. For example, compared to older evangelicals who tend to believe that God is the source of moral authority, younger evangelicals (ages 18-29) tend to believe that their own personal conscience is the true judge of right or wrong (Farrell, 2011).

Emerging adults tend to have a cafeteria style of beliefs--take what you want and leave behind what you do not want. They do not feel there is a need for religious people to spend time together and have a cohesive package of beliefs and lifestyle (Smith & Snell, 2009). They believe that no one, including organized religion, can really say what is right or wrong, what is fact or fiction, because it all depends on context. The segment of emerging adults who believe that mainstream religion is irrelevant to the needs and concerns of people their age makes up a significant minority at 42 percent (Smith & Snell, 2009). College students seem to

view religion as something shaped by their own ideas and not the ideas preached by an institution. They seem to be dubious of institutions and want their religion to be completely individualized and personalized to match their own context (Arnett, 2004; Wuthnow, 2007; Lee, 2002; Cherry et al., 2001). This individualization of religion and skepticism toward organized religion could be another possible explanation of how service attendance suffers the most compared to other components of religiosity. Because attitudes about organized religion may be associated with religious behavior, this study seeks to examine how attitudes may be formed beginning with socialization processes occurring throughout adolescence.

Parental Religious Socialization

What contributes to an emerging adult's likelihood of becoming disgruntled with organized religion? Where does the resistance, disconnect, or the lack of interest come from? The negative attitudes may be rooted in the religious background of one's younger years. Religious socialization during youth is one of the strongest factors (possibly *the* strongest) in predicting the religious participation of emerging adults (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Vaidyanathan, 2011; Petts, 2009; Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith & Denton, 2005). Religious socialization agents such as parents, religious congregations, religious education, and peer groups have been shown to have important lasting effects on religious behavior and beliefs throughout emerging adulthood. Smith & Snell (2009) write about the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood:

The forces of religious continuity are stronger than the forces of change. Most youth tend as emerging adults to remain generally the kind of religious people they were as teenagers... What we clearly do not observe are random outcomes in which the religious orientations of teenagers are 'thrown into the air' during the transition to emerging adulthood and then land in quite unpredictable places (p. 238).

Their statement is in response to the conflicting findings of Arnett (2004), who claims no relationship between religious training during adolescence and religious behavior during emerging adulthood. Other research supports the former conclusion that emerging adulthood religion can be highly predicted by factors of adolescence (Vaidyanathan, 2011; Petts, 2009; Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith & Denton, 2005).

In combination with teenage religious behaviors, parental service attendance and religious salience is highly predictive of religious commitments during emerging adulthood (Smith & Snell, 2009). Parental effects on their children's religious development appear to carry through well into emerging adulthood and may even be the most important influence on religious engagement (Myers, 1996; Smith & Denton, 2005). The mechanism for parents' long-lasting effects is likely to be parents serving as religious models, communicating directly about beliefs and religious engagement, and maintaining a family environment conducive to their youth respecting the model and messages (Nelson, 2014). This would include factors like parenting styles and the relationship they have with their children (Nelson, 2014). Some have argued that parents have an indirect impact (Barry et al., 2010), while other researchers have found that parents not only have indirect effects through mediators, but they also have a direct effect on their children's religiosity during their transition to adulthood (Vaidyanathan, 2011). The

predictive power of parental religiosity appears to depend on religious tradition, for at least some religious factors. Parental religious participation among Catholics and mainline Protestants affects service attendance, but religious environment becomes non-significant when considering other variables (Vaidyanathan, 2011). For black Protestants, religious participation has no effect, but parental religious environment (parental religious salience, religious discussion in the home, and frequency of prayer for their children) greatly impacts emerging adults' service attendance. Both parental participation and environment have significant effects on evangelical Protestants' service attendance (Vaidyanathan, 2011).

Parental effects are not limited to emerging adults' religious participation, but other family characteristics also appear to impact emerging adulthood religious engagement. While parental religious participation is a more powerful predictor, family structure also affects emerging adulthood religiosity. Growing up in a single-parent family is tied to religious disaffiliation, religious switching and decreased regular service attendance (Uecker and Ellison, 2012). However, when parental religious characteristics are controlled for, the single-parent effects and divorced-parents effects are reduced or eliminated (Uecker and Ellison, 2012). Other studies (for example, see Petts, 2009) come to the same conclusion that parental religious effects are stronger than the adolescent's family characteristics.

While there are a number of studies examining parental effects on emerging adult religious participation, very little research addresses parental effects on emerging adults' perceptions of or attitudes toward religion. What little research that does exist suggests that there is an association between parental closeness and

religious attitudes. One study found that a close paternal relationship during emerging adulthood decreases the likelihood of the development of an impersonal conception of God, the abandonment of belief in miracles, and increased doubt about religion (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). However, this study did not examine parental religiosity. Because there is so little research focusing on parental closeness and parental religiosity and their effects on emerging adults' religious attitudes, the current study can only speculate based on the associations between parental effects and emerging adult religious engagement. Because religious engagement during emerging adulthood is so closely tied to parental socialization during adolescence, it is expected:

H1: An adolescent's parental religious engagement will have a significant negative effect on an emerging adult's propensity for negative perceptions of organized religion.

H2: Parental closeness during adolescence will have a significant negative effect on an emerging adult's propensity for negative perceptions of organized religion.

Religious Engagement during Adolescence

In addition to parental effects, religious development and internalization is thought to come from consistent religious rituals such as prayer or participation in a religious congregation (Levesque, 2002). Combined with parental religion, a teenager's importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading have all been found to be part of a combination that is highly predictive of his or her religious commitments during emerging adulthood (Smith & Snell, 2009). For example, teens scoring in the top quartile of a scale measuring these four factors have an 85% chance of maintaining their high religious levels through emerging adulthood. In

contrast, one who scores in the lowest quartile of the same scale stands only a slight chance of 0.4% of reaching the highly religious category when he or she is 18-23 years old (Smith & Snell, 2009).

Religious factors during adolescence such as regular Sunday School attendance, youth group involvement, worship service attendance, religious salience and holding traditional beliefs all affect emerging adults' propensity for service attendance (Vaidyanathan, 2011). Some effects of youth religiosity are contingent upon religious tradition. For example, regular Sunday School attendance has a marginal positive effect on evangelical Protestants, but a significant positive effect on black Protestants' service attendance during emerging adulthood. The effect for mainline Protestants is significant but in the opposite direction. That is, Sunday School participation during adolescence actually decreases service attendance for mainline Protestant emerging adults. Adolescent religious service attendance and religious salience appear to also play a role in shaping emerging adult ideology, reducing the likelihood for no longer believing in a personal God, no longer believing in miracles, and no longer believing it is okay to convert others. Additionally youth religious salience reduced odds for a decline in religious exclusivism for emerging adults.

Not only does youth religiosity impact religious behavior and salience during emerging adulthood, it has also appeared to affect liberalization of religious beliefs. While parental relationships and religiosity of peers have been found to be highly associated with liberalization during emerging adulthood, service attendance and religious salience during adolescence has the strongest effect (Mayrl & Uecker,

2011). Because youth religiosity appears to have lasting effects on emerging adulthood religious engagement and beliefs, it is expected:

H3: Religious engagement during adolescence will have a significant negative effect on an emerging adult's propensity for negative perceptions of organized religion.

Data

Data for this study come from the first and third waves of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Conducted in 2002-2003, Wave 1 is a nationally-representative, random-digit-dial telephone survey of 3,290 teenagers ages 13-17. In Wave 3, of the eligible 3,282 Wave 1 respondents, 2,532 participated in the Wave 3 survey for a completion rate of 77.1 percent. By the time of Wave 3, respondents were ages 18-24. Wave 3 replicated many of the questions asked in Wave 1. Because this study focuses specifically on individuals transitioning into adulthood and considers the life course effects that tend to occur after completing or dropping out of high school, the current analysis omits students still enrolled in high school (n=169) or who were homeschooled (n=8) during Wave 3, making the sample size 2,355. The NSYR includes a wealth of information about respondents' religious beliefs and practices at both waves, making it ideal for a study examining the relationship between emerging adults' attitudes about organized religion and their religious beliefs and behaviors.

Dependent Variables

Four dichotomous variables from Wave 3 of NSYR data are used to measure the perceptions young people have of organized religion. The first item measures a

generally negative perception of organized religion, using a question that asks to what extent respondents agree with the statement, "Organized religion is normally a big turn-off for me." Responses included "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree." A respondent was identified as generally negative toward organized religion (negative=1), if the respondent strongly agreed or agreed.

A second measure examines how relevant emerging adults view organized religion to be, asking to what extent they agree "Most mainstream religion is irrelevant to the needs and concerns of people my age." This variable is coded the same where respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing were coded as a 1 and all others were coded as a 0. A third measure uses the question, "Some people say that in order for people to be truly religious and spiritual, they need to be involved in a religious congregation." Respondents were only given two choices. Those who disagreed with the statement were coded as 1 and those who agreed were coded as a 0. Finally the last measure only includes respondents who affiliated with any religion at Wave 1. These respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree, "I have very positive feelings about the religious tradition in which I was raised." Respondents strongly disagreeing or disagreeing were coded as a 1. All others were coded as a 0.

Independent Variables

The present study examines the influence of parents and religious characteristics during the teenage years on emerging adult's later perceptions of religion. Three measures were used to examine parental socialization. The first

variable measured parental religiosity. Following Smith & Snell (2009), parental religion at Wave 1 is measured by combining the parent's service attendance and the importance they place on their religion ($\alpha=.75$). Respondents were asked, "About how often do you attend religious services?" Respondents could choose "never," "few times a year", "many times a year", "once a month", "2-3 times a month", or "once a week or more." To measure religious salience, respondents were asked "How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life?" Respondents could choose from "extremely important", "very", "somewhat", "not very", or "not important at all." Also included are measures of the respondent's relational closeness to their mother and father at Wave 1. These variables range in value from "not close at all" (coded 1) to "extremely close" (coded 6). In order to limit missing cases, those who were not in contact with their mother or fathers were coded as a 1 for that variable.

Following the work of Smith & Snell (2009) and Mayrl & Uecker (2011), religiosity during the teenage years is measured using three items including service attendance, religious salience, and prayer frequency. Religious service attendance is an external behavior and a more objective measure of religion (Smith & Snell, 2009; Uecker et al., 2007). Respondents were asked, "About how often do you attend religious services?" Respondents could choose "never," "few times a year", "many times a year", "once a month", "2-3 times a month", or "once a week or more." Religious salience is a much more subjective and internal aspect of religiosity (Smith & Snell, 2009; Uecker et al., 2007). Respondents were asked "How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life?" Respondents

could choose from “extremely important”, “very”, “somewhat”, “not very”, or “not important at all.” Frequency of personal prayer is also an internal aspect of religion, but instead of measuring an attitude like religious salience does, it measures an actual behavior. Respondents were asked, “How often, if ever, do you pray by yourself?” Respondents selected among the following choices, “never”, “less than once a month”, “one to two times a month”, “about once a week”, “a few times a week”, “about once a day”, or “many times a day.” All three measures were left as numeric variables.

Controls

Demographic and religious characteristics that are often associated with religiosity are controlled for including gender (Female=1), region (Wave 1, with South as the reference category), and race/ethnicity with White being the reference category. Religious affiliation during adolescence is controlled for following the RELTRAD classification with Evangelical Protestant being the reference category (see Steensland et al., 2000). Mother’s education is included to control for sociodemographics during youth (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). A dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent comes from a biologically intact, two-parent family at Wave 1 is also controlled for. Having a biologically intact, two-parent family tends to significantly decrease the likelihood of religious decline for both external and internal measures (Uecker et al., 2007). Wave 3 control variables include age, ever attended community/junior college or four-year college/university (yes=1), marital status (married=1), and has child living with him/her (yes=1).

Analytic Approach

Four series of logistic regression models are executed, examining socialization effects that predict negative attitudes about organized religion later on during emerging adulthood. Each series has three models. The first model examines parental effects and the second model examines youth religiosity. A third model includes parental effects and youth religiosity in the same model. Controls are included in all models. The last series of models that examines feelings toward religious affiliation of his/her youth excludes those respondents who reported no religious affiliation (none=1) at Wave 1. All analyses apply the longitudinal weight included in the NSYR data.

Results

Table 2.1 displays results of the first binary logistic regression model, predicting what characteristics during adolescence are associated with feeling “turned off” by organized religion. This perception was shared by 30.4 percent of the population. Females are less likely to have this negative perception. Compared to the South, West Coast emerging adults are more likely to have negative attitudes toward organized religion. Emerging adults in the Northeast were more likely to have a negative perception, but only when youth religious engagement was not considered. No difference appears in Midwest emerging adults compared to the South. Compared to white emerging adults, Black and Hispanic emerging adults are less likely to be turned off by religion. Those who claimed no religion are more than twice as likely to have negative attitudes toward religion as evangelical Protestants, but only when youth religious engagements is not included in the model. Mainline

Protestants are more likely to feel turned off by organized religion, but its effect is not significant when both parental effects and religious engagement are included in the same model. All other religious traditions showed no difference. The socioeconomic control of mother having a college degree showed no significant effects. Belonging to a biologically intact two-parent family as a teenager decreased the odds for a generally negative perception of organized religion, but its effect was reduced to non-significant when considering parental effects. Age, having attended college, and having ever been married showed no effect. Having children decreased the odds of having a generally negative perception of organized religion.

Results of this analysis on emerging adults feeling “turned off” by organized religion supported H2 and H3. All three parental effects, including parental religiosity, closeness to mother and closeness to father, reduced odds for negative perceptions. All three measures of youth religiosity, service attendance, religious salience, and frequency of prayer, also reduced odds for negative perceptions. When youth religiosity and parental religiosity are included in the same model, parental religion and closeness to mother are no longer significant. However, the effects of closeness to father and all youth religiosity measures persist. Closeness to father reduces odds by ten percent, service attendance by nine percent, religious salience by 25 percent, and prayer frequency by seven percent.

Table 2.2 displays the results of the next series of models, examining the characteristics of emerging adults who are likely to view mainstream religion as irrelevant to people in their age group. A significant minority (43 percent) of the sample expressed this view. Females were less likely to view religion as irrelevant

Table 2.1
*Odds Ratio from Logistic Regression Models Predicting
 Feeling "Turned Off" by Organized Religion*

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	0.357		0.132		1.157	
<i>Wave 1 Controls</i>						
Female	-0.526***	0.591	-0.361***	0.697	-0.404***	0.667
Lived in Northeast ^a	0.333*	1.396	0.190		0.184	
Lived in Midwest ^a	0.198		0.145		0.125	
Lived in West ^a	0.678***	1.970	0.664***	1.942	0.637***	1.891
<i>Race/Ethnicity^b</i>						
Black	-0.602***	0.548	-0.567***	0.567	-0.557***	0.573
Hispanic	-0.216***	0.806	-0.201**	0.818	-0.209**	0.811
Asian	-0.364		-0.487		-0.494	
Other/Indeterminable	0.126		0.177		0.131	
<i>Religious Tradition^c</i>						
Mainline Protestant	0.455**	1.576	0.367*	1.444	0.320	
Black Protestant	0.534		0.447		0.412	
Catholic	0.074		-0.107		-0.113	
Jewish	0.557		0.238		0.166	
Other Religion	-0.054		-0.120		-0.168	
None	0.825***	2.281	0.202		0.159	
Mother had college degree	-0.012		-0.008		-0.014	
Biologically intact family	0.037		-0.315**	0.730	-0.065	
<i>Wave 3 Controls</i>						
Age	0.033		0.042		0.027	
Ever attended college	0.130		0.172		0.208	
Ever married	-0.144		-0.083		-0.041	
Has child living in household	-0.847***	0.429	-0.859***	0.424	-0.884***	0.413
<i>Parental Socialization (W1)</i>						
Parental religion	-0.100***	0.905			-0.025	
Closeness to mother	-0.124**	0.883			-0.073	
Closeness to father	-0.141***	0.869			-0.113**	0.894
<i>Religiosity (W1)</i>						
Service attendance			-0.105***	0.900	-0.090**	0.914
Religious salience			-0.304***	0.738	-0.283***	0.754
Prayer frequency			-0.078*	0.925	-0.068*	0.934
Model Fit (Pseudo R-square)	0.17		0.20		0.21	
N	2170		2179		2166	

Source: National Youth and Religion Survey

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is lived in South.

^bContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^cContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

Table 2.2
*Odds Ratio from Logistic Regression Models Predicting
Viewing Mainstream Religion as Irrelevant*

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	1.313		1.875		1.743	
<i>Wave 1 Controls</i>						
Female	-0.215*	0.807	-0.129		-0.126	
Lived in Northeast ^a	-0.023		-0.099		-0.107	
Lived in Midwest ^a	-0.193		-0.224		-0.227	
Lived in West ^a	-0.058		-0.069		-0.075	
<i>Race/Ethnicity^b</i>						
Black	-0.380***	0.684	-0.346**	0.708	-0.345**	0.708
Hispanic	0.044		0.046		0.048	
Asian	-0.239		-0.310		-0.296	
Other/Indeterminable	0.381		0.422		0.427	
<i>Religious Tradition^c</i>						
Mainline Protestant	0.198		0.111		0.117	
Black Protestant	0.762**	2.143	0.674**	1.963	0.679**	1.972
Catholic	0.210		0.124		0.117	
Jewish	0.703		0.532		0.482	
Other Religion	-0.113		-0.193		-0.184	
None	0.344		0.017		-0.004	
Mother had college degree	0.001		0.011		-0.005	
Biologically intact family	-0.376***	0.687	-0.400***	0.670	-0.425***	0.654
<i>Wave 3 Controls</i>						
Age	-0.033		-0.040		-0.036	
Ever attended college	-0.420***	0.657	-0.391***	0.677	-0.405***	0.667
Ever married	-0.341		-0.303		-0.313	
Has child living in household	0.220		0.222		0.215	
<i>Parental Socialization (W1)</i>						
Parental religion	-0.041*	0.960			-0.007	
Closeness to mother	-0.001				0.022	
Closeness to father	-0.001				0.011	
<i>Religiosity (W1)</i>						
Service attendance			-0.028		-0.027	
Religious salience			-0.078		-0.084	
Prayer frequency			-0.095**	0.910	-0.093**	0.911
Model Fit (Pseudo R-square)	0.06		0.08		0.08	
N	2147		2155		2142	

Source: National Youth and Religion Survey

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is lived in South.

^bContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^cContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

but only when youth religiosity was not included in the model. Black emerging adults, those who belonged to a biologically-intact two parent family during their teenage years, and those who ever attended college were less likely to view religion as irrelevant, while Black Protestants were more likely. This analysis offered only meager support for hypotheses 1 and 3. Parental religion decreased odds for viewing mainstream religion as irrelevant but only when youth religiosity was not considered. Closeness to mother and closeness to father showed no significant effect on this perception. Service attendance and religious salience showed no significant effect on this perception. Prayer frequency during adolescence, however, reduced likelihood for viewing religion as irrelevant by nine percent and this effect remained steady even when accounting for parental effects.

The third analysis, presented in Table 2.3, examined the characteristics of emerging adults who tend to believe that congregational participation is not absolutely necessary to being religious. Three-quarters of the sample believed this to be true. Asians were less likely to believe this, but only when not including parental effects. Mainline Protestants and Catholics were more likely to view congregations as unnecessary for one's religion, as were religious "nones", but only when not considering religious engagement during youth. Teenagers in a biologically intact two-parent family were more likely to grow up to be emerging adults who believe congregations to be necessary. Those who had attended college were less likely to view religious congregations as unnecessary, but only when youth religious engagement and parental effects were not included in the same model. Evidence from this analysis supports H1 and H3, but does not support H2.

Parental religion appears to reduce an emerging adult's propensity for viewing mainstream religion to be irrelevant, but closeness to mother and closeness to father appears to have no effect. Religious service attendance and religious salience reduce odds for the same perception, but prayer frequency appears to make no difference. In a model including both adolescent religious engagement and parental effects, service attendance, religious salience and parental religion appeared to decrease likelihood of believing religious congregations to be unnecessary by nine percent, 28 percent, and 16 percent, respectively.

A final analysis in Table 2.4 examined emerging adults who have negative feelings about the religious tradition they were raised in. About 17 percent of the sample had negative perceptions of their childhood religious tradition. Hispanics were less likely to have negative feelings about the religious tradition in which they were raised. Those raised in a religious tradition categorized as "Other Religion" were more likely. Catholics were also more likely, but only when adolescent religious engagement was not accounted for. Those who were raised in biologically intact two-parent families were less likely to have negative feelings about their childhood religious tradition. When isolated from youth religiosity, parental religion decreased odds ten percent and closeness to mother decreased odds for negative feelings 13 percent. However, when combined with teenager's religiosity, no parental effects appear to be significant, offering no support for H1 and H2. Conversely, evidence from this analysis supports H3. When isolated from parental effects, youth service attendance and religious salience decreased the likelihood for negative feelings during emerging adulthood. Even when including parental effects

Table 2.3
*Odds Ratio from Logistic Regression Models Predicting
Viewing Congregation Involvement as Unnecessary to be Truly Religious*

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	2.988		3.223		3.745	
<i>Wave 1 Controls</i>						
Female	0.067		0.211		0.185	
Lived in Northeast ^a	0.243		0.058		0.099	
Lived in Midwest ^a	0.025		-0.028		-0.029	
Lived in West ^a	-0.150		-0.178		-0.183	
<i>Race/Ethnicity^b</i>						
Black	0.067		-0.026		0.064	
Hispanic	-0.047		-0.068		-0.049	
Asian	-0.505		-0.795*	0.452	-0.644	
Other/Indeterminable	0.436		0.324		0.343	
<i>Religious Tradition^c</i>						
Mainline Protestant	0.877***	2.404	0.893***	2.441	0.795***	2.215
Black Protestant	-0.062		-0.050		-0.107	
Catholic	0.528***	1.696	0.440**	1.553	0.361*	1.435
Jewish	0.213		0.148		-0.139	
Other Religion	-0.054		-0.148		-0.104	
None	0.812**	2.252	0.430		0.130	
Mother had college degree	0.108		0.059		0.115	
Biologically intact family	-0.300*	0.741	-0.408***	0.665	-0.398**	0.672
<i>Wave 3 Controls</i>						
Age	0.031		0.011		0.025	
Ever attended college	-0.333*	0.717	-0.269*	0.764	-0.241	
Ever married	-0.349		-0.314		-0.301	
Has child living in household	0.160		0.131		0.125	
<i>Parental Socialization (W1)</i>						
Parental religion	-0.251***	0.778			-0.178***	0.837
Closeness to mother	-0.009				0.052	
Closeness to father	-0.004				0.028	
<i>Religiosity (W1)</i>						
Service attendance			-0.172***	0.842	-0.093*	0.912
Religious salience			-0.369***	0.692	-0.327***	0.721
Prayer frequency			-0.034		-0.027	
Model Fit (Pseudo R-square)	0.17		0.18		0.20	
N	2183		2192		2179	

Source: National Youth and Religion Survey

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is lived in South.

^bContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^cContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

Table 2.4
*Odds Ratio from Logistic Regression Models Predicting
 Negative Feelings about Childhood Religious Tradition*

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	1.708		1.771		2.590	
<i>Wave 1 Controls</i>						
Female	-0.098		0.017		0.002	
Lived in Northeast ^a	0.082		-0.101		-0.078	
Lived in Midwest ^a	0.225		0.151		0.154	
Lived in West ^a	-0.106		-0.168		-0.175	
<i>Race/Ethnicity^b</i>						
Black	-0.268		-0.287		-0.253	
Hispanic	-0.147*	0.863	-0.164*	0.849	-0.154*	0.857
Asian	-0.387		-0.513		-0.490	
Other/Indeterminable	-0.096		-0.135		-0.130	
<i>Religious Tradition^c</i>						
Mainline Protestant	0.261		0.173		0.133	
Black Protestant	-0.283		-0.307		-0.333	
Catholic	0.434**	1.543	0.302		0.294	
Jewish	-0.040		-0.369		-0.372	
Other Religion	0.599*	1.821	0.542*	1.719	0.530*	1.699
Mother had college degree	0.154		0.142		0.162	
Biologically intact family	-0.404**	0.668	-0.605**	0.546	-0.501**	0.606
<i>Wave 3 Controls</i>						
Age	-0.063		-0.068		-0.075	
Ever attended college	0.122		0.200		0.208	
Ever married	-0.199		-0.150		-0.131	
Has child living in household	-0.363		-0.352		-0.377	
<i>Parental Socialization (W1)</i>						
Parental religion	-0.108***	0.898			-0.041	
Closeness to mother	-0.139**	0.871			-0.098	
Closeness to father	-0.052				-0.025	
<i>Religiosity (W1)</i>						
Service attendance			-0.089*	0.915	-0.069	
Religious salience			-0.373***	0.689	-0.342***	0.710
Prayer frequency			-0.013		-0.009	
Model Fit (Pseudo R-square)	0.09		0.11		0.12	
N	1926		1932		1923	

Source: National Youth and Religion Survey

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is lived in South.

^bContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^cContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

the effect of adolescent's religious salience persists. Each measure of adolescent religious salience reduces the odds of having negative feelings about the religious tradition he or she was raised in by nearly 30 percent.

Discussion

The perceptions emerging adults have of organized religion appear to be influenced by religious socialization during youth through parental effects and religious engagement, offering support for the three hypotheses of this study. Four different negative perceptions were studied. The first perception addresses negative attitudes about organized religion in general, examining those who feel "turned off" by organized religion. The second perception viewed mainstream religion as irrelevant to people their age, the third perception viewed congregations as not necessary for someone to truly be religious, and finally the last perception examined was negative feelings about one's specific religious tradition in which he or she grew up.

Multivariate analyses offer some support for H1, little support for H2, and substantial support for H3. While parental closeness shows little effect, parental religion initially appeared to have an effect on all outcomes. However, religious engagement during youth appears to have a stronger effect, often rendering the effects of controls and parental socialization to non-significant. Service attendance and prayer frequency both showed effects on two negative perceptions, but the measure of religious socialization that seemed to outshine the rest was religious salience. Religious salience also is important in predicting liberalization among emerging adults (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). The value a teenager puts on his or her

faith, even though it is subjective, appears to be highly predictive of attitudes held by emerging adults later on in life.

Youth religiosity showing stronger and more consistent effects than parental religiosity and closeness is consistent with previous research on religious liberalization of emerging adults (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). This may indicate that parents have a more indirect effect on their children through religious socialization, rather than a direct effect, at least in the area of perceptions of organized religion. The results of this study suggest that the perceptions learned from religious socialization are created through processes of religious internalization rather than religious modeling. In other words, emerging adults are not simply imitating or repeating learned behavior from their parents, but the way emerging adults view organized religion more so originates from their own personal religious engagement, both public and privately.

One control measure that appears to play a very important role in predicting emerging adults' perceptions of organized religion is belonging to a biologically intact two-parent family during adolescence. Results pointing to the significance of family structure are consistent with previous research. Emerging adults from divorced families are significantly less likely to identify themselves as "religious" and they constitute the majority (62%) of the "spiritual but not religious" category (Zhai et al., 2008). Adults from single-parent families are more likely to disaffiliate from religion altogether, more likely to make a major switch in their religious affiliation, and less likely to attend religious services regularly. However, family structure effects are reduced or eliminated when parental religiosity is considered

(Uecker and Ellison, 2012). As previously discussed, other studies also suggest that both parental religiosity and family structure significantly affect emerging adulthood religiosity, but parental religiosity shows a stronger effect than family structure (Petts, 2009). In the present study, however, family structure effects persist even when considering parental religiosity. In fact, family structure appears to play a more consistent role in the perceptions of organized religion, compared to parental religiosity or parental closeness. Belonging to a two-parent, biologically intact family may have this effect on perceptions of organized religion, as well as other measures of religiosity, due to the stability and potentially more consistent religious messages offered by intact families.

While not as strong as belonging to an intact family, race and ethnicity also appeared to play an important role in predicting perceptions of organized religion. Black emerging adults and Hispanic emerging adults were both less likely than white emerging adults to report being turned off by organized religion. Black emerging adults were also less likely to view organized religion as irrelevant and Hispanic emerging adults were less likely to show discontentment with their childhood religious traditions. Very little attention is paid to ethnic variations in emerging adult religiosity, but the little research that does exist shows ethnic minorities' religious engagement taking a lesser hit during emerging adulthood compared to their white peers. NSYR data reveal that the small minority group (6.9 percent) that actually increases their religious engagement during emerging adulthood is disproportionately made up of African Americans and Hispanics (Smith & Snell, 2009). Compared to non-Hispanic Catholics, a much larger percent of

Hispanic Catholics ages 21-45 highly value church teachings, read their Bibles, believe the Bible to free of error, and are Biblical literalists (Wuthnow, 2007). Compared to white emerging adults, Hispanics are less likely to lose belief in a personal God during emerging adulthood (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). Black emerging adults are less likely to show liberalization on a number of measures including no longer believing in miracles, no longer believing in converting others, and reporting stronger identification with “spiritual, but not religious.” They are also less likely to decline in religious exclusivism and less likely to begin believing it is okay to pick and choose religious beliefs (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). Race and ethnicity showing important differences in religious engagement during emerging adulthood is a common theme that will appear again in Chapters Three and Four of this study, calling for more attention to be paid to ethnic variations during emerging adulthood.

This study complements previous research indicating that weak religious socialization is potentially the strongest culprit of religious decline during emerging adulthood. It is evident that religious socialization has lasting effects on youth transitioning into adulthood. Consistent with previous research, religious socialization often appears to be a more powerful predictor than life course effects (see Uecker et al., 2007 and Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). After accounting for adolescent personal religiosity and parental effects, higher education effects only appear to be significant in one model. Attending college actually reduces likelihood for believing that mainstream religion is irrelevant, which provides more evidence to support previous arguments that address the misconception that higher education liberalizes or secularizes students.

Also consistent with previous research, marriage and children did not appear to be highly associated with perceptions of organized religion. Between these two measures, only having children was associated with any of the perceptions. That is, having children reduced odds for feeling turned off by organized religion. This association potentially supports Uecker et al.'s (2007) speculation that emerging adults may feel "out of place in, or turned off by, religious communities that focus heavily on children and parents, to the exclusion of single and/or childless young adults" (1686). Emerging adults who have children may feel less alienated from religious organizations targeting families. If this speculation is true, a potential reason for the decline in religious participation during emerging adulthood could be that they feel left out from family-focused programs. This speculation is further examined in Chapter Four.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing evidence indicating religious socialization to be a strong contender in predicting religious attitudes, beliefs and behaviors during emerging adulthood. Parental effects and personal religiosity during adolescence both impacted perceptions of organized religion later in life during the transition to adulthood, with youth religious salience and belonging to a biologically intact family showing the strongest effects. Youth service attendance, prayer frequency, and race and ethnicity also appear to play important roles in predicting emerging adults' perceptions of organized religion, showing significant effects on two of the four perceptions included in the study.

One limitation of this study is that peer effects are not included, as this variable for Wave 1 is not publicly available. In addition to parental effects and a teenager's religious behavior, socialization through peers also plays an important role in one's religious commitment during emerging adulthood. Adolescents belonging to dense religious peer networks are expected to also demonstrate high religious engagement and those peer effects likely go beyond adolescence to influence individuals even during their transition to adulthood (see Uecker, 2009, Adamczyk, 2009, and Gunnoe & Moore, 2002). To further contribute to the conversation of religious socialization, peer effects during youth should be examined as potentially impacting religious perceptions of emerging adults.

Additionally, future research could examine how perceptions of organized religion are associated with their religious participation. It is expected that negative perceptions are associated with low participation. However, it cannot be assumed that low participation or a decline in attendance is the result of negative perceptions. Popular Christian literature, as briefly mentioned earlier, often assumes that emerging adults are not showing up on Sundays because they are disgruntled with organized religion. However, emerging adults who feel turned off by religion or have a negative perception of the religious tradition in which they were raised are a minority, not the majority. A study on how perceptions affect attendance may contribute to the conversation of why emerging adults experience a religious decline, but this study does not assume that negative perceptions of organized religions is a primary cause for religious decline during emerging adulthood. Negative perceptions potentially are related to decline, but because it

would be impossible to draw a cause and effect relationship between negative perceptions and decline, the more important question is likely to be the question that this study addresses: What are the sources of the negative perceptions? Future research could expand on this question by including peers, as previously mentioned, as well as other socialization agents and experiences such as religious experiences, mission trips, and relationships with religious adults besides parents.

Religious socialization occurring in a teenager's home or religious congregation not only affects religious behavior later in life, but it also affects the value an emerging adult places on organized religion. Religious leaders would benefit from continuing to improve their programs that target families, children, and youth, as evidence points to the notion that important processes of religious internalization are occurring in teenagers when they attend worship services, express personal religiosity, and belong to a family that contributes to an environment conducive to religious growth. However, religious socialization does not stop when a teenager turns 18. The next chapter will explore how congregations can successfully extend their reach beyond children and families to catch a population that is difficult to reach, but is ripe for religious socialization and growth.

CHAPTER THREE

Engaging Souls in Transition: How Congregations Attract Emerging Adults

Introduction

Substantial research has addressed the religious decline among emerging adults from a micro-level perspective. Trends in attitudes and beliefs toward religion have been deeply explored and many argue that religious participation among emerging adults is extremely predictable, particularly by religious socialization occurring during youth (Smith & Snell, 2009). What has not been addressed, however, is how organizations can overcome barriers to attract the population of emerging adults. The emerging adult population is not completely secularized and some congregations have been very successful in attracting emerging adults. For many emerging adults, congregations are centerpieces to their social lives and to their maturation. Congregations can provide a steady foundation of guidance, support, and security during a developmental season that is often otherwise characterized by instability (Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006). However, congregational research has invested very little in the examination of the relationship between congregational life and its effects on the development of its younger members (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004).

The purpose of this chapter is to address the large gap in literature about the religious decline among emerging adults, recognizing the disconnect between religious salience and religious participation among emerging adults. It may be true

that individual characteristics of emerging adults are the culprits for religious waning, but that does not mean that religious organizations play no role in the religious decisions of emerging adults. Given that service attendance during emerging adulthood suffers much greater than other measures of religiosity (Uecker et al., 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009), examining the phenomena from an organizational standpoint would be an important contribution to the analysis of emerging adult religious decline. This study seeks to use the existing literature to build an analysis that brings forth answers about what characteristics of a congregation are associated with success in attracting emerging adults.

Characteristics of an Emerging Adult Friendly Congregation

Congregations that successfully engage young adults are greatly diverse from each other. They vary considerably in terms of size, date founded, budget and theological approach (Belzer et al., 2007). These findings are echoed in a quantitative study by Wuthnow (2007) and in United States Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) data (Hackett, 2008). Youthful congregations do not substantially differ from older congregations, except in some aspects of worship that could be attributed to the larger percent of youthful congregations that are evangelical (Wuthnow, 2007). Young adults can be found in any size of congregation and no size of congregation is more likely to have young adults than another. Some differences that do appear is youthful congregations tend to be founded more recently, located in metropolitan areas where young adults live, and are more racially and ethnically mixed (Wuthnow, 2007). Additionally, evidence points to young adults seeking out a worship service that “feels” like a worship service, rather than a service that is more

seeker-friendly that may feel more like a concert, a football game, or a social gathering, for example (Wuthnow, 2007). They seek to be participants, not just audience members (Belzer et al., 2007). As previously mentioned, youthful congregations are disproportionately evangelical. This could be attributed to a number of factors including their success at retaining young people as they transition to emerging adulthood, their tendency to be more innovative and seeker friendly over being traditional and ritualistic, their success in adapting to diversity, and their success in acquiring converts from other religious traditions, particularly Catholics (Wuthnow, 2007).

Research examining the characteristics of congregations that successfully engage emerging adults exists, but it is limited in three ways. The first limitation of congregational research on emerging adulthood is that it lacks strong statistical evidence to support its speculations. Existing research tends to be more qualitative and sometimes make overarching conclusions that may or may not actually be representative of the American emerging adult population. Second, existing research focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on the worship service. It has hardly addressed the congregation as a community or recognized all the goods or benefits congregations offer outside of the worship service itself. Finally, existing research examines the age group as part of a much larger age cohort called “young adult”. This category is difficult to pin down because the definition of “young adult” is very fluid. For example, Wuthnow (2007), who has arguably contributed the most to congregational studies focusing on young members, defines young adults as 18-45. However, due to limitations of the data, he examines “youthful congregations”,

which he defines as congregations in which at least 35% are ages 18-35. However, due to life course factors such as marriage, having children, education, and even psychological and emotional development, it is difficult to develop specific trends among emerging adults when they are combined with their older peers in their 30's who are more likely to have reached what society has deemed as traditional adulthood. In other words, assumptions can be made about emerging adults based on young adult research, but it is important to recognize that the study of emerging adults is a different animal than the study of young adults because emerging adulthood is often characterized by much more instability, mobility, transition, and continuous development.

Competition for Emerging Adults

The worship service is not the only religious good congregations offer to their communities. Recognizing this may be the first step a congregation takes in engaging emerging adults. Religion has a lot to compete with during emerging adulthood and congregations will need to be strategic about staying competitive if they are interested in attracting this age cohort that is well aware of the myriad of options they are afforded. In Chapter 1, the relationship between normative deviance and cognitive dissonance are discussed as possible culprits for religious waning during emerging adulthood (see Uecker et al., 2007). Can religion compete with deviant behaviors during a unique time in one's life when deviance is viewed positively, or at least acceptable, among peers? Even if an emerging adult chooses not to engage in normative deviance, does he or she have any reason to prioritize service attendance when other priorities seem to be much more competitive?

Just like any other organization, religious organizations must compete for their consumers. This is further explained by religious economies theory. Simply put, the premise for religious economies theory is that religious organizations are strong when they provide benefits that are equal to what the members are required to “pay” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). Benefits to be paid out to the religious consumer include rewards and compensators. Rewards include earthly rewards such as church membership or participation in activities and clubs. Compensators are nontemporal rewards such as religious doctrines and religious experiences (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). Religious consumers pay for rewards and compensators with resources such as time, money, and often the sacrifice of anti-religious behavior. The perceived value of the payoff and the size of the investment are in the eye of the beholder. For example, the cost of being religious is perceived to be higher during the transitional phase of emerging adulthood compared to adulthood after age 24. Emerging adults feel they have a lot more to sacrifice and a lot more to overcome to be religious compared to their older counterparts. Additionally, they may not have as much support to stay engaged as their older counterparts do (Smith & Snell, 2009).

While it may take great intentional effort, religion can offer rewards and compensators that contend with the temptations of emerging adulthood. Existing research has only scratched the surface of knowing what characteristics of a congregation attract emerging adults. Existing research, as previously mentioned, is primarily limited to belief systems and features of the worship service.

Roehlkepartain & Patel (2006), however, argue that congregations are not simply

providers of services. Instead, they should be seen as dynamic environments promoting a culture of development. Whitney and King (2014) write, “We may understand religious congregations and communities as multifaceted ecologies where religious development is influenced by a network of relationships, rituals, and expectations over time” (141).

This study goes beyond examination of the belief systems and worship services of congregations and focuses more on participation and experiences offered by the religious community. While little research directly addresses what rewards and compensators will attract emerging adults, it has been suggested that offering opportunities for service activities and social engagement will give congregations an advantage in attracting emerging adults by providing them an effective platform to nurture their identity formation in a religious context (Whitney & King, 2014; Wuthnow, 2007). This platform for identity formation may appeal to emerging adults during a season that is often marked with ambiguous transition (emerging adults often do not feel comfortable labeling themselves as either adolescents or adults), exploration, experimentation and instability (Arnett, 2004; Settersten et al., 2008). This study will focus on the rewards and compensators congregations can offer emerging adults, focusing on service activities and social engagement.

Service Activities

Across faiths, emerging adults are interested in how their faith overlaps with their daily lives. They are looking for relevance in their religions. They seek out congregations that encourage questioning, offer honest discussion, and provide

experiential opportunities that challenge their members to take deeper and more personal ownership of their faith (Belzer et al., 2007). For the purpose of this study focusing on religious participation and experiences, I will be focusing on those experiential opportunities, including any kind of involvement, participation, or investment of personal resources through opportunities of service offered by the congregation.

The offering of service opportunities could be an important strategy for engaging emerging adults for a number of reasons, including its relationship with a congregation's ideological context. Emerging adults seek to make sense of the world and to find their place of belonging in it. The ideological context that congregations provide, including their beliefs, worldview, and values, can support emerging adults in developing a sense of meaning, order and place in the world, which is critical to identity formation within the religious context (Erikson, 1968; King, 2003). For religious emerging adults, congregations can provide opportunities for stability, the clarification of their own beliefs and a greater understanding of their identity (Whitney & King, 2014). Their ideological context also creates a structure to help emerging adults develop and internalize beliefs, values and morals. Congregations that intentionally offer a strong, consistent and well-communicated ideological framework can help emerging adults to make sense of the different religious, moral and ethical value systems that compete for their attention (Whitney & King, 2014). This study focuses on the service activities of the congregation that are closely anchored to emerging adults' ideology. Such activities are not only rooted in a

congregation's ideology, but they also serve to strengthen the attenders' ownership of the congregation's ideology.

Community service within the religious context, for example, provides meaningful life experiences that create opportunities for reflection and contributes to emerging adults' identity formation and development (Whitney & King, 2014). International mission trip opportunities and local community service have been suggested to be an underutilized strategy to engage emerging adults (Wuthnow, 2007). Not only will they be attractive to emerging adults seeking to develop and strengthen their social circles, all while enjoying new experiences, but these service activities are also likely to help retain emerging adults. While research on mission trips is limited, short-term mission trips appear to have transformative effects on youth and young adults in a number of ways (see Beyerlein et al., 2011). Short term mission trips also bolster religious beliefs and commitment. After participating in a mission trips young people tend to increase service attendance, private Bible reading, and private prayer (Trinitapoli & Vaisey, 2009). Participants of mission trips are less likely to report they are unsure about their belief in God and less likely to view God as an impersonal force. Going on a mission trips also increases feelings of closeness to God (Trinitapoli & Vaisey, 2009). Finally, short term mission trips tend to lead to increased evangelizing (Trinitapoli & Vaisey, 2009), so emerging adults engaged in such mission trips may return home, excited to share their faith with their peers, attracting even more members of their age cohort. Based on evidence suggesting the positive implications of service activities offered by a congregation, the first expectation of this study is:

H1: Congregations offering opportunities for their attenders to serve locally or in other locations will be more successful in attracting emerging adults.

Social Engagement

Religion is often thought to have a competitive advantage in creating friendships among individuals (Smith, 1998), which is a function emerging adults highly value. Religious organizations are uniquely equipped to create a breeding ground for close friendships and deep emotions of belonging. Given that emerging adults place a high value on the quality and quantity of their social relationships, this unique advantage of offering a strong social network may be one of the most desirable rewards religious organizations has to offer. Emerging adults appear to be less concerned about size of congregation and more concerned about finding a community in which they feel they belong (Wuthnow, 2007). Relationship building and connections with others who are also exploring their religious identities are fundamental aspects of emerging adults' congregational experiences (Belzer et al., 2007).

“Young adults' interests in religion are multifaceted. For some their deep sense of belonging comes from being a part of a community. They want to connect with others who are also articulating a sense of self. Some young adults desire emotional support and guidance. Some wanted their religious groups to be a place where they can develop their professional and social networks” (Belzer et al., 2007: 120).

During emerging adulthood, finding friendships within their religious communities not only satisfies their desire to expand their social circles, but congregational friendships are also important to solidifying a person's religious identity (Wuthnow, 2007). Congregations often offer opportunities for young members to connect with peers and develop relationships with their older peers as

well. This social component encourages young people to imitate the life or behavior of religious adults they admire (King 2003). Congregations provide a social context characterized by interactive, trustworthy relationships in which goals, beliefs and values are modeled for the young members. This support structure provides a safe place for young people to explore their identity and creates a culture in which they internalize the belief and value system that is modeled for them (King 2003).

Quantitative research supports the theoretical assumptions regarding the important effects strong social support has on the retention of religious service attenders. Social embeddedness, often measured by congregational friendships and reported feelings of belonging, is a powerful and consistent predictor of religious commitment to one's congregation and religious beliefs (Stroope, 2012). The more an individual's friendships come from his or her congregation, the more an individual will attend services, participate in religious activities, contribute money and other resources, and continue their membership in the congregation (see Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009 & Stroope, 2012). Those who do not have friends in the congregation are more likely to exit and even if they do stay, they are less likely to be engaged in the congregation compared to those who have close friends in the congregation (see Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009). Theoretical arguments about emerging adults and congregations and empirical evidence on social embeddedness suggest:

H2: Congregations offering a strong social context will be more successful in attracting emerging adults.

Data

Data used are from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) Wave II conducted in 2008/2009. A total of 256 congregations recruited by Harris Interactive returned worshiper surveys. For this study, 241 congregations are used, while 15 are omitted due to incomplete surveys. This report will draw upon the data from a Congregational Profile describing the congregation's facilities, staff, programs, and worship services completed by one person in the congregation. This report will also draw upon the data collected by attendee surveys completed by all respondents age 18 and older who attended worship services during the weekend of the collection of data. First-time attenders were excluded from the analyses.

Dependent Variable

This study will be measuring how well a congregation attracts emerging adults with a congregation's proportion of emerging adults ages 18-24 serving as the dependent variable. This variable is created by aggregating data from the attendee surveys. A high proportion of emerging adults will indicate that the congregation has characteristics that attract this cohort.

Independent Variables

There are two groups of independent variables measuring congregation-level characteristics that are hypothesized to affect how well a congregation attracts emerging adults. The first group consists of three dichotomous variables measuring: 1) whether or not the congregation offered emergency relief or material assistance (free meals, food, clothes for the needy) to members of the congregation or people

in the community; 2) whether or not the congregation sent people or groups to provide assistance to people in need in another part of the United States; 3) whether or not the congregation sent people or groups to provide assistance to people in need in another country.

The second group of independent variables measures the social engagement of the congregation. The first variable in this group examines small group participation. A dichotomous variable measures whether or not the respondent is regularly participating in a prayer, discussion or a Bible study group (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2010). The second independent variable in this category is proportion of congregation with close congregational friendships. Following prior work (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Stroope, 2012; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; Stroope & Baker, 2014), this variable will be measured based on a question asking individuals about friendships in their congregations. Possible answers were: 1) I have little contact with others from this congregation outside of activities here, 2) I have some friends in this congregation, but my closest friends are not involved here, 3) I have some close friends here as well as other close friends who are not part of this congregation and 4) Most of my closest friends are part of this congregation. A dichotomous variable measuring individual-level network embeddedness is created in which 1= “some close friends” or “most of closest friends” are in respondent’s congregation. All other responses were coded as 0.

For the last variable measuring social context, subjective sense of belonging is measured from the question: “Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?” Possible answers were: “Yes, a strong sense of belonging that is

growing”; “Yes, a strong sense- about the same as last year”; “Yes, but perhaps not as strong as in the past year”; “No, but I am new here”; “No, and I wish I did by now”; “No, but I am happy as I am”; and “Do not know or not applicable”. Following the work of Martinez and Dougherty (2013), a dichotomous variable is used where 1=those who have a strong sense of belonging that is consistent with or growing from how they felt the previous year and 0=all other responses. All three variables measuring social context will be aggregated to create congregation-level variables measuring proportion involved in a small group, proportion with close friends in the congregation, and proportion feeling a strong sense of belonging.

Controls

Control variables at the congregation level will also be included in each model. I control for year the congregation was founded, congregation size (measured by the average weekly attendance and log transformed to create a normal distribution), and region with South being the reference category. Contemporary music is controlled for using a scale ($\alpha=0.74$) including the use of an electric guitar, the use of drums, and reporting the offering of “other contemporary music” (as opposed to “contemporary hymns”). Additionally, ethnic diversity is included in each model using a general heterogeneity index developed by Emerson & Woo (2006). Education of a congregation is controlled for by first creating a dichotomous variable from attender data in which 1=graduated with a bachelor’s degree. This data is aggregated to create a measure representing proportion with a bachelor’s degree in the congregation. Religious affiliation is controlled for following a modified version of the RELTRAD classification with

evangelical Protestant being the reference category (see Steensland et al., 2000). The one Jewish congregation in the sample was categorized as “Other”. Due to their specific denominations being associated with evangelical Protestant beliefs, the two Black Protestant congregations were categorized as evangelical Protestant. US Census data are used to control for county size as congregations have more access to emerging adults in metropolitan areas where there are larger populations of emerging adults (see Wuthnow, 2007). US Census data are also used to control for proportion of county population that is ages 18-24. Table 3.1 reports descriptive statistics for the sample of congregations.

Table 3.1
Descriptive Statistics of Congregations

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Proportion Emerging Adult in a Congregation	0.036	0.039	0	0.346
<i>Congregation Characteristics</i>				
Year founded	1910	58.440	1698	2008
Congregation size	1542.05	2851.17	48.0	27000.0
Contemporary music	0.983	1.141	0	3.0
Ethnic/Racial diversity index	0.135	0.149	0	0.7662787
College educated (mean score)	0.454	0.209	0.063	0.9454545
East	0.240	0.428	0	1.0
Midwest	0.343	0.476	0	1.0
South	0.236	0.425	0	1.0
West	0.182	0.386	0	1.0
<i>Religious Tradition</i>				
Evangelical	0.194	0.396	0	1.0
Mainline	0.574	0.495	0	1.0
Catholic	0.198	0.400	0	1.0
Other Religion	0.033	0.179	0	1.0
<i>Service Opportunities</i>				
US service opportunities	0.525	0.500	0	1.0
International service opportunities	0.355	0.480	0	1.0
Local community service opportunities	0.880	0.325	0	1.0
<i>Social Engagement</i>				
Proportion in small groups	0.257	0.130	0	1.0
Proportion with close friends in congregation	0.744	0.105	0.437	1.0
Proportion with strong sense of belonging	0.770	0.088	0.517	1.0

Source: USCLS 2008/2009

Results

Shown in Table 3.2, a correlation analysis examined the bivariate relationships between a congregation's characteristics and their propensity for attracting emerging adults. The population of county appeared to have no significant association, but being located in counties with a high population of emerging adults gave congregations an advantage in attracting emerging adults. Year founded, congregation size, and region of the country in which the congregation was located showed no effects. This is consistent with other studies that suggest emerging adults can be found in all kinds of congregations, especially in terms of year founded and congregation size (Belzer et al., 2007; Wuthnow, 2007; Hackett, 2008). Consistent with Wuthnow (2007) and Hackett (2008), featuring contemporary music and the evangelical Protestant tradition were both highly associated with increased proportion emerging adult. The mainline Protestant tradition was associated with decreased proportion emerging adult. Catholic and "Other" tradition showed no significant correlation. Consistent with Wuthnow (2007), ethnic diversity showed a positive relationship with proportion emerging adult in a congregation.

The college educated mean score for a congregation had a negative relationship with proportion emerging adult. This is not surprising, as individuals who are 18-24 have a lower likelihood for being college educated simply because they have had less opportunity to graduate from college compared to their older peers. The offering of service opportunities in the United States appeared to have no relationship, but international service opportunities was associated with increased

proportion emerging adult and local service opportunities was associated with decreased proportion emerging adult. Proportion of the congregation in small groups showed no correlation, while proportion with congregational friendships and proportion feeling a strong sense of belonging both had negative relationships with proportion emerging adult. The findings of the correlation analysis are nearly echoed in the OLS regression analyses to be discussed next.

Table 3.2
Correlation Analysis on Proportion Emerging Adult (Ages 18-24) in a Congregation

Variables	Emerging Adult Congregation
Population of county	0.039
Proportion emerging adult in county	0.160*
<i>Congregation Characteristics</i>	
Year founded	0.119
Congregation size	0.098
Contemporary music	0.283***
Ethnic/Racial diversity index	0.025***
College educated (mean score)	-0.177***
East	-0.028
Midwest	-0.002
South	0.005
West	0.028
<i>Religious Tradition</i>	
Evangelical	0.328***
Mainline	-0.311***
Catholic	0.096
Other Religion	-0.087
<i>Service Opportunities</i>	
US service opportunities	-0.042
International service opportunities	0.162*
Local community service opportunities	-0.192**
<i>Social Engagement</i>	
Proportion in small groups	0.064
Proportion with close friends in congregation	-0.143*
Proportion with strong sense of belonging	-0.215**
N (congregations)	227

Source: USCLS 2008/2009

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

Two models using OLS regression were executed to examine each context isolated from the other. A third model examined all contexts in one model and included all control measures. In all three models shown in Table 3.3, proportion emerging adult in county appeared to be consistently positively associated with proportion emerging adult in a congregation. Population of county was non-significant in all three models. In every model, year founded and congregation size were not significantly associated with proportion emerging adult in a congregation. Geographic region of the country in which the congregation was located also showed no effect.

The first model of Table 3.3 included congregational traits measuring the service opportunities of the congregation. Contemporary music and ethnic diversity are associated with increased proportion emerging adult in a congregation in the first model. The model showed no significant association between education of congregation and proportion emerging adult. Evangelical congregations appeared to be more successful in attracting emerging adults compared to mainline Protestant and “Other” religious traditions. In all three models, the difference between evangelical and mainline congregations were significant at the $p < .01$ level. The “Other” category also significantly differed from evangelical congregations, but the difference was not as strong as the one between mainline and evangelical. No significant difference appeared between Catholic and evangelical congregations in any of the models. Opportunities to serve people in need in the United States and in other countries showed no effect. Local community service opportunities actually were negatively correlated with proportion emerging adult in a congregation.

Table 3.3
OLS Regression of Proportion Emerging Adult (Ages 18-24) in a Congregation

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	0.135	0.243	0.252
Population of county	-0.001	-0.002	-0.002
Proportion emerging adult in county	0.016**	0.015**	0.016**
<i>Congregation Characteristics</i>			
Year founded	<-0.001	<-0.001	<-0.001
Congregation size	<-0.001	0.002	0.001
Contemporary music	0.006*	0.006*	0.006*
Ethnic/Racial diversity index	0.040*	0.038†	0.034†
College educated (mean score)	-0.021	-0.031*	-0.027*
East	-0.001	<-0.001	-0.002
Midwest	<-0.001	-0.001	-0.002
West	-0.003	<-0.001	-0.003
<i>Religious Tradition</i>			
Mainline	-0.020**	-0.022**	-0.020**
Catholic	-0.010	-0.015	-0.013
Other religion	-0.032*	-0.029†	-0.030†
<i>Service Opportunities</i>			
US service opportunities	-0.004		-0.004
International service opportunities	0.008		0.008
Local community service opportunities	-0.022**		-0.019*
<i>Social Engagement</i>			
Proportion in small groups		0.011	0.003
Proportion with close friends in congregation		-0.026	-0.027
Proportion with strong sense of belonging		-0.079*	-0.059†
Model Fit (R-squared)	0.27	0.26	0.29
N (congregations)	227	227	227

Source: USCLS 2008/2009

†p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test)

The second model considers the social context of the congregation only. The effect of contemporary music persists. The effect of ethnic diversity also persists, but decreases in significance. In this model, education gains significance, showing a negative association. Compared to the first model, the significant difference between evangelical and mainline remains the same, continuing to show the advantage evangelical Protestants have over mainline Protestants. The difference between evangelical and the “Other” category is still significant, but is less significant compared to the first model. Proportion in a small group and proportion with close friends in a congregation are both not related to proportion emerging adult in a congregation. However, proportion reporting strong feelings of belonging within the congregation is negatively associated with proportion emerging adult. In other words, congregations who exhibit higher levels of the emerging adult population also show lower levels of feelings of belonging within the congregation.

A third model includes both contexts combined. In this model, congregation characteristics including contemporary music, ethnic diversity, college educated and religious tradition appear to show identical effects compared to previous models. Similar to Model 1, service opportunities in the United States and internationally showed no effect on a congregation’s propensity for attracting emerging adults. The negative association between local community service opportunities and proportion emerging adult persisted, but is reduced to from $p < .01$ to $p < .05$. Small group participation and attenders having close friends in the congregation continued to have no effect. Proportion of a congregation reporting a strong sense of belonging

was still negatively associated with having increased levels of emerging adults, but its significance was reduced to $p < .10$.

Discussion

Incorporating research on both emerging adults and on congregations, I expected that opportunities for service and social engagement would increase a congregation's propensity for attracting emerging adults. H1 proposed that congregations that offer service activities would be more successful in attracting emerging adults. While the bivariate analysis showed a relationship between international service opportunities and increased proportion emerging adult, the OLS regression did not support this hypothesis. In fact, offering activities to serve the local communities appears to be negatively associated with the proportion of emerging adults in a congregation. It is unlikely that local community service activities actually deter emerging adults, but apparently they do not attract them either. A more likely explanation for this negative association is that the type of congregation that offers local community service to people in need is not the same kind of congregation that offers activities to attract emerging adults. For whatever reason, the niches of these two kinds of congregations have little to no overlap in the religious market.

H2 expected congregations successful in attracting emerging adults to have high congregation-level social embeddedness in terms of feelings of belonging, close friendships and small group participation. This hypothesis was not supported and instead the opposite was true. In all models, small group participation and close friendships in the congregation was not significantly related to their ability to

attract emerging adults. Close friendships appeared to have a negative relationship with proportion emerging adult in the bivariate analysis, but when including controls there appeared to be no significant relationship. However, congregation-level feelings of belonging was consistently and negatively associated with proportion emerging adult in a congregation. It is unlikely that congregations will be more successful in attracting emerging adults when they ensure their attenders are not getting too comfortable in feeling like they belong in that congregation. Instead, these results probably suggest that emerging adults struggle to find feelings of belonging in their congregation. Congregations that have high populations of emerging adults have low congregation-level feelings of belonging because it appears that emerging adults themselves may find it challenging to feel a sense of belonging in their congregation, especially since congregations tend to target traditional nuclear families. One possible culprit of decreasing service attendance Uecker et al. (2007: 1683) mentions is “organized religion's emphasis on other age groups, namely school-aged youth and parents”. Congregations tend to make families their target niche (Smith & Denton, 2005; Edgell, 2006). This may be because families are more apt to have higher levels of religious participation and are likely to have more finances, time and other resources to contribute to the organization. Additionally, families may be easier to retain than emerging adults who tend to be extremely mobile (Smith & Snell, 2009). Because congregations tend to heavily target families, this may leave emerging adults feeling left out, underserved or undervalued by religious organizations, causing them to have loose ties or no ties to the congregation.

One reason why social embeddedness is so important to consider when discussing the relationship between emerging adults and congregations is because social embeddedness is an important component of retaining attenders. How well one fits in with the target niche is a primary determinant of one's social embeddedness. Being on the edge of the niche will likely decrease one's social embeddedness (Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; McPherson et al., 1992; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995). The niche edge effect argues members on the edge will likely have more social ties outside the organization than they do inside, which in turn makes them less anchored to the organization and more of a flight risk. Because membership retention in any voluntary organization is closely tied to social networks, those on the edge of a niche are much more likely to exit than those within the niche's core (Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; McPherson et al., 1992; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995). Niche specialists that target families would likely have a lower proportion of emerging adults due to their position of being on the edge of the niche. If emerging adults do feel like they are on the edge of the niche, it is possible that they are attracted to congregations with low levels of social embeddedness. This assumption is consistent with previous literature on social embeddedness. Olson (1989) found that churches with dense friendship networks may be less attractive to new members as they struggle to become incorporated into the new group. Current members may be less interested and open to accepting new members in their social networks if they feel they are already at "maximum capacity" for relationships. Stroepe and Baker (2014) found that those with fewer close friends in the congregation actually show stronger sense of belonging when

the rest of their congregation also has few congregational friendships. In other words, increased congregation-level social embeddedness does not always benefit an individual's sense of belonging, but instead it is likely to cause individuals on the fringes to feel excluded. This could mean that emerging adults, given their high mobility, may feel more at home at a congregation where members are still available for new relationships. The relationship between emerging adults' and their social embeddedness in congregations is more deeply explored in the next chapter.

The control measures of this study are worth further discussion, considering a few of them played an important role in predicting a congregation's propensity for attracting emerging adults. First, location does matter. Having access to emerging adults does appear to help congregations attract more emerging adults. This is worth noting because it points to the argument that congregations are not completely disqualified from being competitive against other priorities or activities that emerging adults have to choose from. Areas that have higher concentrations of emerging adults are likely to feature a greater number of activities or groups that emerging adults have the option to engage in, compared to areas that are not as youthful. Even with all of these options, congregations are staying competitive. They are capitalizing on their locations, or at least appear to be, and therefore are more successful in attracting emerging adults compared to congregations in areas that have less access to emerging adults.

Another important control to discuss is religious tradition. The results of this study are consistent with existing research pertaining to emerging adults being concentrated in evangelical congregations. Wuthnow (2007) explains that

evangelical Protestants' success in attracting emerging adults can be attributed to a number of factors. Mainline congregations continue to use traditional programs that are more appealing to older people while evangelical congregations tend to focus their efforts on being innovative and current. Evangelical congregations actively pursue new attenders by moving into areas that are traditionally less "churched" and by intentionally putting a lot of effort into making new attenders feel welcome (Wuthnow, 2007). This is especially effective for potential attenders who are new to the area, which is an important strategy in attracting the mobile group of emerging adults. Furthermore, even though evangelical Protestants highly advocate a traditional view of the family, they are more likely to offer nontraditional programming to target singles, divorced, and other nontraditional family types (Wilcox et al., 2004).

Evangelical congregations have also been more successful in attracting converts (particularly Catholics), attracting ethnic diversity, and adapting to diversity in general (Wuthnow, 2007). All of these wins have contributed to their success in attracting emerging adults. This is likely to explain this study's finding of ethnic diversity in a congregation being tied to success in attracting emerging adults. That is, the same kind of congregation that is successful in attracting ethnic diversity and adapting to diversity is the same kind of congregation that is successful in attracting emerging adults. Moreover, the emerging adult population is ethnically diverse, meaning that any congregation that has a high percentage of emerging adults will naturally also have high ethnic diversity (Wuthnow, 2007).

Evangelical congregations have more emerging adults not only because they do well in attracting them, but they also do very well in retaining their young attenders even as they move forward into emerging adulthood. Evangelical emerging adults experience much less of a decline in service attendance compared to other religious traditions (Smith & Snell, 2009; Uecker et al., 2007). This could possibly be due to the youth socialization being much stronger among evangelical families and/or the exclusive beliefs and strictness among evangelicals. However, Wuthnow (2007) believes that differences in life course factors between evangelicals and mainline Protestants have more to do with evangelical success in retaining emerging adults. Evangelical emerging adults are less likely to move away, whether for college, a job, or any other reason. Mobility is tied to religious waning or conversion, meaning evangelicals' lack of mobility is likely to be a strong contributor of their retention. Additionally, more evangelicals marry and have children in their 20's compared to mainline Protestants, which is also tied to remaining in one's childhood religious tradition (Wuthnow, 2007). The active pursuit of new members, the embracing of diversity and innovation, and the advantage in retention of its young members are all part of a recipe that has allowed evangelical congregations to be more successful in retaining emerging adults.

Finally, there also appears to be an important relationship between contemporary music and attracting emerging adults. It may be tempting to assume that this is an obvious relationship caused by emerging adults' preference for contemporary music. However, the relationship may not be one of cause and effect nature. Wuthnow (2007) found that only 12 percent of adults in their twenties

showed preference for contemporary music, showing the least preference compared to all other age categories. He suggests that worship services of youthful congregations differ from older congregations not due to young adults' preference for a more contemporary service but instead those differences can be attributed to the larger percent of youthful congregations that are evangelical. USCLS data show a stronger preference for contemporary music than reported in Wuthnow's study. A correlation analysis (not shown) concludes that there is a significant positive relationship between emerging adults and preferring "Other contemporary music". However, more emerging adults prefer "praise" music (34.7 percent) and "traditional hymns" (30.9) than they do contemporary music (28.3 percent). Regardless of *how* they are related, this study shows an important relationship between offering contemporary music and attracting emerging adults. In fact, this relationship is so important that it renders the effect of international mission trips non-significant. In an OLS regression that excludes contemporary music as a control (not shown), international mission trips are significantly related ($p < .10$) to increased proportion emerging adult. International service trips appear to be tied to increasing proportion emerging adult in a congregation, but contemporary music has a stronger effect. International service opportunities are still probably part of a recipe that is tied to success in attracting emerging adults, in spite of its lack of significant relationship in a multivariate analysis.

The effect of contemporary music also reduces the effect of religious tradition. Omitting contemporary music shows an even stronger advantage for evangelical Protestants over every other religious tradition. Including contemporary

worship music makes the difference between evangelical and Catholic congregations non-significant and reduces significance for mainline Protestants and “Other”. Again, it cannot be assumed that contemporary music directly leads to increased proportion emerging adult without considering any other variables. For example, it may be that congregations that offer contemporary music are also the same congregations that actively seek out new members or the congregations that adapt to diversity and change more successfully. More research is needed to explore this relationship between contemporary music and increased emerging adult populations.

Conclusion

Using data from a nationally representative sample of congregations and congregants, this study sought to examine characteristics of a congregation that successfully attracts emerging adults. While emerging adults can be found in all kinds of congregations, there is a type of congregation that is more successful in attracting emerging adults. Offering contemporary music, racial and ethnic diversity, being evangelical, and to a lesser degree, offering international service trips, all are part of a recipe that is tied to success in attracting emerging adults. Mainline Protestant congregations and congregations that offer local service activities appear to have a different niche that does not include attracting emerging adults. While the examination of the social context and service opportunities of a congregation did not indicate clear strategies to attract emerging adults, it did start drawing a picture of the kind of congregation that attracts emerging adults.

The study also shed light on the relationship between congregations and emerging adult engagement. Evidence points to a hypothesis that will be further explored in the next chapter: Emerging adults appear to be much less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging compared to their older counterparts. It is even possible that they are more attracted to congregations where many attenders share their same low level of belonging and close friendships. The barrier between emerging adults and congregations deserves much greater attention, but evidence from this study suggests that one strong contender in building this barrier is social embeddedness. Emerging adults have many reasons to not participate in congregations. Having close friends in the congregation or having a strong sense of belonging could make or break an emerging adult's decision to continue to participate in any given congregation. For this reason, it is important to further study the gap that appears to exist between emerging adults and feelings of belonging in their congregations. This study recognizes its limitation in that it may highlight individual-differences rather than group-differences. However, the results from this study still bring forth important areas of potential research and bring us more understanding about the social contexts of congregations and how those contexts play a role in the relationship between congregations and emerging adults.

A great amount of additional data collection is needed to address the question of how congregations have successfully overcome barriers of reaching emerging adults. Wuthnow (2007) contributes a great amount of knowledge to the understanding of the relationship between congregations and young adults 18-45 and the current study echoes similar findings for the more narrow age category of

18-24. However, the Wuthnow study only discusses reasons for evangelical congregations' success based on comparing evangelical congregations to other religious traditions. Likewise, the current study's greatest limitation is that it can only address the segment of the population that is actually attending worship services. While the USCLS is a phenomenal resource and ideal for a study such as this one, because it is a study of congregations, it only surveys attenders. Data from the USCLS, as well as most of the existing research, allow us to see how competitive congregations are against one another. This has a lot of value and certainly tells us information about the relationship between emerging adults and their congregations. However, it would be extremely helpful to know specific strategies congregations have implemented to successfully attract emerging adults, especially those that are new to religion or returning to religion. In other words, how are congregations competing against not one another, but against other groups and activities competing for emerging adults' attention? Or how are congregations competing against possibly even stronger forces of religious opposition like apathy, lack of interest, or discontentment with organized religion? Unfortunately, surveys that include non-attenders do not focus on congregation involvement as deeply as the USCLS, making it difficult to examine these questions with existing quantitative data. More data are needed to address this gap in research. An extended series of case studies examining both successful youthful congregations and congregations that have tried and failed to attract emerging adults would be extremely advantageous in the helping to address this gap.

CHAPTER FOUR

Congregational Belonging and Friendships for Emerging Adults

Introduction

Emerging adults are not looking for salvation in their congregations. They are looking for love. That is the conclusion Richard Flory and Donald Miller (2000) made from field work published in their book *GenX Religion*. While the message is possibly an exaggeration, it does express a desire of religious emerging adults to find a congregation in which they can connect and belong (Wuthnow, 2007). Connecting and belonging are not only subjectively important to emerging adults. Feelings of belonging and congregational friendships have important effects on religious service attenders. The degree to which someone is embedded in a congregation is a powerful and consistent predictor of religious commitment to one's congregation and religious beliefs (Stroope, 2012). The more an individual's friendships come from his or her congregation, the more an individual will attend services, participate in religious activities, contribute money and other resources, and continue their membership in the congregation (see Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009 and Stroope, 2012). Those who do not have friends in the congregation are more likely to exit and even if they do stay, they are less likely to be engaged in the congregation compared to those who have close friends in the congregation (see Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009).

How well do emerging adults “connect” and “belong” in their congregations? This chapter first hypothesizes that emerging adults will be less likely to experience social embeddedness measured by strong feelings of belonging and close friendships in their congregations. I then explore what factors affect emerging adults’ propensity for finding feelings of belonging and friendships in congregations, examining both individual-level and congregation-level characteristics. Having close friends in the congregation, increasing length of attendance, and marriage are all hypothesized to increase an emerging adult’s social embeddedness. Additionally, emerging adults are expected to benefit from congregations with high proportions of emerging adults. However, they are expected to not fare as well in congregations with high network density where members have a number of close congregational friendships and may not be as open or available for new friendships with emerging adults. I test these hypotheses with multilevel modeling and the 2008/2009 United States Congregational Life Survey. Important themes emerge from the analyses that highlight the unique challenges congregations may face when trying to help emerging adults connect and belong.

Congregational Belonging and Friendships during Emerging Adulthood

The previous chapter discussed organizational ecology theory and more specifically, niche edge effect. As explained before, those on the outskirts of a niche are less likely to feel a sense of belonging in the congregation and are likely to have more ties outside the congregation than within. Being on the edge makes them less likely to have stable membership and participation and more likely to leave the congregation (McPherson, Popielarz, & Drobnic, 1992; Popielarz & McPherson,

1995). A substantial amount of evidence has supported this idea as it pertains to racial diversity in congregations. When studying how racial composition of a congregation affects longevity of membership, Scheitle and Dougherty (2010) found that individuals belonging to the majority racial group sustained longer membership than those in minority groups. The differences in membership stability increased according to the size of the numerical majority. However, when a majority group was only 60 percent, the congregation showed stability with there being no significant membership duration differences between minority and majority groups. Martinez and Dougherty (2013) expounded further, examining the mechanisms for belonging and participation according to size of racial group. Compared to members of the majority group, individuals belonging to the minority racial groups were less likely to have a sense of belonging, have close congregational friends, and participate in congregational programs. Feeling less connected and having fewer social ties in the congregation, minority group members are more likely to be at risk for leaving the congregation. Interestingly, increased racial concentration did not have a significant independent effect on an individual's belonging or participation, indicating that homogeneity does not actually benefit belonging or participation. However, a cross-level interaction showed that size of the majority group has a negative effect on individual subjective belonging with that effect being much greater on those belonging to the racial minority. In other words, the degree of racial homogeneity increases the gap in subjective belonging between members of minority and majority groups (Martinez & Dougherty, 2013). Because emerging adults are statistically underrepresented in congregations (Hackett, 2008; Smith &

Snell, 2009), this study expects age groups to also experience similar majority/minority effects. Based on this assumption, I hypothesize:

H1: Those who belong to the minority age group of 18-24 in a congregation will be less likely to experience social embeddedness compared to their older counterparts.

H2: Social embeddedness for emerging adults will increase as their proportion within the congregation increases.

Effects of Friends in Congregation on Feelings of Belonging

The amount of close friends one has in the congregation is an important predictor of subjective individual belonging. Stroope and Baker (2014) found close congregational friendships to be associated with strong feelings of belonging, but the effects of close congregational friendships appear to act differently depending on congregation-level characteristics. They found that a smaller congregation size and high belief unity both increase the effects friendships have on feelings of belonging. Congregational network density, or how many attenders have close friends in the congregation, heightens individual friendship effects on sense of belonging but only when individual-level network characteristics are congruent with that of the congregation (Stroope & Baker, 2014). Individual belonging will actually benefit from low levels of network density in a congregation when the individual also reports fewer close friends in the congregation. Put simply, in terms of belonging, individuals with many close friends in the congregation do better in congregations featuring other members enjoying close friendships. Conversely, attenders with fewer close friends in the congregation do better when their fellow attenders also have fewer friends in the congregation.

Stroope and Baker (2014) explain their finding, “A worshipper will likely sense openness and welcome in a congregation with a preponderance of less socially integrated individuals, a group of people looking for new, weak ties themselves” (p. 15). Someone with few or no close friends in densely networked congregations may “find such churches cliquish because high-tenure members have as many friends as they want or can manage” (Olson, 1989, p. 1). In sum, one’s belonging is not guaranteed to benefit from a congregation featuring attenders with many close congregational friendships, but individual and organizational network characteristics must match to increase feelings of belonging (Stroope & Baker, 2014). This means that if the first hypothesis is accurate in predicting that emerging adults are less likely to feel a sense of belonging than adults 25 and older, then their sense of belonging is likely to suffer even more when they attend congregations featuring greater organizational network density. In other words, when emerging adults attend congregations where everyone else seems to have close friends in the congregation, their likelihood of feeling like they belong will decrease even more. The emerging adult may feel excluded in a congregation in which everyone seems to know each other and have no room in their lives to welcome new friends, especially ones that are in such a different life stage than them. Conversely, they may feel like they belong more in congregations when other attenders are also looking, or at least available, for new friendships. Assuming this is true for emerging adults, it is expected that:

H3: Emerging adults will be more likely to experience a strong sense of belonging in their congregations when they have close friends in their congregations.

H4: Emerging adults will be more likely to experience a strong sense of belonging when they attend congregations in which attenders have fewer close friends in the congregation.

Life Course Effects on Emerging Adults' Social Embeddedness

There could be a number of other possible explanations for emerging adults experiencing a lack of social embeddedness in congregations. It could have less to do with the congregation and more to do with the individual. Life course effects may be especially relevant to how well emerging adults connect and belong. For example, adults tend to return to organized religion after they get married and begin raising families (see Farrell, 2011). Emerging adults who are married are less likely to experience service attendance decline compared to single emerging adults (Uecker et al., 2007). Additionally, regardless of age, married people tend to experience stronger social embeddedness in their congregations than single people (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; Stroope & Baker, 2014). The two social institutions of family and religion are so tightly intertwined that emerging adults may struggle to feel a sense of belonging in congregations that focus heavily on the nuclear family. Messages encouraging marriage and having children, family-focused social networks, and programs focusing on family are all prevalent across many religious traditions (see Wilcox, Chaves, & Franz, 2004). Predominantly white Christian traditions are especially known to focus on attracting and serving families, offering a menu of child- and family-centered religious and social activities (Christiano, 2000; Edgell, 2003). Wilcox et al. (2004) argue that American religion, particularly white Protestant congregations, is dependent on the nuclear family. They write, "The shifting fortunes of American

religion continue to be tightly bound to the fortunes of a particular family type-- married couples with children--partly because most American religious traditions continue to focus their pastoral life on this family type" (502-503). When congregational programs and messages are so heavily directed toward traditional families, it could push emerging adults to the fringes. They could feel excluded or even like the congregation is irrelevant to their needs. They may experience a niche edge effect not only due to their age and being numerically underrepresented, but also due to the challenges singles may face trying to find their place in an environment that is specifically designed to engage the traditional family. Thus, my fifth hypothesis predicts:

H5: Social embeddedness for emerging adults will increase for those who are married.

The last characteristic of emerging adulthood that could challenge one's feeling of belonging or ability to make close congregational friendships is their high mobility and instability. Longevity of attendance has been shown to be highly associated with increased social embeddedness (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Stroope & Baker, 2014), but emerging adults' lifestyles often make it more difficult to attend the same congregation for a number of years especially if they move away for college or work after turning 18. Research on emerging adults (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2008; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014) highlights the instability experienced by emerging adults who frequently change directions in residential status, relationships, work and education. In other words, many emerging adults may not be able to sit still in the same place long enough to make a friend or gain a

sense of belonging within a congregation. Assuming that emerging adults' high mobility and instability make it more challenging for them to experience social embeddedness, I hypothesize:

H6: Social embeddedness for emerging adults will increase with the number of years the individual has been attending the same congregation.

Data

Data for this chapter are from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) Wave II conducted in 2008/2009. A total of 256 congregations recruited by Harris Interactive returned worshiper surveys. For this study, 241 congregations are used, while 15 are omitted due to incomplete surveys. This report will draw upon data from a congregational profile describing the congregation's facilities, staff, programs, and worship services completed by one person in the congregation. This report will also use survey data from attenders age 18 and older who attended worship services during the weekend of the collection of data. First-time attenders and attenders under the age of 18 were excluded from the analyses. The availability of both attender and organization-level data makes the USCLS an ideal data set to examine both first and second level effects on one's social embeddedness. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, a number of studies have used USCLS data to examine how congregations impact their attenders based on both individual and congregational characteristics (e.g. Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Scheitle & Finke, 2008; Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; Stroope & Baker, 2013).

Dependent Variables

Coming from the USCLS attender survey, two measures of belonging act as dependent variables in this study. Subjective sense of belonging is measured from the question: “Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?” Possible answers were: “Yes, a strong sense of belonging that is growing”; “Yes, a strong sense- about the same as last year”; “Yes, but perhaps not as strong as in the past year”; “No, but I am new here”; “No, and I wish I did by now”; “No, but I am happy as I am”; and “Do not know or not applicable”. Following the work of Martinez and Dougherty (2013), a dichotomous variable is used where 1=those who have a strong sense of belonging that is consistent with or growing from how they felt the previous year and 0=all other responses.

The second dependent variable examines network embeddedness by measuring whether or not the respondent has close friends in the same congregation. The USCLS attender survey asked: “Do you have any close friends in this congregation?” Possible answers included: “No, I have little contact with others from this congregation outside of activities here”; “No, I have some friends in the congregation, but my closest friends are not involved here”; “Yes, I have some close friends here as well as other friends who are not part of this congregation”; “Yes, most of my close friends are part of this congregation.” This variable is also coded dichotomously where 1=those who selected either of the “yes” responses, and 0= those who responded with either of the “no” responses.

Independent Variables

The primary independent variable included in every model is whether or not a respondent is part of the emerging adult cohort including adults ages 18-24. The first congregation-level independent variable is proportion emerging adult in a congregation (log transformed to correct an otherwise highly skewed distribution). To test H2, a cross-level interaction term is created: emerging adult*proportion emerging adults in congregation. To test H3, a cross-level interaction term is also created: emerging adult*congregational friends. Like the dependent variable used in H1 and H2, congregational friends is measured using an item asking individuals about friendships in their congregation where 1= “some close friends” or “most of closest friends” and 0= “little contact with people” or “some friends”. The mean score of this individual variable is used to represent organization network density, or how many congregants have close friends in the congregation. An interaction term emerging adult*organizational network density is created to test H4.

Three more interaction terms are created to test H5 and H6, examining how individual-level characteristics affect emerging adults’ social embeddedness. The interaction term emerging adult*married is created to test H5. The last individual-level independent variable is how long a respondent has attended his or her current congregation. To account for high mobility experienced by emerging adults, longevity of attendance is measured. The survey asks respondents, “How long have you been going to worship services or activities at this congregation?” To create an equal distribution of emerging adults, I use three dichotomous variables: 0-2 years, 3-5 years, and 6 or more years. Six or more years serves as the reference category.

Two cross-level interaction terms are created to test H5: emerging adult*0-2 years and emerging adult*3-5 years.

Controls

A number of control variables are included at both the individual-level and congregation-level. At the individual-level, I control for gender (1 = female), marital status (1=married), education (ranging from 1 = no formal education to 8 = master's, doctorate, or other graduate degree), children living at home (1 = yes), congregational membership (1 = member) and congregational attendance (ranging from 1=hardly ever to 6=more than once a week). Two measures are also used to control for personal religiosity (see Martinez & Dougherty, 2013). The first is time spent in private devotional activities such as prayer, meditation, and reading the Bible alone (ranging from 1= never to 6 = every day). The second personal religiosity control is theological exclusivity. Theological exclusivity is measured by the respondent indicating to what level they agree or disagree with the statement, "All the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth". Five possible responses ranged from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". A high level of disagreement with this statement indicates a high level of exclusive theological belief (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009). Finally, race/ethnicity is controlled for using the following dichotomous variables: white (non-Hispanic), black, Hispanic, Asian, and other race/ multiracial. White is used as the reference category.

At the congregation-level, I control for region (1 = South), congregation size (measured by the average weekly attendance and log transformed to create a

normal distribution), and religious affiliation. Religious affiliation is controlled for following a modified version of the RELTRAD classification with evangelical Protestant being the reference category (see Steensland et al., 2000).

Analytic Strategy

To simultaneously account for individual-level and congregation-level characteristics, multilevel regression modeling is employed. The use of multilevel regression modeling more accurately assesses interactions between group and individual processes, making it ideal for this study. Because the dependent measures are dichotomous, hierarchical logistic regression is used (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). A series of models for each dependent variable were then executed. The first three models test H1 and H2. The first model is a conditional model with individual-level effects specified. The second model is a conditional model with individual- and congregational-level effects specified. This model examines if congregational context moderates individual traits, while also showing how congregational-level variables affect social embeddedness at the individual-level (Singer, 1998; Martinez & Dougherty, 2013). The third model is a conditional model with individual-, congregation-, and cross-level interaction variables specified.

A series of three models tests H3 and H4 with subjective sense of belonging as the only dependent variable examined. The first model includes individual-level variables only with congregational friendships as the primary independent variable. The second model adds organization-level variables with network density as the primary independent variable. The third model adds the cross-level interaction emerging adult*congregational friendships. The fourth model includes the cross-

level interaction emerging adult*network density. The next models test H5, including the interaction term emerging adult* married and controlling for both individual-level and congregation-level variables. Models for H6 incorporate length of attendance. Two separate models are tested with the first including individual- and congregation- level variables and the second adding the appropriate interaction terms.

Results

Table 4.1 compares emerging adults ages 18-24 with adults 25 and older. As expected, social embeddedness is experienced by a higher proportion of adults (25+) than emerging adults. A strong sense of belonging is felt by 74.3 percent of adults 25 and older and only 62.2 percent of emerging adults. Close congregational friendships are enjoyed by 68.4 percent adults 25 and older but only 60.6 percent emerging adults. Table 4.1 shows that only a small minority of emerging adults (7 percent) are married and that the distribution of emerging adults according to how long they have attended their congregations is significantly different than the distribution of adults 25 and older. Both of these findings will be further discussed when examining how marriage and length of attendance affects social embeddedness for emerging adults differently compared to adults 25 and older.

Belonging

The three models in Table 4.2 predict the likelihood that an individual feels a strong sense of belonging in his or her congregation. As seen in Model 1, being female, education, and exclusive theology are all negatively associated with a strong

sense of belonging. Having children, service attendance, congregational membership, and personal devotional are positively associated with belonging. Age and marriage show no significant effects. Compared to non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics are more likely to feel a strong sense of belonging while “Other” race individuals are less likely. Black and Asian individuals show no difference. As expected, emerging adults are less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging. Compared to their older counterparts 25 and older, emerging adults are nearly 27% less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging. However, unlike the similar study on race and ethnicity, the size of the minority group does not interact with the status of being an age minority (emerging adult), as seen in Models 2 and 3. Emerging adults do appear to struggle to find a sense of belonging in their congregations compared to older attenders, but lacking a large and robust same-age peer group does not appear to be the culprit of this challenge.

Table 4.1
Comparison of Means of Selected Variables by Age Cohort

Variables	Adults 25+	Emerging Adults
Strong sense of belonging	0.74	0.62
Close friends in congregation	0.68	0.61
Age	57.14	20.54
Married	0.71	0.07
Has children in household	0.41	0.64
Service Attendance	4.82	4.53
Member	0.82	0.65
Exclusive Theology	2.79	2.79
Private Devotion	4.79	4.17
Attendance longevity within congregation		
0-2 years	0.17	0.33
3-5 years	0.16	0.18
Six or more years	0.67	0.49
N	54,109 (95.31%)	2660 (4.69%)

Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey (2008/2009); Note: All differences significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed t tests), except exclusive theology, which was non-significant

Table 4.2

Effects of Individual and Congregational Attributes on Sense of Belonging for Emerging Adults

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-2.405	-	-2.065	-	-2.067	-
<i>Individual-level</i>						
Female	-0.077**	0.926	-0.081***	0.922	-0.080***	0.449
Age	0.0002	-	3.094	-	0.0001	-
Education	-0.082***	0.921	-0.083***	1.087	-0.083***	0.920
Married	-0.029	-	-0.031	-	-0.030	-
Children at home	0.070**	1.073	0.071**	1.074	0.070**	1.073
Attendance	0.621***	1.861	0.625***	1.868	0.625***	1.868
Congregation member	1.208***	3.347	1.206***	3.340	1.205***	3.337
Exclusive theology	-0.093***	0.911	-0.094***	0.910	-0.094***	0.910
Personal devotion	0.110***	1.116	0.112***	1.119	0.112***	1.119
<i>Race^a</i>						
Black	0.139	-	0.132	-	0.133	-
Hispanic	0.263***	1.301	0.290***	1.336	0.292***	1.339
Asian	0.114	-	0.134	-	0.133	-
Other race	-0.220***	0.803	-0.215***	0.807	-0.215***	0.807
Emerging adult	-0.321***	0.725	-0.326***	0.722	-0.269**	0.764
<i>Congregation-level</i>						
Congregation size			-0.053	-	-0.053	-
South			0.192**	1.212	0.192**	1.212
<i>Religious Tradition^b</i>						
Mainline Protestant			0.066	-	0.064	-
Catholic			-0.287**	0.751	-0.287**	0.751
Other			0.479*	1.614	0.477*	1.611
Size of emerging adult group			-0.021	-	-0.021	-
Emerging adult × size of group					-0.068	-
ICC	.049		.034		.034	

Congregation *N* = 241; Individual *N* = 47,162; **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.001 (two-tailed test)^aContrast group is white non-Hispanic; ^bContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

Table 4.3 reveals how sense of belonging is affected by close friendships in the congregation. Consistent with previous models, emerging adults appear to be less likely to experience a strong sense of belonging. Table 4.3 highlights their disadvantage slightly more than previous models with emerging adults being about 40% less likely to experience feelings of belonging in all four models. Additionally, Model 1 shows that individuals with close friends in the congregation are 2.5 times more likely to feel a strong sense of belonging compared to those who do not have close friends in the congregation. These effects persist when congregation-level variables are added. Having close friends in the congregation continues to have a positive effect on feelings of belonging, but social network density has no effect on social embeddedness. Both interaction terms examining the effects congregational friendships have on emerging adults' sense of belonging were non-significant. In sum, attending congregations with high social network density does not appear to affect emerging adults' sense of belonging and emerging adults who have close friends in the congregation do not appear to be any better off than those who do not.

Table 4.4 presents the findings from the three models examining life course effects on emerging adults' sense of belonging. The first model shows similar results as previous models with emerging adults being about 29% less likely to have strong feelings of belonging. One variation of this model is that it shows congregation size significantly decreasing feelings of belonging. Other models show congregation size to be significant, but only at the $p < .10$ level. As with other models, marriage does not have a significant effect on feelings of belonging. Table 4.4 shows that marriage also has no significant effect on emerging adults' sense of belonging. How long one

Table 4.3
Effects of Friends in the Congregation on Sense of Belonging for Emerging Adults

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>						
Intercept	-2.437	-	-2.175	-	-2.177	-	-2.111	-
<i>Individual-level</i>								
Female	-0.086***	0.918	-0.089***	0.915	-0.089***	0.915	-0.089***	0.915
Age	-0.004***	0.996	-0.004***	0.996	-0.004***	0.996	-0.004***	0.996
Education	-0.081***	0.921	-0.084***	0.92	-0.084***	0.92	-0.084***	0.92
Married	-0.033	-	-0.034	-	-0.035	-	-0.035	-
Children	0.046	-	0.047	-	0.047	-	0.047	-
Attendance	0.590***	1.803	0.594***	1.811	0.594***	1.811	0.594***	1.811
Congregation member	1.051***	2.861	1.049***	2.855	1.049***	2.855	1.050***	2.855
Exclusive theology	-0.093***	0.911	-0.094***	0.911	-0.094***	0.911	-0.094***	0.911
Personal devotion	0.095***	1.100	0.097***	1.102	0.097***	1.102	0.097***	1.102
<i>Race^a</i>								
Black	0.188*	1.207	0.195*	1.215	0.195*	1.215	0.195*	1.215
Hispanic	0.313***	1.367	0.338***	1.402	0.338***	1.402	0.336***	1.400
Asian	0.139	-	0.158*	1.171	0.159*	1.171	0.158*	1.171
Other race	-0.199**	0.820	-0.193**	0.825	-0.193**	0.825	-0.194**	0.824
Friends in congregation	0.931***	2.538	0.927***	2.527	0.925***	2.522	-0.927***	2.527
Emerging adult	-0.462***	0.630	-0.469***	0.625	-0.492***	0.611	-0.480***	0.619
Emerging adult × friends					0.042	-		
<i>Congregation-level</i>								
Congregation size			-0.049	-	-0.049	-	-0.050	-
South			-0.208**	0.812	-0.208**	0.812	-0.208**	0.812
<i>Religious Tradition^b</i>								
Mainline Protestant			0.154	-	0.155	-	0.153	-
Catholic			-0.158	-	-0.158	-	-0.159	-
Other			0.513*	1.670	0.514*	1.672	0.511*	1.667
Social network density			0.085	-	0.086	-	0.105	-
Emerging adult × social network density							-0.374	-
ICC	.047		.036		.036		.036	

Congregation *N* = 241; Individual *N* = 46,928

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^bContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

Table 4.4
*Effects of Marriage and Length of Attendance on
 Sense of Belonging for Emerging Adults*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-1.932	-	-1.571	-	-1.546	-
<i>Individual-level</i>						
Female	-0.081***	0.922	-0.082***	0.921	-0.084***	0.92
Age	0.00003	-	-0.003**	0.997	-0.003**	0.997
Education	-0.083***	0.92	-0.085***	0.918	-0.086***	0.918
Married	-0.034	-	-0.044	-	-0.048	-
Children at home	0.071**	1.074	0.049	-	0.052	-
Attendance	0.625***	1.868	0.633***	1.882	0.632***	1.881
Congregation member	1.207***	3.344	1.017***	2.766	1.019***	2.771
Exclusive theology	-0.095***	0.91	-0.099***	0.906	-0.099***	0.906
Personal devotion	0.112***	1.118	0.113***	1.119	0.112***	1.119
<i>Race^a</i>						
Black	0.140	-	0.142	-	0.143	-
Hispanic	0.290***	1.336	0.298***	1.347	0.296***	1.345
Asian	0.135	-	0.141	-	0.145*	1.156
Other race	-0.214***	0.807	-0.207**	0.813	-0.206**	0.814
Emerging adult	-0.339***	0.712	-0.379***	0.684	-0.493***	0.611
Emerging adult × Married	0.123	-				
<i>Longevity of attendance^c</i>						
0-2 years			-0.538***	0.584	-0.560***	0.571
3-5 years			-0.034	-	-0.034	-
Emerging adult × 0-2 years					0.297**	1.346
Emerging adult × 3-5 years					0.032	-
<i>Congregation-level</i>						
Congregation Size	-0.062*	0.94	-0.056	-	-0.056	-
South	-0.192**	0.825	-0.174*	0.84	-0.174*	0.841
<i>Religious Tradition^b</i>						
Mainline Protestant	0.091	-	0.095	-	0.095	-
Catholic	-0.273**	0.761	-0.287**	0.75	-0.288**	0.75
Other	0.504*	1.655	0.540**	1.716	0.543**	1.72
ICC	.034		.034		.034	

, Congregation *N* = 241; Individual *N* = 47,162; **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^bContrast group is evangelical Protestant

^cContrast group is six or more years.

attends the congregation does have an effect. Model 2 reveals that individuals attending their congregations for 0-2 years are, unsurprisingly, about 40 percent less likely to experience strong feeling of belonging compared to those who have attended for 6 or more years. There appears to be no difference whether attenders have attended 3-5 years or 6 or more years. Including interaction terms in Model 3 shows that for emerging adults, the effect of being new is less severe. While attending 3-5 years still shows no difference, attending 0-2 years decreases likelihood for belonging by about 43 percent for adults 25 and older, but only by 23 percent for emerging adults.

Congregational Friendships

Tables 4.5 and 4.6 reveal emerging adults' propensity for congregational friendships is much different than their lack of belonging. Age, having children, service attendance, congregational membership, and personal devotion all increase likelihood for having close friends in the congregation. Black, Hispanic and "Other" race individuals are less likely than whites to report congregational friendships. Asians show no difference. Sex, education, and marital status appear to have no significant effects. Model 1 shows exclusive theology to also be non-significant. Contradictory to what was expected by H1, emerging adults are 95 percent more likely than adults 25 and older to report close friends in the congregation.

Model 2 includes congregation-level variables and presents similar results as Model 1 with the exception of showing theological exclusivism to significantly reduce the likelihood of congregational friendships. Emerging adults' likelihood of congregational friendships continues to be 95% more than adults 25 and older.

Table 4.5
*Effects of Individual and Congregational Attributes on
 Congregational Friendship for Emerging Adults*

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-2.600	-	-1.863	-	-1.845	-
<i>Individual-level</i>						
Female	0.032	-	0.031	-	0.030	-
Age	0.022***	1.022	0.022***	1.022	0.022***	1.022
Education	-0.007	-	-0.007	-	-0.008	-
Married	-0.003	-	-0.003	-	-0.005	-
Children at home	0.114***	1.121	0.114***	1.121	0.115***	1.122
Attendance	0.265***	1.303	0.265***	1.303	0.264***	1.302
Congregation member	0.947***	2.578	0.950***	2.586	0.952***	2.591
Exclusive theology	-0.016	-	-0.021*	0.979	-0.021*	0.979
Personal devotion	0.095***	1.100	0.096***	1.101	0.096***	1.101
<i>Race^a</i>						
Black	-0.296***	0.744	-0.319***	1.376	-0.321***	0.725
Hispanic	-0.168***	0.845	-0.153**	0.858	-0.155**	0.856
Asian	-0.049	-	-0.039	-	-0.037	-
Other race	-0.151*	0.860	-0.151*	0.860	-0.151*	0.860
Emerging adult	0.667***	1.948	0.667***	1.948	0.569***	1.766
<i>Congregation-level</i>						
Congregation size			-0.067	-	-0.066	-
South			0.039	-	0.039	-
<i>Religious Tradition^b</i>						
Mainline Protestant			-0.307***	0.736	-0.304***	0.738
Catholic			-0.605***	0.546	-0.603***	0.547
Other			0.023	-	0.027	-
Size of emerging adult group			-0.004	-	-0.004	-
Emerging adult × size of group					0.119	-
Model fit (pseudo r-square)						
ICC	.066		.049		.049	

Congregation *N* = 241; Individual *N* = 47,456

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^bContrast group is evangelical Protestant.

Table 4.6
*Effects of Marriage and Length of Attendance on
 Congregational Friendship for Emerging Adults*

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-1.846	-	-1.020	-	-0.979	-
<i>Individual-level</i>						
Female	0.033	-	0.023	-	0.021	-
Age	0.022***	1.022	0.016***	1.016	0.015***	1.015
Education	-0.006	-	-0.011	-	-0.012	-
Married	0.009	-	-0.023	-	-0.029	-
Children at home	0.109***	1.116	0.073**	1.076	0.078**	1.081
Attendance	0.265***	1.303	0.280***	1.323	0.279***	1.322
Congregation member	0.948***	2.581	0.579***	1.784	0.583***	1.792
Exclusive theology	-0.020*	0.98	-0.028**	0.973	-0.028**	0.972
Personal devotion	0.096***	1.101	0.100***	1.105	0.100***	1.105
<i>Race^a</i>						
Black	-0.319***	0.727	-0.306***	0.737	-0.305***	0.737
Hispanic	-0.150**	0.861	-0.108*	0.898	-0.111*	0.895
Asian	-0.039	-	-0.010	-	-0.005	-
Other race	-0.149*	0.861	-0.129*	0.879	-0.128*	0.88
Emerging adult	0.718***	2.050	0.547***	1.728	0.308***	1.361
Emerging adult × Married	-0.592**	0.553				
<i>Longevity of attendance^c</i>						
0-2 years			-1.014***	0.363	-1.047***	0.351
3-5 years			-0.636***	0.53	-0.650***	0.522
Emerging adult × 0-2 years					0.497***	1.643
Emerging adult × 3-5 years					0.308*	1.361
<i>Congregation-Level</i>						
Congregation Size	-0.069*	0.933	-0.053	-	-0.054	-
South	0.038	-	0.083	-	0.084	-
<i>Religious Tradition^b</i>						
Mainline Protestant	-0.306***	0.737	-0.312***	0.732	-0.312***	0.732
Catholic	-0.604***	0.547	-0.661***	0.516	-0.661***	0.516
Other	0.025	-	0.131	-	0.135	-
ICC	.049		.045		.045	

Congregation *N* = 256; Individual *N* = 47,456; **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.001 (two-tailed test)

^aContrast group is white non-Hispanic.

^bContrast group is evangelical Protestant

^cContrast group is six or more years.

Mainline Protestant and Catholics are less likely to have close congregational friendships than evangelical Protestants, while “Other” religious traditions show no difference. Proportion of emerging adult group also showed no difference in one’s likelihood for congregational friendships.

In Model 3, emerging adults appear to be 77 percent more likely to have congregational friendships than their older counterparts. Proportion of congregation that is emerging adult continues to be non-significant. The interaction term examining the effect proportion emerging adult in a congregation has on an emerging adult is not significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 4.6 presents the findings of analyses examining life course effects on emerging adults’ likelihood of having congregational friendships. Demographics and religious characteristics appear to show similar results in Model 1 as they do in previous models examining congregational friendships. Marriage continues to be non-significant, but only for adults 25 and older. Contrary to what was originally hypothesized, marriage for emerging adults actually decreases their likelihood for congregational friendships. Married emerging adults are 45 percent less likely than their single peers to report congregational friendships.

Previous trends in congregational friendships are continued in Models 2 and 3, where longevity of attendance within a congregation is examined. Model 2 shows emerging adults to be 73 percent more likely than adults 25 and older to have close congregational friendships. Compared to individuals who have been attending 6 or more years, new attenders (0-2 years) are 64 percent less likely to report close congregational friends. Attenders of 3-5 years are 47% less likely than veterans (six

or more years) to report congregational friendships. Similar to belonging, interaction terms in Model 3 reveal that being new has the a less severe effect for emerging adults than it does for adults 25 and older. When including these interaction terms, emerging adults are only 36 percent more likely to experience close friendships in the congregation. Attending 0-2 years decreases likelihood for congregational friendships by about 65 percent for adults 25 and older, but only by 42 percent for emerging adults. Unlike belonging, attending 3-5 years versus six or more years shows a significant effect on congregational friendships and that effect is different for emerging adults compared to their older peers. Attending 3-5 years decreases likelihood for friendships by 48 percent for adults 25 and older, but only by 29 percent for emerging adults.

Discussion

Incorporating research on both emerging adults and social embeddedness in congregations, I proposed six hypotheses. H1 predicted that emerging adults would be less likely to experience social embeddedness than adults 25 and older. Evidence clearly supported this hypothesis when measuring feelings of belonging. As presented in Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4, emerging adults are less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging in their congregations. However, when measuring congregational friendships, Tables 4.5 and 4.6 show that emerging adults are more likely than their older counterparts to report having close friends in their congregation. This finding foreshadowed other findings revealing the important differences between emerging adults' feelings of belonging in their congregation and their tendencies to have close friends in the congregation.

Based on the niche edge effect, H2 predicted that emerging adults would experience greater social embeddedness in congregations that have high proportions of emerging adults. Proportion of emerging adults in a congregation did not appear to benefit their sense of belonging as the interaction was non-significant. Given these results in examining both H1 and H2, weak evidence supports the niche edge effect as it pertains to emerging adults being a numeric minority. Emerging adults may *feel* on the “edge” but they do not appear to be on the edge in congregational social networks. Furthermore if niche edge effect was partly responsible for putting emerging adults at a disadvantage, then attending congregations with higher proportions of emerging adults would benefit their sense of belonging. Increasing proportions of emerging adults within a congregation does slightly benefit their propensity to have close congregational friendships, but it is still difficult to translate this into evidence for the niche edge effect, especially since emerging adults do not seem to actually be on the outskirts of social networks. A more likely explanation is that it much easier for emerging adults to make friends in a congregation when there are other emerging adults available to make friends with.

The next analysis investigated the relationship between congregational friendships and feelings of belonging. H3 hypothesized that congregational friendships would benefit emerging adults’ feelings of belonging. Consistent with Stroope and Baker (2014) close congregational friendships is advantageous for attenders’ sense of belonging. In three models, attenders with congregational friendships are consistently 2.5 times more likely to feel belonging. However, the effect does not translate the same for emerging adults. Emerging adults are no

likely to feel a sense of belonging, regardless of whether or not they have close congregational friendships. This finding is among others that indicate social embeddedness for emerging adults is much different than embeddedness for adults 25 and older. Additionally, based on previous research and theory, it was expected that high network density would put emerging adults' belonging at a disadvantage (H4). Emerging adults may find it even more challenging to find their place in congregations characterized by a high proportion of attenders with close friends in the congregation. However, the analysis gave no support to H4. It is very possible that characteristics of congregations do not actually make it challenging for emerging adults to feel like they belong, but in general, during their transitional season, emerging adults may find it difficult to feel like they belong anywhere (Smith & Snell, 2009).

The next finding also highlights differences between emerging adults and their older counterparts. While marriage has no effect on the general population, it does appear to have an effect on emerging adults' friendships. However the effect is not in the direction expected in H5. Married emerging adults are less likely than their same-aged single peers to have close congregational friendships. Marriage has no effect on emerging adults' sense of belonging. It appears that if emerging adults feel they are on the outskirts, singlehood is not to blame. Conforming to the religious pressures to get married, especially by the evangelical tradition, does not appear to help emerging adults feel any more belonging, but instead make them less likely to have close congregational friendships. It would be easy to assume that longevity of attendance could be a possible explanation, as it appears that emerging

adults benefit from being new to a congregation. Examining the effects of marriage and length of attendance on emerging adulthood in the same model (not shown) does not change the effect marriage has on emerging adults. In other words, even when accounting for longevity of attendance, the negative effect of marriage persists. A more likely explanation is because they are such a small minority (only 7 percent of the sample's emerging adults are minorities) it may be difficult to find many married couple friends of their same age in their congregations.

Finally, the most prominent difference found in this study between emerging adults and adults 25 and older pertains to social embeddedness. Due to emerging adulthood's high mobility and evidence showing that social embeddedness benefits from attendance longevity (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Stroope & Baker, 2014), H6 predicted that longevity would increase emerging adults' social embeddedness. As expected, attendance longevity had important effects on emerging adults, but the effects are not as strong for emerging adults as they are for adults 25 and older. New attenders find it more challenging to find belonging and close friendships within their congregation, but emerging adults appear to adapt better to a new congregation than their older peers. Because attendance longevity does significantly affect emerging adults' belonging and congregational friendships, it is likely that some of their challenges in connecting and belonging can be attributed to their mobility and high propensity for life transitions. The difficult part in drawing a conclusion is that cause and effect cannot be determined. Being new to a congregation is likely to make someone less likely to experience belonging and close friendships, but it is possible that the relationship is bi-directional. If an emerging

adult struggles to find belonging or friendships, they are probably more apt to try to find a new congregation. Either way, how long an emerging adult attends a congregation appears to have an intimate relationship with their ability to connect and belong in that congregation.

The USCLS is an excellent resource to draw upon when studying congregations and their attenders. However, it is important to recognize a limitation of using the USCLS to study the social embeddedness of emerging adults. Due to the way data are collected for the USCLS, the sample naturally has higher rates of attendance than the general population and it does not include non-attenders. This makes it difficult to study how the challenge to connect and belong in congregations affects those who do not attend regularly or those who do not attend at all. Without knowing more about non-attenders, another way the results could be interpreted is that not having close friends in a congregation will prevent or discourage emerging adults from attending. In other words, emerging adults' likelihood for friendships could be high in this study because those who do not have congregational friendships do not come as often or do not come at all. Those who are 25 and older may continue attending their congregation without friendships because they were socialized to attend after starting a family or because they are attracted to the family-focused discourse and programming. Adults 25 and older may have other motivations for attending, while the socially driven cohort of emerging adults will only attend if they can reap the benefits of a social network that they are accepted into and enjoy. If this assumption is true, it can also be assumed that emerging adults may forego service attendance if they cannot find a

place to connect in the congregation, but they will continue to attend even if they have not found a place to belong.

Furthermore, married emerging adults in the sample are less likely to have close friendships, possibly because married emerging adults will attend with or without friendships because they have been socialized to do so. If single emerging adults are not receiving the companionship they are looking for, or just not interested in religious companions, their attendance may wane or end altogether. The same speculation can be applied to emerging adults who are new to a congregation. For someone who has attended her congregation for several years, she may still feel comfortable going and feel deeply rooted in her congregation even without friends. Conversely, an emerging adult new to a congregation may not feel as comfortable going where she has not made any close friends. She may lack motivation to attend without a close friend saving her a seat for her, making her more likely to be a hit-and-miss attender or discontinue attendance altogether. Of course, these assumptions about non-attenders and hit-and-miss attenders are only speculations. Without knowing more about this population, it can only be speculated that friendships and belonging may be an important facet of congregations that attract and retain emerging adults. The findings in this study draw attention to the need for more research in this area to examine if lack of congregational friendships and belonging is a possible explanation for the religious service attendance decline during emerging adulthood.

Conclusion

Using data from a nationally representative sample of congregations and congregants, I find strong evidence indicating that emerging adults are less likely to experience strong feeling of belonging compared to adults 25 and older. However, they are more likely to enjoy close friendships in their congregation. Even though they are a numerical minority, their high likelihood of close congregational friendships indicates emerging adults may not be on the fringes nearly as much as their low proportion suggests. Furthermore, when emerging adults *feel* on the fringes, as in they have difficulties finding a sense of belonging in their congregations, it is unlikely due to being a numerical minority, or feeling alone in their age category or life stage. Strong evidence also says it is not because they lack friends in the congregation. And little to no evidence indicates feelings of being excluded from congregations that heavily focus on married couples and traditional families. While longevity does appear to matter for emerging adults in a significant way, they still seem to fare better than their older peers when they are new to a congregation.

This study highlights two themes important to the study of emerging adults and congregations. First, emerging adults' social embeddedness in congregations looks very different than adults 25 and older. Developing close friendships in the congregation tend to help individuals feel a sense of belonging, but emerging adults can have many close friends in a congregation and are still likely to struggle in finding a sense of belonging. Additionally, individuals usually benefit from several years of attendance in the same congregation, but emerging adults are more likely

to experience a sense of belonging and enjoy close congregational friendships when they are new to a congregation.

The second theme apparent in this study is that for emerging adults, connecting and belonging do not always coincide. In other studies, the measures are highly relevant to one another and behave similarly (Martinez & Dougherty, 2013; Stroepe & Baker, 2014). In this study, it is clear they are two very different facets of an emerging adult's congregational life. As previously mentioned in explaining the first theme, emerging adults can have close friends in the congregation and still have a weak sense of belonging. A high proportion of emerging adults affords them more close friends in the congregation but has no significant impact on their sense of belonging. Marriage does not benefit or harm their belonging, but tying the knot decreases their chances of having close congregational friends. The only characteristic the two measures share is their mutual benefit from being a veteran attender to a congregation versus being very new.

While these two themes help us to understand more about emerging adults who attend congregations, the same findings call for more attention to those who do not attend or who rarely attend. Without knowing more about the differences between attenders and non-attenders, I can only speculate three overall mechanisms behind the findings: 1) emerging adults benefit from congregations more than their older counterparts in the area of congregational friendships, especially singles who have attended their congregations for six or more years; 2) emerging adults, also especially new singles, more actively pursue friendships in the congregation; or 3) emerging adults are less likely to attend when they do not have

close friendships in the congregation, but they will attend without strong feeling of belonging. It is likely that all three of these mechanisms, particularly the last two, are behind the findings in this study.

This study brings forth a number of important conclusions about the congregational belonging and friendships of emerging adults, highlighting the differences between emerging adults and adults 25 and older, as well as the differences between “connecting” and “belonging”. These series of contrasts have important implications relevant to the study of emerging adults and to the pursuit of their engagement by religious leaders. Those religious leaders who successfully create an environment in which emerging adults can find a place to connect and to belong will not only see their congregation reap benefits, but will impact emerging adults during a transitional season in which great support is needed but hard to be found.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

While great research exists to address the emerging adults' decline in religiosity during their transitional season, this dissertation addressed the gap in research that specifically focuses on the relationship between emerging adults and religious congregations. While important findings came forth, this dissertation only scratched the surface of understanding the relationship between emerging adults and religious congregations. This final chapter will draw upon the themes of the entire study to highlight areas for future research and then conclude with a discussion on what the future may hold for emerging adults and their religious participation.

The first study found that parental effects and personal religiosity during adolescence both impacted perceptions of organized religion later in life during the transition to adulthood. Youth religious salience and belonging to a biologically intact family showed the strongest effects. Youth service attendance, prayer frequency, and race and ethnicity also appear to play important roles in predicting emerging adults' perceptions of organized religion. It is important to note that this study does not necessarily conclude where negative perceptions originate, but instead helps us understand what may buffer against negative perceptions. This is especially relevant to the finding of a teenager's religious salience being associated with his or her decrease in likelihood of having negative perceptions. I cannot

conclude, however, that there is a direct cause and effect relationship between religious salience during adolescence (or any other measure of personal religiosity) and positive perceptions during emerging adulthood. There is another factor that could potentially play a very important role in predicting perceptions of organized religions during emerging adulthood. That is, positive religious experiences and positive religious relationships may be important predictors of personal religiosity during adolescence. When emerging adults have opportunity for negative experiences to change their perceptions of organized religion, their personal religiosity during adolescence will serve as a buffer, decreasing the likelihood of those negative experiences causing them to have negative perceptions of organized religion.

If this is true, religious experiences and relationships are not only affecting perceptions as indirect effects via personal religiosity, they also likely have a direct effect on perceptions. The reason why I discuss these speculations is to draw attention to the need for future research to include religious experiences and relationships beyond parental relationships. As mentioned in the second chapter, future research could include peer relationships, relationships with religious adults besides parents, and religious experiences. Religious experiences would include supernatural experiences (experiencing a miracle, feeling they heard from God, having a conversion experience, etc.) as well as participation in mission trips (local, domestic, or international), religious camps or retreats, and other religious-based extracurricular activities and clubs.

Religious experiences and relationships are, of course, not always positive. Positive religious experiences could buffer against negative experiences later on in life (or in an anomalous case, an emerging adult only has positive experiences even during emerging adulthood), while negative experiences could potentially, and are likely to, be the culprit of negative perceptions of religious organizations during emerging adulthood. Studying religious experiences and religious relationships would help to identify reasons for negative perceptions. It is also important to study negative experiences in general, particularly tied to the family. This speculation is rooted in the finding that emerging adults are much less likely to have negative perceptions when they belong to a biologically intact two-parent family during adolescence. As discussed in Chapter 2, a substantial amount of evidence communicates the importance of family structure on emerging adulthood religiosity (Zhai et al., 2008; Petts, 2009; Uecker and Ellison, 2012).

Negative perceptions of organized religion are likely not the main contender in the problem of emerging adults not filling the pews. In fact, even if this study focused on the relationship between perceptions and attendance, I still would not be able to conclude that perceptions predict attendance. It is more likely that perceptions and attendance have a bidirectional relationship. When an emerging adult is not engaged in organized religion, he or she may have negative perceptions simply because she is not tied to a congregation. In other words, she *assumes* the congregation is irrelevant or she *assumes* it is unnecessary to her religion. However, this does not necessarily mean that these reasons are what keep her from attending.

Emerging adults have plenty of reasons to not attend. It could be that they are too busy, too mobile, or just too apathetic to attend a religious service.

Regardless of *why* they are less likely to attend than their older peers and *why* they are highly likely to decrease or end attendance altogether, congregations have their work cut out for them in the pursuit of attracting and retaining emerging adults. Chapter Three found that congregations who are successful in attracting emerging adults are highly likely to be evangelical, offer contemporary music, are more ethnically diverse, and to a lesser degree, are more likely to offer international service opportunities. This chapter began to paint a picture of the kind of congregation that attracts emerging adults, but due to data limitations, the picture is not a clear one. The greatest limitation of these data is that it only addresses the segment of the population that is actually attending worship services, allowing only a comparison of how congregations compete against each other to attract emerging adults. It would be extremely helpful to know specific strategies congregations have implemented to successfully attract emerging adults, especially those who are new to religion or returning to religion. In other words, how are congregations competing against other groups and activities competing for emerging adults' attention? Or how are congregations competing against possibly even stronger forces of religious opposition like apathy, lack of interest, or discontentment with organized religion? More data collection is needed to address the question of how congregations overcome barriers to attract emerging adults.

Congregations can learn from the successes and struggles of other congregations. I believe that this study calls for a series of case studies examining

both successful congregations and struggling congregations. Location, ethnic diversity, religious tradition and service opportunities should all be considered as the current study has, but case studies would allow the opportunity to consider other factors. For example, what are the demographics of the leadership staff in terms of age, sex, and ethnicity? What is their worship experience like? Does the congregation try to integrate emerging adults into their existing programs or do they instead create separate programs specifically for emerging adults? Whether religious leaders believe it is important to focus on integrating their emerging adult population into the rest of their congregation or they believe it is more important to offer them special programs and services that specifically target their age groups, these are both questions that ask: How do we help emerging adults feel like they can connect and belong here? An important finding of Chapter Three was that congregations that have a high proportion of emerging adult also have a high proportion of attenders who do not feel a strong sense of belonging in their congregation. This led to Chapter Four where I examined emerging adults' propensity for feeling belonging and connectedness in their congregations.

In Chapter Four I find strong evidence indicating that emerging adults are less likely to experience strong feeling of belonging compared to adults 25 and older. At the same time, they are more likely to enjoy close friendships in their congregation. Even though they are a numerical minority, their high likelihood of close congregational friendships indicates emerging adults may not be on the fringes nearly as much as their low proportions suggest. Furthermore, when emerging adults *feel* on the fringes, as in they have difficulties finding a sense of

belonging in their congregations, it is unlikely due to being a numerical minority, or not having friends in the congregation. Marriage does not affect belonging and actually is negatively associated with congregational friendships for emerging adults. However, more research is needed to address the possibility of feelings of being excluded from congregations that heavily focus on married couples and traditional families. Those who do feel excluded may not participate or rarely participate. Due to the nature of the USCLS and the prevalence of high attenders in its sample, it is hard to make a conclusion about how connecting and belonging may be tied to level of participation. Finally, while emerging adults still seem to fare better than their older peers when they are new to a congregation, longevity of attendance is still closely tied to an emerging adults' belonging and congregational friendships. While it cannot be concluded from this analysis, this is likely a bi-directional relationship. Those who are new are less likely to feel belonging and have close friends and those who lack feelings of belonging or friendships are more likely to find a new congregation.

There were two more subtle themes that appeared throughout this dissertation that call for more research. The first one is that ethnic variations matter. In Chapter Two, it was evident that ethnic minorities are less likely to have negative perceptions of religious organizations during emerging adulthood. In Chapter Three, ethnic diversity appeared to be highly associated with a larger population of emerging adults. Not only is the emerging adult population ethnically diverse themselves, but it appears that the recipe for attracting ethnic diversity is similar to the recipe for attracting emerging adults. Finally, Chapter Four echoes the

studies of previous research showing that strong ethnic variations do exist when it comes to connecting and belonging. However, the present study did not show the exact same results as previous research (i.e. Martinez & Dougherty, 2013). Ethnic minorities, including Black, Hispanic and Asian adults, were more likely to feel a sense of belonging but less likely to have close congregational friendships. Those of “Other” race or those who are two or more races were less likely to feel belonging and less likely to have close congregational friendships.

Other studies of emerging adults’ religious engagement point to ethnic variations. Smith & Snell (2009) divide emerging adults into six categories according to how their religious participation increases, decreases, or remain stable. The “high stable” group, who only shows little change, disproportionately consists of African Americans. The small group that actually increases their religiosity disproportionately consists of African Americans and Hispanics. The “steep decline” group is disproportionately white (Smith & Snell, 2009). A few other studies show ethnic variations among emerging adults but ethnicity is only included as a control and therefore not closely examined (see Petts, 2009 and Vaidyanathan, 2011, for example). Jones et al. (2011) highlights ethnic variations in religious participation but only in a bivariate analysis with the purpose of comparing 27-year-old to 30-year-olds. Evidence points to the notion that race and ethnicity matter when it comes to emerging adults’ religiosity, but more research is needed to examine how race affects emerging adults’ religiosity and more specifically how it affects their congregational involvement.

The second subtle theme is the difference between emerging adults who go to college and those who do not. Before there was such an abundance of information showing otherwise, there was a misconception that pursuing higher education played an important role in emerging adults' decline in religious engagement. However, multiple studies have provided evidence showing the religious decline to not be nearly as steep among four-year college students than it is for non-college students (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011; Uecker et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The current study is consistent with previous research with evidence indicating that college-attenders are less likely to call congregations irrelevant to their age group and unnecessary to being religious. Emerging adults who never attended or are not currently attending college deserve more attention, from both researchers and religious leaders, to address their increased propensity for waning religious participation and negative perceptions of organized religion.

Will emerging adults swing back around and begin participating in congregations once they have settled down? If history is a predictor of the future, then yes. However, in this case it may not be so predictable. Historically, trends have shown that adults typically return to organized religion after getting married and/or having children (see Farrell, 2011). However, the trend of delayed marriage is of concern because an extended recess from religion is expected to result in lower confidence in religious organizations (Hoffman, 1998) and without their community and plausibility structure intact, it is easier to doubt religious beliefs and teachings (Berger, 1967). In other words, the longer they are gone, the further they will go from religion and the less likely they are to return. Additionally, their lack of desire

to marry someone of the same faith may be an indicator of how little value they place on their faith. One quarter of emerging adults say that it is very or extremely important to them to marry someone from their own religion, while more than half said that that it is not very important or not important at all (Smith & Snell, 2009).

Not only is the length of their absence detrimental to their religious socialization, but their absence during a crucial period of development should be of concern to religious leaders. Emerging adults who do not engage in development and maturation at all during this period, or those who try to go at it alone, are more likely to find themselves “lost in transition,” leading to a myriad of potential consequences such as consumerism, substance abuse, unsatisfying sexual experiences, and civic and political disengagement (Smith et al. 2011). A generation plagued by these symptoms could have a societal impact.

While the relationship between emerging adults and congregations deserve much further exploration, a religious leader would be wise to take away the findings that come from this study, as well as the findings of the existing research discussed in this dissertation. First, important processes of religious internalization are occurring in teenagers when they attend worship services, express personal religiosity, and belong to a family that contributes to an environment conducive to religious growth. Childhood religious socialization has lasting effects on religious participation during emerging adulthood. It also impacts perceptions of organized religion during emerging adulthood. All of the efforts that congregations pour into programs directed toward the family and children, when well executed, are certainly not in vain.

Moving beyond the traditional family, congregations must be strategic about pursuing emerging adults, as success in attracting this hard-to-reach population typically does not happen by accident. Based on previous research and the results of this study, congregations that are intentionally strategic about pursuing and welcoming new members, those that offer a participatory worship experience with contemporary music, and those that embrace societal change, innovation, and diversity will all have a great advantage in attracting emerging adults. Furthermore, congregations will need to recognize and address the challenges emerging adults face in feeling a sense of belonging within their congregations. The ability to cultivate feelings of connection and belonging among emerging adults may be the number one winning strategy for attracting and retaining emerging adults. While more research is needed in this area, if I was a religious leader only focusing on a single issue, I would choose to tackle the tough question of how do I make sure emerging adults feel like they can connect and belong within the greater congregation?

Wuthnow (2007) argues that the survival and vitality of congregations are dependent upon their ability to serve young adults. Many researchers highlight the importance of serving this age group which needs support and guidance during a transitional stage. Whether religious leaders are interested in attracting emerging adults to their congregations to serve this special population or to serve their efforts of pursuing greater vitality, congregations would greatly benefit from continuing to scrutinize the barriers they face in engaging emerging adults and how other congregations have successfully overcome these barriers.

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