

WOMEN BY THE NUMBERS

Why are fewer women attending church?

By Julie Kathleen Schubring

Some of our readers might have seen the August 2 Huffington Post article - "Women Show Deep Drop in Church Attendance." Both surveys mentioned in the article were conducted by the Barna Group – the first in 1991 and the second in 2011. The article tells us that the percentage of women attending church has decreased by 11 percentage points to 44 percent. The percentage of women teaching Sunday school and volunteering has also decreased, while there has been a 17 percentage point increase in the number of women who have become "unchurched."

As of August 5, I have read through the almost 900 comments posted. If we subtract the usual ranting and raving about separation of church and state as well as the debate over worldwide decline or increase in religious institutions, the comments can be simply summarized as:

Women have become better educated and women have become more aware of their right to walk away from the imposed understandings of the role of women in the institutional church.

Much of the comments look at Christianity as "one" theology that treats women in a "lesser" position than men. It is unfortunate that the general population doesn't see Christianity (as well as other faith traditions) as comprising a spectrum of thoughts. Religion on mass media is often displayed as ultra conservative. The assumption that all women who go to church believe in the traditional views taught by the faith traditions is not true.

Some 42% of women interviewed "strongly believe the Bible is accurate in all it teaches," which means more than half the women do not. And 70% "view God as 'the all-knowing, all-powerful and perfect Creator of the universe who still rules the world

today.'" Look closely at this last statement; there are no claims that God is male; which is striking since most of the commentators focused on women moving out of the church due to our increased education, which pushes us to move beyond a male God.

Yet this *Huffington Post* is just a snapshot of the larger Barna Group study, which realized that in order to understand the overall trends, more questions need to be asked. The original study included six distinct yet interconnected sections. These sections have been posted between July 26 and August 4 and they examine 14 religious factors between 1991 and 2011. The *Huffington Post* article is one-half of the Barna section on gender and faith. The other five sections round out the larger picture, which helps us to better grasp the shifts found amongst women. These sections include general trends, generational trends, racial/ethnic differences, regional faith and faith

"tribes." For more information go to www.barna.org.

Does a decline in church attendance also reflect a decline in spirituality? Is there a relationship between church attendance and spirituality? According to several religious studies, there is a fast-growing percentage of individuals claiming they are spiritual and not religious. What is it that women are looking for in spirituality? What is the church NOT doing to help women find spirituality?

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