
EXCHANGE ON CHURCH ATTENDANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

*Comment on Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves,
ASR, December 1993*

THE CASE OF THE PHANTOM EPISCOPALIANS*

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In "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance," Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves (1993, henceforward HMC) conclude that the church attendance rate in the United States "is probably one-half what everyone thinks it is" (p. 750). They present evidence from a study of Protestant churches in Ashtabula County, Ohio, and from 18 Catholic dioceses across the country to support the thesis that survey reports of church attendance are grossly inflated.

That some overreporting of church attendance occurs seems quite probable, but for all the effort that HMC put into this investigation their method amounts in effect to a meticulous comparison of apples and oranges. Thus, in Ashtabula County, HMC used their own 1992 survey results and the 1990 census count to estimate the Protestant population; their telephone survey of a random sample of the county population in the spring and fall of 1992 asked if the respondent attended church or synagogue in the last seven days. Of Protestant respondents, 35.8 percent claimed to have attended church. HMC then obtained average church attendance figures through denominational yearbooks, telephone interviews, letters, and church visits, and for a few small churches they estimated attendance figures by counting cars in parking lots in February and March of 1992. HMC used these accumulated numbers to calculate an average weekly church attendance rate of 19.6 percent for Ashtabula County Protestants.

Aside from the consideration that church attendance varies considerably from one season of the church year to another, and that nothing in the attendance figures relates directly to the various seven-day periods about which respondents were questioned, there is the uncertain character of the attendance figures themselves. Nearly all numbers were estimates, not actual counts. HMC seem to assume that any errors in these estimates must be inflationary: "... the fact that the count-based rates are probably overestimates of actual attendance does not threaten our argument" (p. 743). Their assumption is merely bias.

For the 18 Catholic dioceses HMC examined, they calculated attendance rates ranging from 20.0 percent in Seattle to 47.4 percent in Omaha—on average conspicuously less than the attendance rates reported by Catholic respondents in national surveys. For this part of the study, the survey-reported attendance rate used for comparison was a national average derived from the Gallup poll and the General Social Survey (GSS). Once again, this method provided no direct connection between the time periods for which respondents reported attendance and the month or year in which attendance was counted. In these 18 dioceses, attendance at mass was counted officially on certain weekends in October. These counts provided the numerator of the attendance rate. The denominator was derived from the 1989–1990 Survey of Religious Affiliation, which, according to HMC, used a sample large enough to estimate reliably for each diocese the proportion of the local population that was Catholic. HMC acknowledge in a footnote that their estimates exceed the diocesan populations shown in the Official Catholic Directory, but they do not seem to have considered the possibility that it might be the survey-based populations rather than the survey-based attendance rates that were overreported.

This possibility might seem hypothetical had not HMC provided a crystal clear illustration of how it would work. Early in their paper, they tell us,

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[A]ttendance figures from Episcopal parishes are far below what would be expected if self-defined Episcopalians attended church in the numbers they claim. Based on Gallup surveys and other poll data, about 35 percent of Episcopalians say they attended church during the last seven days. If 2.5 percent of Americans claim to be Episcopalian and 35 percent of Episcopalians attend worship, total attendance during an average week should exceed 2 million. . . . Instead, average weekly attendance was less than 900,000 in 1991. (Pp. 742-43)

But in this instance, it is plain beyond argument that the surveys overreported the population of Episcopalians more than their church attendance rate. In 1991, 2.11 percent of GSS respondents reported themselves to be Episcopalian (Davis and Smith 1991). Applying this percentage to the 1991 national population gives us 5.3 million Episcopalians.¹ Using HMC's 2.5 percent rate gives us 6.1 million Episcopalians. Both of these wildly inflated estimates contain more phantoms than people. The Episcopal church counts its members with reasonable care, and the official count for 1991 was 2,474,625 (Protestant Episcopal Church 1992).² Thus, the average weekly attendance of "less than 900,000" cited by HMC closely matches the 35-percent attendance rate reported by Gallup surveys and other poll data.

This does not explain why the proportion of GSS respondents identifying themselves as Episcopalians so much exceeds the actual proportion of Episcopalians in the population, but that interesting question can be left for another day.

Meanwhile, until better evidence is presented, the verdict on any statement that "church attendance in the United States is overreported" must be "Not Proven."

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¹ Because the Episcopal Church baptizes infants and counts all baptized persons as members, HMC decided that "our estimates of self-identified Episcopalians pertain to the entire population rather than adults" (p. 742, note 3).

² Confirmed by Bruce Woodcock, General Convention Office, October 1996.

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WHAT CHURCH OFFICIALS' REPORTS DON'T SHOW: ANOTHER LOOK AT CHURCH ATTENDANCE DATA*

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Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves (1993, henceforward HMC) conclude that, when asked in surveys about attending religious services, Americans overstate their actual weekly church attendance rates by a factor of two. They base their conclusion on administrative estimates they received from churches in one county in Ohio and on published data for 18 Roman Catholic dioceses.¹ From these data sources they speculate that church attendance may be falling, despite no evidence of change among Protestants in any of the survey records and evidence that the

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¹ Chaves and Cavendish (1994) include more dioceses in their subsequent analysis on Catholics' church attendance rates.