News



Parishioners receive Communion during Mass at St. John Catholic Church in Westminster, Maryland, in May 2017. (CNS/Chaz Muth)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Tempted to drop out of church? For those who treasure longevity, that may not be a good idea.

That's the view of Baldwin Way, a psychology professor at the Ohio State University, who led a study published this summer concluding that churchgoers can expect to live up to nine years longer than their more secular peers.

While God may want active worshipers to live longer, that is a theological proposition impossible to prove. But Way said there are plenty of plausible secular explanations as to why churchgoers live longer.

Researchers at Ohio State studied newspaper obituary columns in Des Moines, Iowa, as well as nationally, looking for evidence of church affiliation.

"The effect is real," Way told NCR. "It's a larger effect than gender." (Women have long been known, on average, to live longer than men.)

Even in the internet age, Way knows the importance of the newspaper obituary column from personal experience. His 85-year-old father, who lives outside Seattle, plans his week only after reading the obituaries, so he knows when to set aside time to attend funerals.

The impact of religion Way knows as a member of a Salvation Army church community in Columbus, Ohio, as well as a Vineyard group, an evangelical Christian outreach. He also spent years attending Catholic services. As a social scientist, Way is not trying to save souls, but his work illustrates the positive impact faith observance has on people's lives.

"There are benefits to being involved in a church community," he said. The theory he is looking at to explain his findings is that greater social connection leads to better physical and emotional health. Studying deaths is a good way to examine the connection because mortality remains an objective measure of health.

In contrast to more subjective reports on the health of subjects, "you are either dead, or you're not," said Way.

Religiously active people are able to postpone eternal judgment because they are more likely to be involved with others, Way theorizes. Volunteerism among

churchgoers is more pronounced.

Getting involved with others through a church community may be a key to increased longevity. Way also cited studies that note participation in religious ritual reduces stress.

"Social relationships are the biggest drivers of health," he said. Social science indicators note that the impact of social connections on health is more important than even smoking. He points out to his students, in a classroom adjacent to both a campus café and a gym, that the student meeting a friend over coffee is likely doing more for her health than a fellow student working out alone in the weight room.

In the national sample of the study, the impact of church affiliation was less than in Des Moines, selected because it is ethnically a more homogenous region. African-Americans, whether churchgoers or not, have a lower life expectancy than other groups.

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But even in the national study, the impact was five years extra longevity among the church-affiliated. The impact was felt most strongly in more culturally conservative regions of the country, particularly the South and the Midwest. Conversely, cities with relatively high rates of church affiliation and openness to new ideas and people — New York is one example — score higher on longevity than more liberal regions with low church affiliation, such as the Pacific Northwest.

Some researchers argue that church affiliation is simply another social network. Robert Putnam, a prominent sociologist, wrote a surprise bestseller *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, which argued that Americans are losing social connections. Putnam studied a decline in bowling leagues as an example of a trend toward greater social isolation.

Way argued that the jury is still out on whether church affiliation, of whatever denominational stripe, creates greater social bonds than other kinds of organizations. Social scientists aware of the connection sometimes note there can be a chicken-or-egg dispute. Do churches simply attract the healthier and more socially connected? This is a case that the impact of faith on people's lives is negligible. Also, previous research indicates that churchgoers are more likely to

avoid behaviors, such as excessive drinking, that decrease longevity.

Way, however, is inclined to believe that churches offer a dimension that other groups can't.

"Other social organizations can provide fellowship and support. But a church is unique because it provides meaning and purpose," he said.

Discovering those connections is a topic, according to Way, for further research. Meanwhile, Way and his father will continue to scour those obituary columns.

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