

Religious Change and Continuity in the United States: 2006-2012

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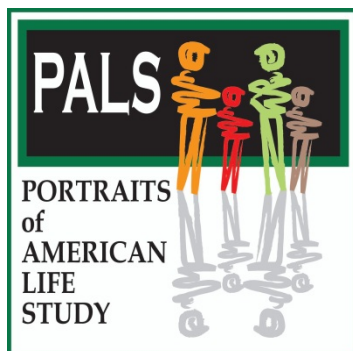


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Executive Summary

Examining the same adult Americans from 2006 to 2012, this report explores how Americans have changed and stayed the same in their religious beliefs and practices. We find that 15% of adult Americans switched religious traditions during this period, with nearly 40% of those switchers exiting religious traditions altogether. The next most common move was to Evangelical Protestantism from other faith traditions, including some who in 2006 were not in a religious tradition. We also find substantial volatility in worship attendance and congregational switching. Only 45% of adult Americans attend worship with the same frequency in 2012 as they did in 2006, and over one-third switched congregations. Other changes identified in this report are a declining confidence in clergy, an increased confidence in faith and God's care, and a substantial jump in the proportion of Americans who view all religions with equal respect.

Introduction

Compared to most developed nations, religion has played a continued influential role in American life. As part of the interest in understanding that role, the study of religious change has been of growing focus.

Religion can of course be studied in a myriad of ways. Religion scholars Roger Finke and Rodney Stark examined religious service attendance in the United States over the history of the nation—from 1776 to 2005—and found that religious service attendance and membership, as a whole, have increased over the centuries.¹

In a more limited time frame, but examining a much wider range of religion measures, religion scholar Mark Chaves studied trends from 1972 to approximately 2006. He found that the dominant trend in this period was two-fold. On a host of measures, stasis has been the pattern; religion has remained unchanged. When changes have been observed, he finds declines, such as in the percentage of people who interpret the Bible literally, word for word.²

Most recently, sociologist Philip Schwadel examined the changes in Americans strength of religious affiliation from 1974 to 2010. He found that the percentage who report a strong affiliation remained stable over the period (at about 40%), but that there was a drop from 1990 to 2010 in the percentage reporting somewhat/not very strong, as they shifted to being unaffiliated. Thus the percentage unaffiliated went from under 10% to nearly 20% in the past twenty years. When examining those who report strong affiliation by Christian religious tradition, he found that the percentage reporting a strong affiliation among Catholics has declined (from 45% to 35%). Conversely, he found that the percentage of Evangelical Protestants and Black Protestants who report a strong affiliation has increased (from 45% to 57%). He found no change for Mainline Protestants reporting a strong affiliation (about 37%).³

These and a few other studies have been tracking religious change and continuity in the United States. But these works use what are called cross-sectional studies. That is, studies that ask a new sample of people their views and behaviors each time the survey is conducted. What we have not had is a current, nationally representative survey that follows the very same people, to see if the same people are changing religiously.

This paper reports on general findings on religious identity, beliefs, and behaviors using the *Portraits of American Life Study* (PALS). It examines these measures from 2006 to 2012 for the same 1314 people, who are nationally representative of adult Americans.

¹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. 2005. *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

² Mark Chaves. 2011. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ Philip Schwadel. 2013. "Changes in Americans' Strength of Religious Affiliation, 1974-2010." *Sociology of Religion* 74(1): 107-128.

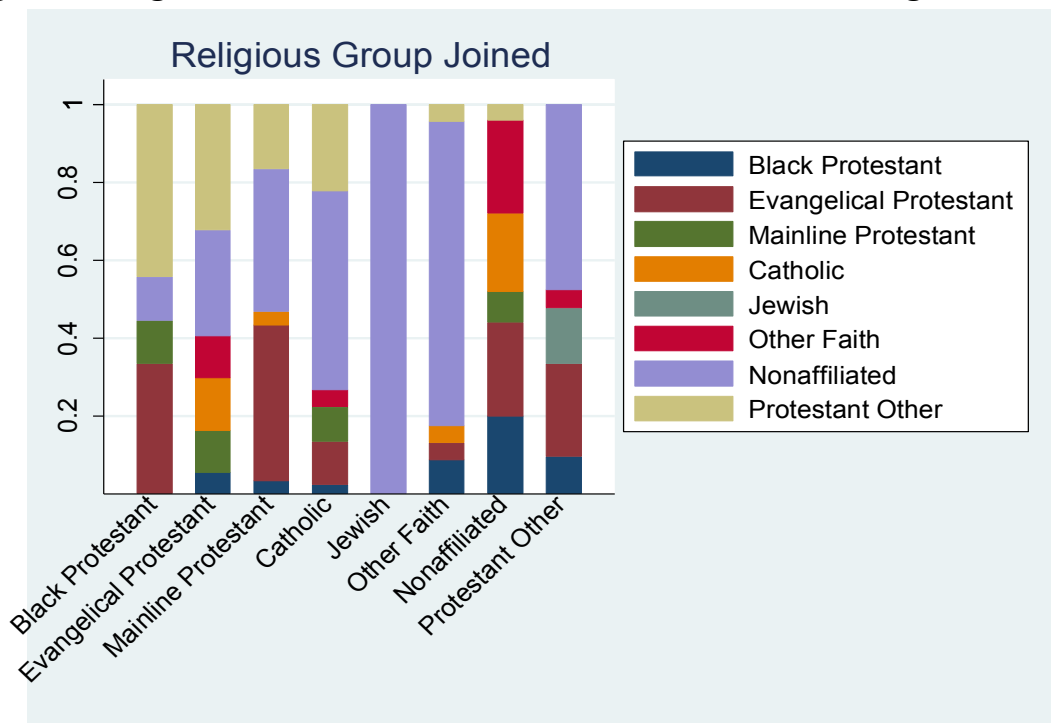
The Findings

A. Religious Traditions: 85% in the same religious tradition in 2012 as in 2006

We begin our assessment of religious change by examining whether adult Americans are switching religious traditions. We measure religious tradition using the common seven category scheme as developed by Steensland and colleagues,⁴ plus an additional category we add for those Protestants we are unable to classify (they told us they attended a Protestant congregation, but we were unable to reliably classify to which specific religious tradition the congregation belonged). These traditions are Black Protestant (those attending congregations in black Protestant denominations), Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other Faith, and the Nonaffiliated. For all of these traditions, except one, 80% or more of the people in the survey stayed in the same tradition between 2006 and 2012. The exception is, interestingly, those of Other Faiths (not Christian, not Jewish). Approximately 30% of those in the Other Faith category in 2006 had moved to another religious tradition by 2012.

Despite strong religious tradition continuity, people of every religious tradition did switch between 2006 and 2012. Where are they going? Figure 1 shows graphically where those who switched moved, organized by their 2006 tradition.

Figure 1: Religious Tradition Switched to in 2012, based on 2006 Religious Tradition



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1314 people interviewed in both years.

⁴ Brian Steensland, Jerry Z. Park, Mark D. Regnerus, Lynn D. Robinson, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Robert D. Woodberry. 2000. "The Measure of American Religion: Improving the State of the Art." *Social Forces* 79:291-318.

As Figure 1 suggests, when people switched religious traditions, the most common path (for 40%) was to switch to unaffiliated, that is, to no longer identifying with a religious tradition or be affiliated with a religious congregation. This was especially true of those of Other Faiths in 2006. Rather than converting or adopting another religious tradition, they most commonly (about 80% of the time) simply exited religious traditions, becoming unaffiliated. Only one person in the sample in 2006 that was Jewish was no longer Jewish in 2012, but that person became unaffiliated. Significant proportions of Other Protestant, Catholic, and to a lesser extent Mainline Protestants also became unaffiliated. Again, while the overwhelming proportion of people did not switch affiliations over the 2006-2012 period (85%), when they did, the most common path was to exit religious traditions altogether.

We have exceptions. Those who switched from Black Protestant rarely exited religious traditions, but instead switched to Other Protestant or Evangelical Protestant. Evangelical Protestants mostly switched to Other Protestant but about 25% of those who switched from this religious tradition became nonaffiliated. Overall, 20% of those who switch religious identities moved to Evangelical Protestantism, making it the most likely religious tradition to receive switchers.

Interestingly, about 15% of the Nonaffiliated in 2006 joined a religious tradition in 2012. While they joined across the entire range of religious traditions, they were most likely to become Evangelical Protestant or Other Faith, followed by Catholic and Black Protestant.

Who changes is not random. The younger—often searching for their overall identities—are significantly more likely to change religious identities than others. Also, compared to those who have not finished high school, those with a college degree are more likely to have changed religious identities over the six year period under study.

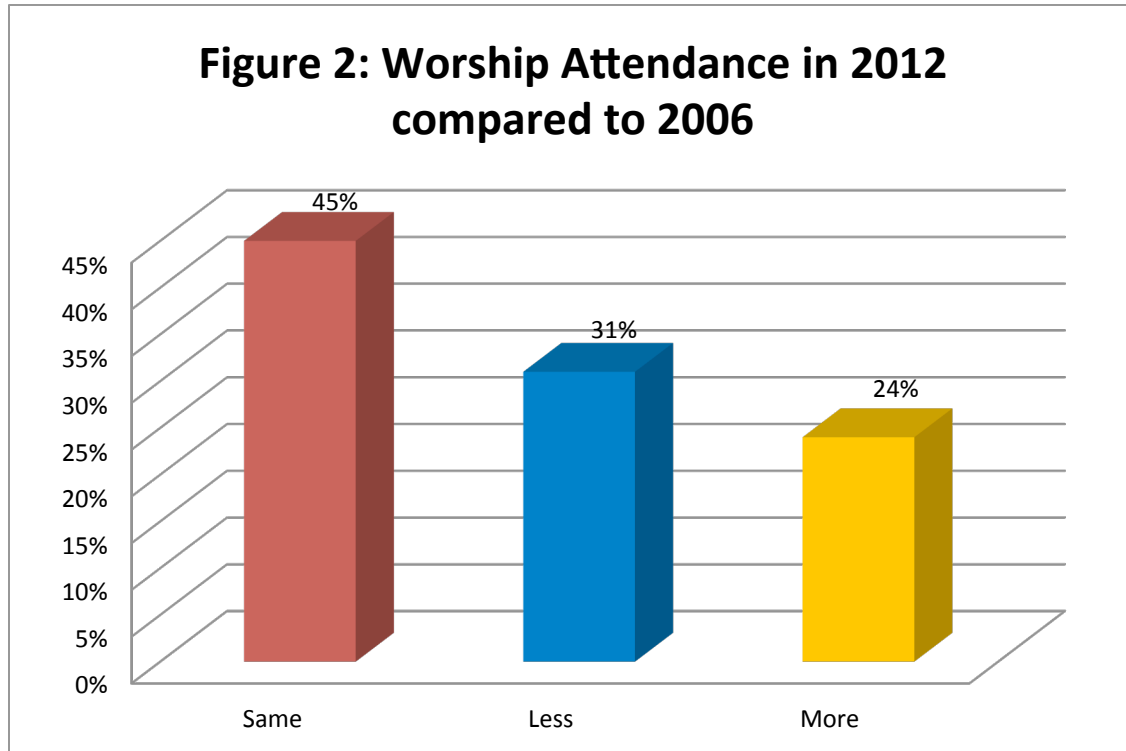
B. Worship Attendance: Much change

Worship attendance overall stayed statistically the same over this period from 2006 to 2012. However, because we have the same respondents we can see if this is true for everyone, or just for the population as a whole.

Compared to religious identity, worship attendance is more volatile. Only 45% of the PALS participants attended worship at the exact same level in 2012 as they did in 2006. Conversely, 31% attended less in 2012 than they had in 2006, and about a quarter (24%) attended more. While the percentage of those who attended less is somewhat larger than the percentage of those who attended more, as will be noted below, those who attended more made more dramatic jumps in attendance than did those who attend less. The end result, at the overall population level is that attendance remained statistically constant between 2006 and 2012.

Of those who attended less in 2012 than in 2006, the pattern was most common among those where were Jewish and Other Faiths. Many changes were minor, such as from 2 times per month to 1 time per month. But for 3% of those who attended less, the change was dramatic—from at least weekly attendance to never attending.

Of those who attended more in 2012 than in 2006, the pattern was most common among those who were Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Catholic. Again, many changes were minor, such as from 1 time per month to 2 times per month. But for 17% of those who attended more, the change was dramatic—from never to at least weekly.



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1314 people interviewed in both years.

C. Congregational Change: Why 1/3rd switched congregations

In both survey years, a bit less than 50% of the people in the sample were affiliated with a religious congregation. No statistical change was found during the study period.

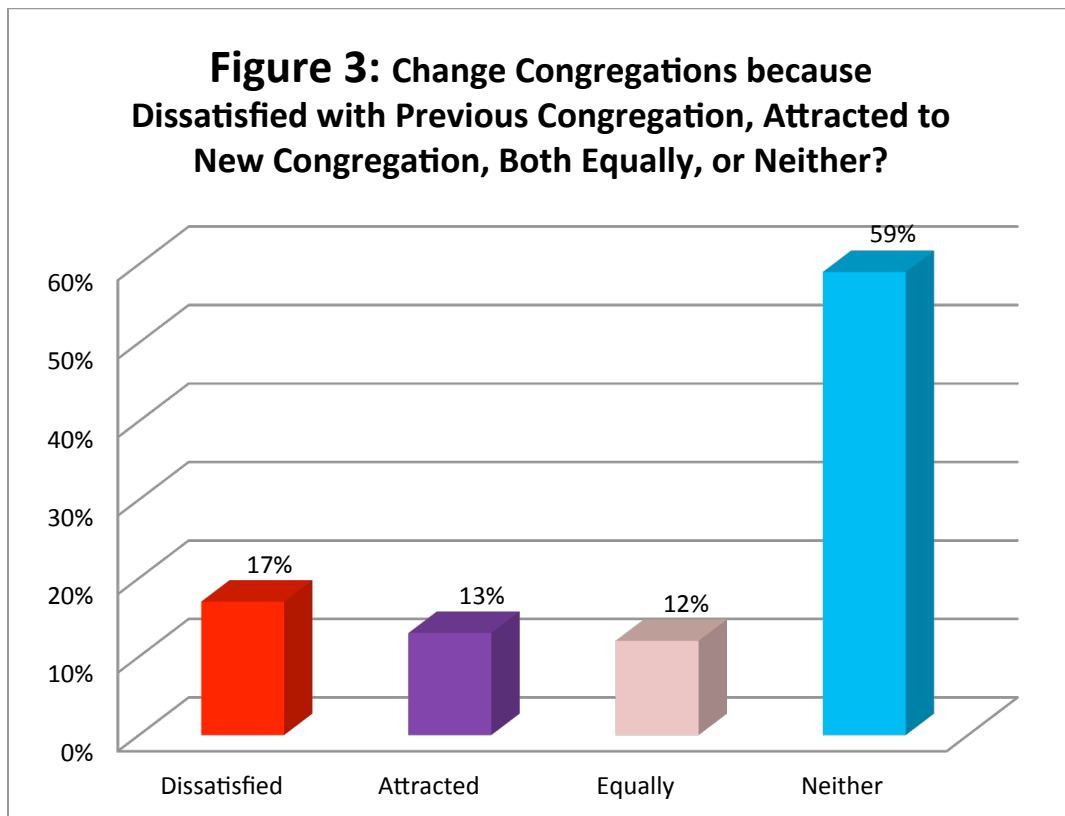
But of those attending congregations in both 2006 and 2012, fully one third (35%) had switched congregations. This is significant movement in but a six year period. PALS asked an extensive battery of questions of those who switched congregations, to better understand this high level of switching.

We first asked those who switched congregations if they did so primarily because they were dissatisfied with their previous congregation, primarily attracted to their new congregation, an equal combination of both dissatisfied with their previous congregation and attracted to their new congregation, or neither of these options.

As Figure 3 shows, 17% of switchers said the primary reason they changed congregations was because they grew dissatisfied with their former congregation. Another 13% of switchers said the

primary reason they changed congregations was because they became attracted to a new congregation, propelling them to change. And 12 percent of the switchers said they are in new congregation because they were both equally dissatisfied with their former congregation and attracted to their new congregation.

But none of these reasons—not individually or combined—approach the most common reason given. Nearly 6 out of every 10 switchers did so, they told us, for none of these reasons.



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1314 people interviewed in both years.

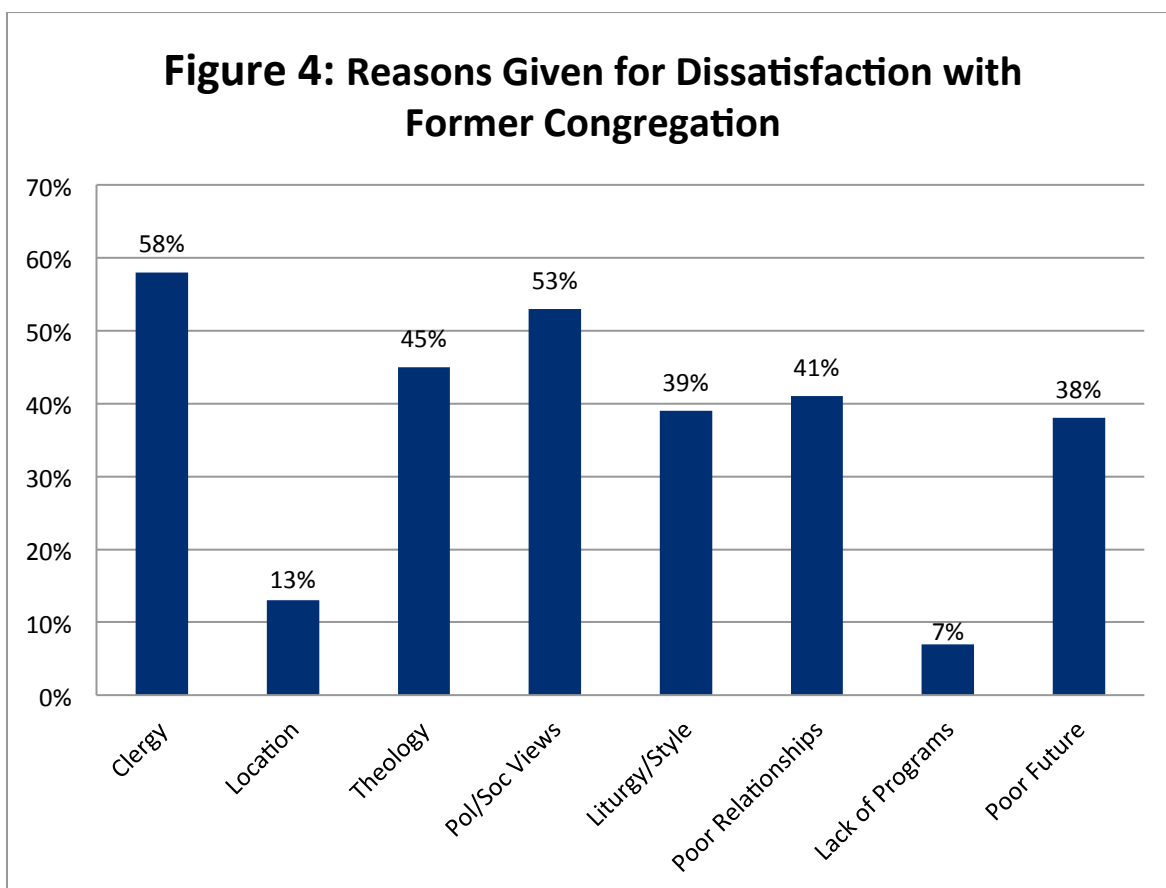
So if they switched, but it was due neither to being dissatisfied with the former congregation nor being attracted to their new congregation, what led to the change of congregations? That is exactly what we asked them.

The most common response—by nearly two-thirds of these switchers—was that they moved. Having moved, they were too far away from their former congregation and needed to find another. Good old American mobility, then, is thus a major reason why people switch congregations. What is more, because individuals exist within social networks, 9% of the “neither” switchers said it was a result of their family switching congregations, and them following.

And it is not just people who move. Another 11% of switchers giving the “neither” reason said that their congregation moved, and they chose to or were unable to move with it. Still another 10% said their congregation closed, forcing a move to another congregation.

We also asked those who reported switching congregations because they were dissatisfied with their former congregation why they were dissatisfied, providing them with several options based on our pre-testing. We let them give us more than one answer. Figure 4 displays the percentages for the various reasons. The most frequently given reason for dissatisfaction with their previous congregation was the clergy, a reason cited by 58% of the respondents who switched congregations. This was followed closely by having issues with the political or social views of the congregation (for example, too liberal, too conservative). Just over half (53%) cited this as a reason for dissatisfaction.

Also cited by a significant majority were issues with theology, liturgy or style of worship, poor relationships with others in the congregation, and a sense that the future of the congregation was not bright, that is, in the respondent’s view, the congregation was not heading in a positive direction. The location of the congregation and the presence of programs/activities were cited by very few switchers.

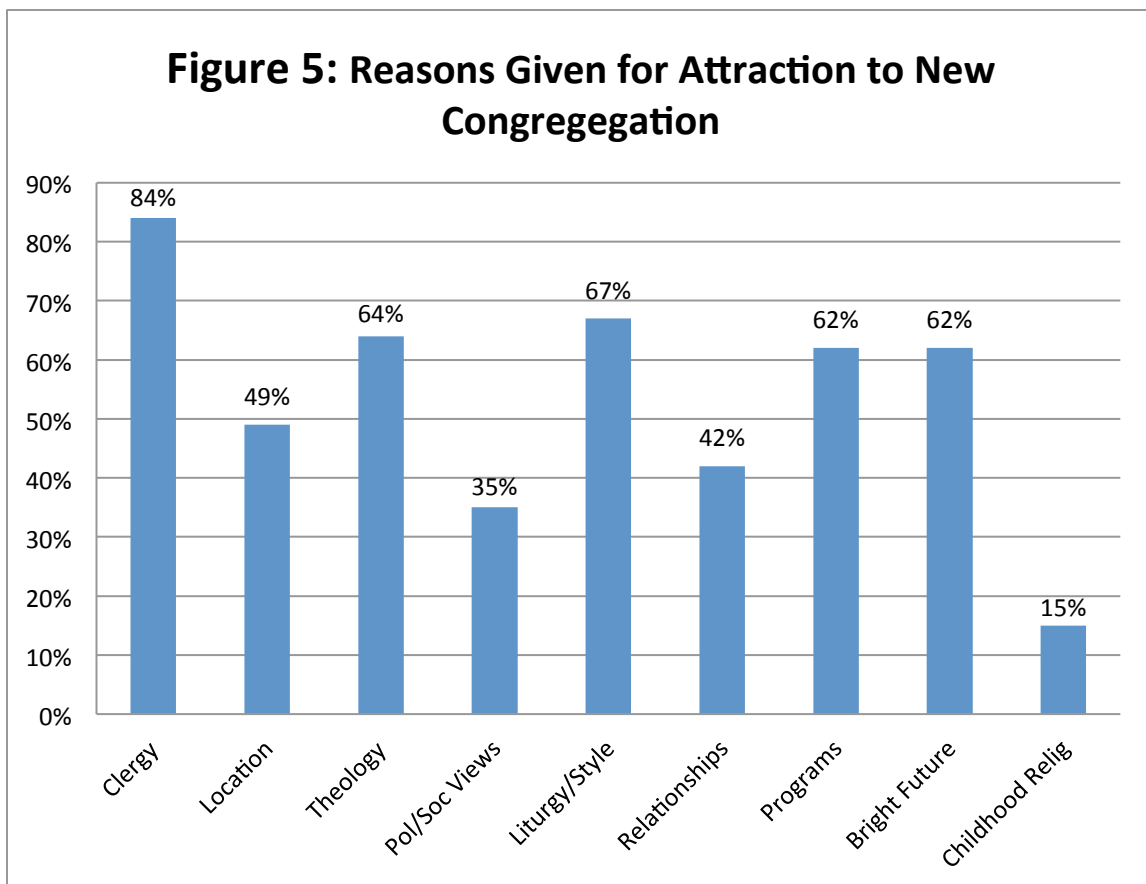


SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, respondents reporting “dissatisfied with previous congregation.”

As noted, respondents could cite more than one reason for their dissatisfaction. If they did cite more than one reason, we asked them to tell us which among their cited reasons was the single most important reason they left their former congregation. Interestingly, 29% said that *theology/religious beliefs* was the most important reason for leaving, followed by issues with the *clergy* (22%), and disagreements with the *political or social views* of the congregation (18%).

For those who switched congregations because they were attracted to another congregation, we asked a similar set of questions, to gauge what they found attractive about their new congregation. Again, those who reported switching primarily because they were attracted to their new congregation could give us multiple reasons why.

In a fascinating turn—and highlighting the central importance of religious leaders—not only were clergy cited most frequently by switchers primarily motivated due to dissatisfaction with their former congregation, but also by switchers primarily motivated by attraction to a new congregation. A massive 84% cited the clergy at their new congregation as a reason they were attracted there. Other reasons—though cited frequently—pale to the clergy reason.



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, respondents reporting “attracted to new congregation.”

About two-thirds of respondents’ switching due to attraction to their new congregation cited the theology/religious views, the liturgy/worship style, the available program, and their assessment

of a bright future as reasons for their attraction. This last reason—a perceived “bright future” matters and should be researched more, most particularly, what factors are used by people to judge a congregation to have a bright future? Our data do not say specifically, but do point to the need to a congregation presenting itself as moving forward with purpose and direction.

About half of the “attraction switchers” were drawn to their new congregation in part by its location. Another 4 out of 10 cited personal relationships with people in their new congregation as important factor in attracting them. Whether being invited to visit by these friends or family, or simply feeling like they “belonged,” for a significant minority, relationships matter in attracting people to a new congregation. Least frequently cited as reasons for attraction are the political or social views of the congregation (35%) and being drawn back to the religion, faith tradition, or congregation of their childhood (cited by just 15%).

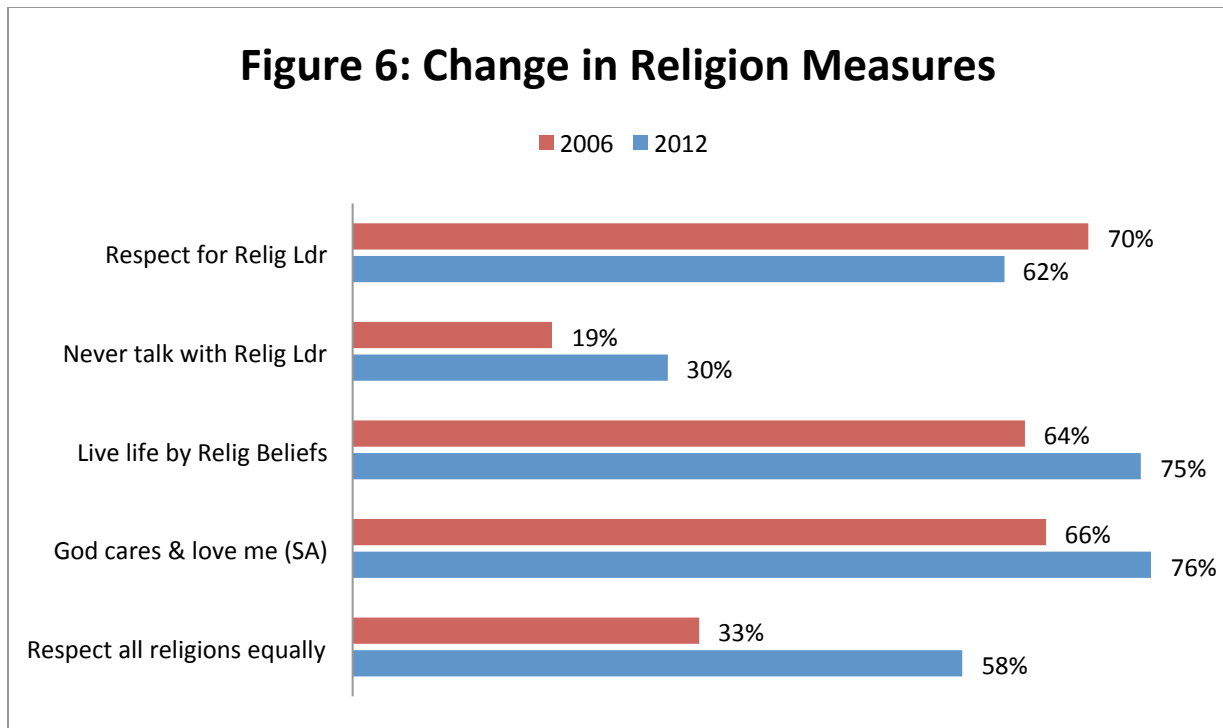
Which factors were named as the single most important attraction factor? Three are in a statistical dead heat: clergy (23%), theology/religious views (23%), and liturgy/worship style (22%). The only other reason given by more than 9% of the respondents was location, cited as the most important attraction factor by 17%. Assessing the factors cited as most important, all are centrally religious rather than social, suggesting what perhaps should be obvious but is often overlooked: people are drawn to religious congregations based on the strength of their religious aspects—the clergy, the theology, the liturgy.

D. Dominant Continuity, Key Change

We examined 51 other measures of religious beliefs and practices. The overwhelming story is amazing continuity—for 45 of these 51 measures the results were identical in 2006 and 2012 (see the list in the appendix). Our data allow us to see that for all measures, individual people change their beliefs and practices over the six year period. But at the population level the outcome is remarkable consistency.

It is rather as if the larger U.S. structure supports a given level of religion, so that while individual people are often changing their beliefs and practices, they merely change places with one another. Someone loses belief at the same time that someone gains it; someone drops out of serving in their congregation, and are replaced by another; someone stops interpreting their scriptures literally while another begins doing so; someone stops praying while another utters a first prayer; someone grows angry with their god, while another forgives. *The end result of this individual-level change is group-level consistency, and religion proceeds on.*

The smaller story—though still important—is the 6 of the 51 measures that showed change. These six measures actually fall into 3 sets of 2 measures each, which can be described as a declining confidence in clergy, an increased in confidence in religious belief and God’s care, and a dramatic increase in equal respect for all religions.



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*

As shown in Figure 6, respect for religious leaders declined somewhat between 2006 and 2012, and less people talked with their religious leaders. Given the number of well-publicized clergy scandals that occurred over this period, we see there was impact on Americans overall confidence in clergy, as indicated by the percentage respecting and talking with clergy.

Figure 6 also shows an increase in adult Americans who say they live their life by religious belief, from two-thirds to three-quarters. What is more, a similar shift occurred in the percentage of Americans who strongly agree that God cares and loves them. Thus, as confidence for clergy declined, it was in a sense replaced by greater confidence in religious belief and God’s care.

Finally, we asked in both years two questions on respect for religions. The first question asked people what religion, other than their own, they *most* respect. The second question asked people what religion, other than their own, they *least* respect. The most respected religion in both years was Judaism, though the percentage naming it declined from 24% in 2006 to 15% in 2012. No other religion was named by even 10% of people. The least respected religion in both years was Islam, named by about 20% of the *PALS* participants. Interestingly, the second most named least respected religion in 2006 was Mormonism (also known as the Church of Latter Day Saints), named by 12%, but it declined to just 5% in 2012, the year that Mormon Mitt Romney ran for president of the United States.

But the most central story from these two questions—the religion most respect, the religion least respect—is the dramatic change in people who said they respect all religions equally. In 2006, just one-third of the *PALS* participants said they respected all religions equally. By 2012, that percentage had shot up to 58%. Clearly, a substantial number of people changed their minds over this six year period, and they changed them toward the direction of greater tolerance.

Conclusion

From 2006 to 2012 we found substantial movement of individuals in their religious beliefs. People change, and seemingly do so quite often. But impressively, the product of this individual-level volatility, in most cases, is population-level continuity. Surveys that gather a new sample each time the survey is conducted miss the dramatic changes occurring at the individual level.

And it is though changes that must be studied, for we know far less why people change in the directions they do, and if they continue to change or eventually settle into relatively constant religious beliefs and practices.

Appendix: Religious Measures with No Statistical Change, 2006-2012

Religion Measures		2006	2012
My congregation feels like family	Strongly Agree	46%	48%
My congregation meets my spiritual needs		54%	56%
Feel like an outsider in congregation		04%	04%
Satisfied with preaching		57%	55%
Satisfied with music		54%	57%
Satisfied with religious education		49%	45%
Satisfied with youth/children's programs		48%	44%
Satisfied with how money is used		46%	47%
Satisfied with how major decisions are made		40%	42%
Close to leader of congregation?	Not at All	18%	21%
Had a leadership position in congregation in past 3 (6) years	Yes	21%	23%
Served on a committee in past 3 (6) years		20%	20%
Organized groups/events in past 3 (6) years		20%	21%
Done any congregational work for greater than 1 hour per month		68%	67%
Participated in activities/groups related to congregation	Never	26%	29%
How often felt appreciated by people in congregation	Not at All	00%	02%
Considered dropping out of religion	Yes	12%	14%
Importance of religious faith	Most Important	18%	21%
Importance of God or spirituality		25%	28%
Importance of religious faith to spouse/partner		17%	18%
Believe in God	Yes	92%	87%
God is an impersonal force, not a personal being		29%	28%
What matters is to be a good person, not religious beliefs	Strongly A	28%	32%
Muhammad was the holy prophet of God	Yes	05%	05%
Jesus Christ was the divine son of God		73%	73%
Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead		62%	62%
Experienced a miracle		37%	40%
Experienced divine healing		30%	27%
Angel has helped respondent		27%	31%
Devil, demons, or evil spirits exist		67%	68%
Believe in reincarnation		24%	24%
Believe in heaven, where people live with God forever		80%	77%
Believe in hell, a place of punishment for sin		63%	64%
Holy Scriptures are inspired	Fully	59%	61%
Read Holy Scriptures in last year	Yes	64%	60%
Belong to a study group		19%	14%
Pray at meals	Never	25%	26%
God created earth in 6 24-hour days	Agree	41%	45%
Felt God punished me for my sins	Never	49%	51%
Felt angry at God		53%	54%
Wondered whether abandoned by God		57%	57%
Had doubts about faith		54%	55%
Would like to attend religious services more	Yes	48%	48%
Would like to attend religious services less		07%	07%
How often attend religious education classes	Never	62%	65%

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006 & 2012. Response categories listed. If not listed, response category is the same as the previous measure. No changes in this chart are statically significant.