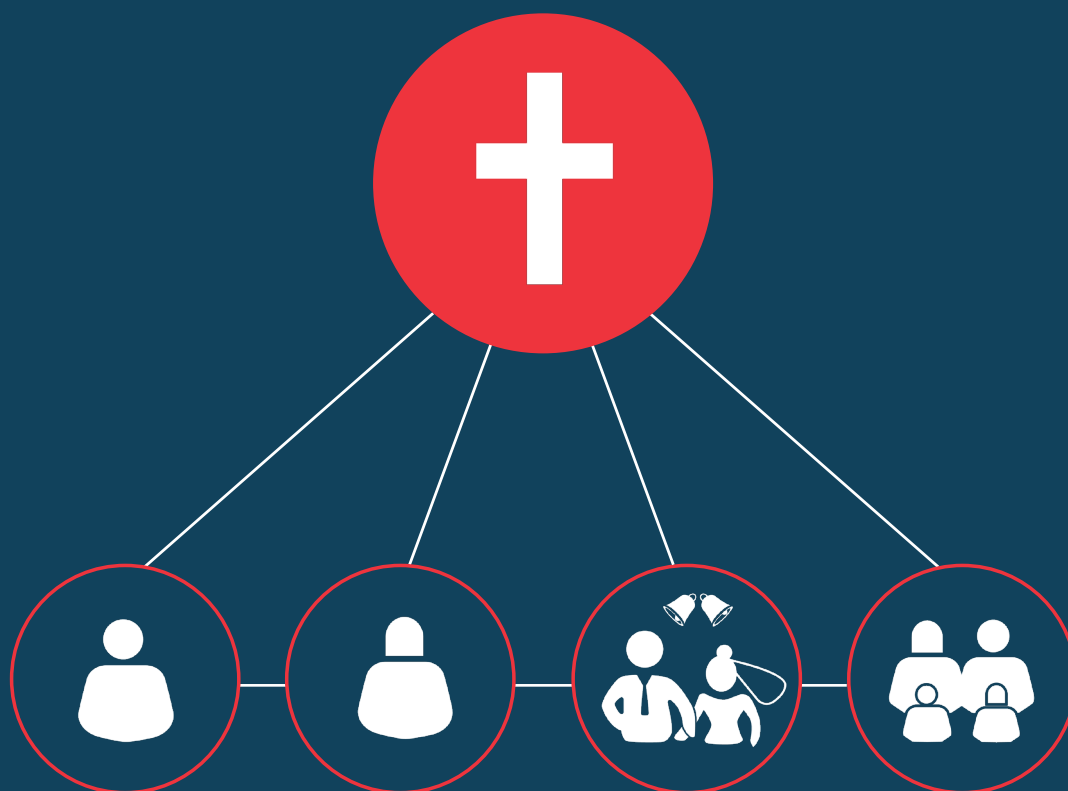




COMMUNIO



NATIONWIDE  
STUDY ON

# Faith & Relationships

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Afterword by John Stonestreet

Revised for Fall 2023 Print Publication

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Christian decline over the last 40 years in the United States has prompted numerous explanations advanced by experts, pastors, church leaders, and those in the media, most of which are either wrong or, at best, incomplete.

This gap in understanding increasingly leads pastors, church leaders, synods, and evangelists to treat the visible symptoms rather than the underlying root causes of why most people no longer attend church.

The Communion Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships reveals that the collapse in marriage and the resulting decline in resident fatherhood may offer the best explanation for the decline of Christianity in the United States. These conclusions are drawn from the results of a nationwide survey of 19,000 Sunday church attendees conducted during worship in 112 evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic congregations in 13 different states.

Overall, the survey found 80 percent of all Sunday church attendees in the United States grew up in a continuously married home with both biological parents at a time where this is becoming increasingly rare. This trend held across age groups and was visible among church-going young adults, especially those under age 30. For example:

- 80 percent of all never-married, Sunday churchgoers between age 25-29 grew up in a continuously married home at a time when less than half of this age group in the US population

did so. Furthermore, 87 percent, or nearly 9 out of 10 of all never-married men in church on Sunday grew up in a continuously married home.

- So, while more than 1 in 2 adults under age 30 grew up without continuously married parents, just 1 in 10 church-attending, never-married men from ages 25-29 were without continuously married parents. In other words, boys who grew up in homes with married parents are considerably more likely to attend church regularly as adults.

Family decline appears to fuel faith decline. This study concludes that the overall population of the religious nones is unlikely to stabilize until 25-30 years after family structure has stabilized.

Loneliness has been defined by experts in psychology as a state of mind with the perception of being alone and isolated.<sup>1</sup> Being lonely has been found to have the same public health effect as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.<sup>2</sup> According to the US Surgeon General's May 2023 advisory, approximately half of all US adults are experiencing loneliness.<sup>3</sup> In our survey, just 22 percent of church goers are in this group. But single church goers are over 3 times more likely to be considered lonely than their married

## FAMILY STRUCTURE SHAPES FAITH:

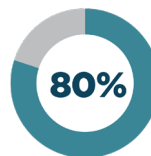
*Church Goers Far More Likely to Have Resident Fathers*



**1/2**

### Less than half

of all young adults today had continuously married parents through childhood.



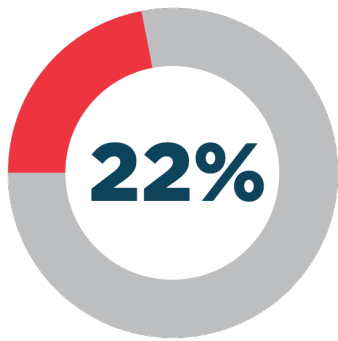
**Yet ...**

**80 percent** of all church goers had continuously married parents through childhood. This trend held across age groups and was visible among young adults



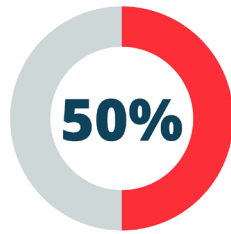
**87 percent** of all 25-29 year old never-married men in church had continuously married parents.

## LONELINESS AMONG CHURCH GOERS



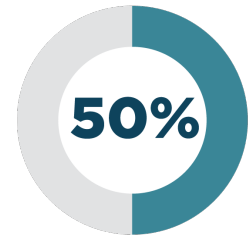
Only 22 percent of church goers are considered lonely.

“Approximately half of all US adults are experiencing loneliness.”



MARRIED

VS



SINGLE

Single church goers are more than 3 times as likely to be considered lonely than their married counterparts. **More so than widows, loneliness levels are higher among the never married between ages 30-39 years old.**

church-going counter parts. Just 15 percent of married people in church are considered lonely while more than 50 percent of all singles are considered lonely with the higher loneliness reported not among widows, but among never-married men and women ages 30-39.

Our survey also found that roughly 1 in 5 married church goers struggle in their marriage. The gap in relationship satisfaction between married men and women is substantial as women are 62 percent more likely to report struggling than married men.

When compared to the married, cohabiting church goers were substantially more likely to report struggling in their relationship. Cohabiting women were 76 percent more likely

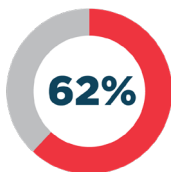
to struggle than married women and 85 percent more likely to struggle than a cohabiting man. Both cohabiting men and women were far more likely to report being lonely than married men and women.

To evangelize fruitfully in the twenty-first century, we must reverse the declining number of marriages, improve marital health, and increase the effectiveness of fathers in those marriages. By addressing these three issues, we can spark a sustained revival in Christian faith and active church attendance. The link between marriage and faith is clear, yet 85 percent of all churches in the United States report spending \$0.00 annually on marriage and relationship ministry.<sup>4</sup>

## THE STATE OF CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS

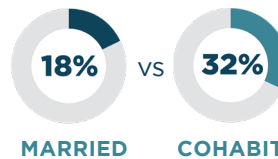


**1 in 5** married people struggle in their marriage.

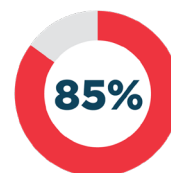


**Married Women** are 62 percent more likely to struggle in marriage than men.

### *Cohabitors Far More Likely to Struggle than the Married*



While 18 percent of married people report struggling, **cohabitators are 78 percent more likely to report struggling in their relationship.**



**Cohabiting women are 85 percent more likely** to say they struggle in their relationship than cohabiting men.

## MARRIAGE DECLINE PRECEDED AND FUELED FAITH DECLINE

The sexual revolution, widely seen as beginning with the introduction of the birth control pill in the United States in 1960, decoupled sex from marriage and transformed the family.

In 1960, 5 percent of all births were outside of marriage. By 1970, nonmarital births had more than doubled. That number nearly reached 20 percent in 1980 and nearly 30 percent by 1990.<sup>5</sup>

This trend coincided with an explosion in divorce. According to analysis produced by the Social Capital Project of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee, 8 percent of all ever-married women between age 50-54 had divorced in 1960. By 1970, that number had reached 11 percent, 16 percent in 1980, and was 36 percent by 2010.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, 40 percent of all births were to unmarried women.<sup>7</sup>

This all profoundly changed the structure of American homelife for children. Over the last decade, less than half of all 17-year-olds reached their birthday with two, continuously married, biological parents in the home.<sup>8</sup>

Sometime between 1986 and 1991, 25 to 30 years after the start of the sexual revolution, religious non-affiliation began to grow in the United States.<sup>9</sup> In 1980, religious “nones” were only 7 percent of the US population. By the late 1990s, they had grown to 13 percent and 22 percent by the late 2010s. Today, 29 percent of the population are counted among the nones.<sup>10</sup> A graph of nonmarital births, divorce, and religious non-affiliation trends over the last 60 years is included in the appendix.

Scholars have identified the phenomenon of “generation succession” as a major driver in the decline of religious affiliation.<sup>11</sup> There is widespread recognition that generational cohorts differ in their religiosity and as they begin to die off, younger generations are less religious. These scholars have argued that shifting politics and views of personal autonomy are the key driver of this religious shift.

This conclusion is inadequate. Changing family

structures over the last 60 years between generations is statistically significant and precedes, and likely shapes the formation of personal views, political perspectives, and behaviors including church attendance. It helps shape the zeitgeist.

Research has found substantial evidence that most who stop attending church cannot provide a singular reason or event for why they stopped attending church but describe their departure as “gradually drift[ing] away and, at some point, decid[ing] they no longer believed.”<sup>12</sup>

The reality is many fundamental decisions, such as someone’s faith practice, operate on a deeper psychological level. A person’s family of origin provides deep and long-lasting influences that many are not aware of on a conscious level.<sup>13</sup> Few can identify a deficit in their relationship with their father as a key driver in their faith or church affiliation decision. Yet, research indicates that nonresident fathers may indeed play an important role in a person’s faith affiliation, which we will review later in this study.

A survey respondent’s family of origin remains an exogenous factor not able to be controlled by the respondent’s changing attitudes or opinions. The structure of a person’s childhood home always precedes in time and place any adult decision to attend church.

It is noteworthy that overall 74 percent of all single and married church attendees ages 18-29 grew up in a continuously married home through age 18. Those percentages are higher for specific subgroupings.

- 77 percent of all church attending men ages 18-29 grew up with continuously married parents.
- Of church attending men ages 18-29 who fall in the never-married category, 81 percent grew up in a continuously married home. That number is 87 percent among all never married men in church between the ages of 25-29.
- 76 percent of all never married women ages 25-29 grew up in a continuously married home while 73 percent of all women between ages 18-29 in church on Sunday grew up in a continuously married home.

This trend held for those ages 30-59. In all, 80 percent of all Sunday church goers ages 50-59 grew up in a continuously married home, 74 percent of all Sunday church goers ages 40-49 and 72 percent of those age 30-39 did so as well.

Causation is notoriously difficult to prove. However, the overall homogeneity in the families of origin from church goers in various generations (Gen Z all the way through the youngest Baby Boomers) is striking. The absence of a proportionate number of church attendees who grew up in homes without married parents across all recent generations suggests movement in family structure is at the heart of the decline in church participation.

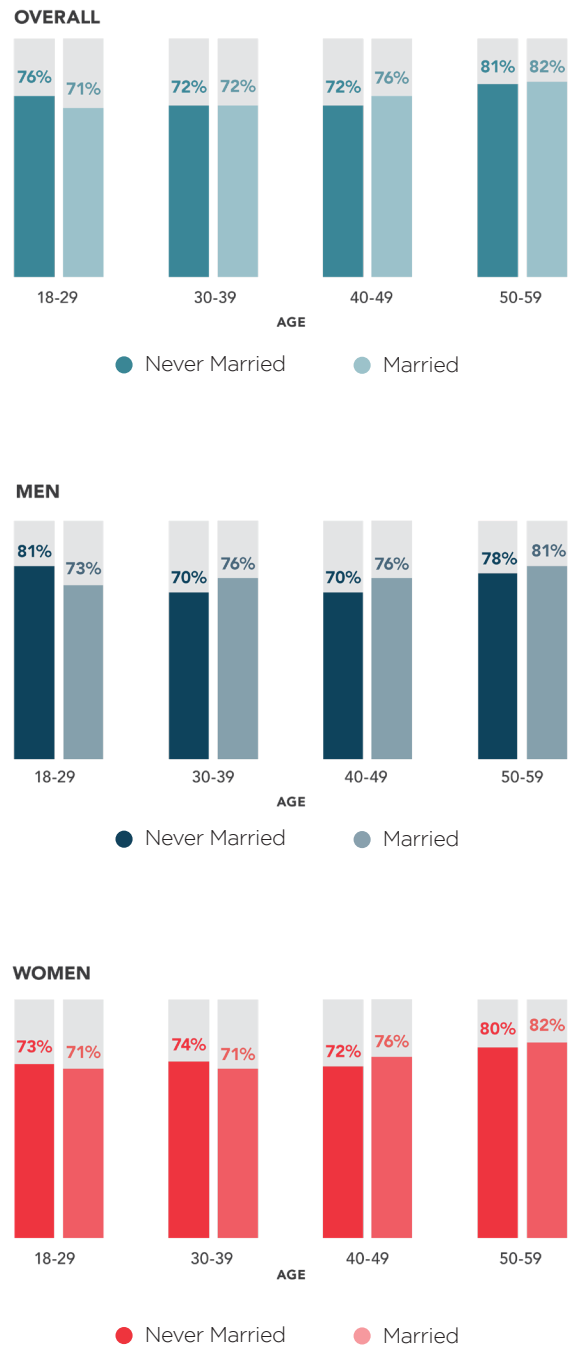
As we will explore further, the sharp and culturally disruptive decline in married fathers over the past 60 years appears to be driving the decline in active church participation on a societal level over the past 40 years. Family structure changes appear to explain the differences in religious behavior among the different generational cohorts.

Indeed, this finding is not entirely new.

“  
**The sharp and culturally disruptive decline in married fathers over the past 60 years appears to be driving the decline in active church participation.”**

### SUNDAY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Percent given are those who grew up in a continuously married home through childhood



Prior research has shown that the break-up of the family through divorce often produces religious non-affiliation among the children.<sup>14</sup> Separately, Mary Eberstadt, a noted writer and social thinker, identified this link between family and faith. While she has written multiple books on the effects of the sexual revolution, her 2014 book, *How the West Really Lost God*, provided compelling evidence that the decline of the family throughout history may explain much of the West's retreat from religious faith.

As far back as the 1940s, Harvard sociologist Carl Zimmerman also hit upon this close relationship noting that historic eras where the family is in decline "are always periods of disbelief."<sup>15</sup>

The data gathered from this nationwide survey conducted during worship from church attendees on a Sunday provides a new way to confirm this relationship between family and faith.

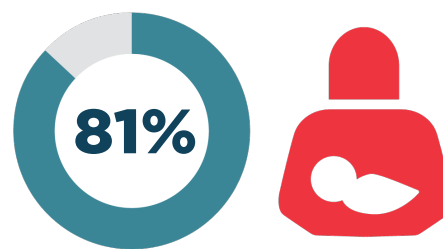
## MARRIAGE, FATHERHOOD, AND CHILDHOOD OUTCOMES

To understand the significant role a married father plays in faith transmission, it is helpful to step back and look at the larger role a father plays in the overall emotional health of his children and then come back to its relationship with faith practice.

Indeed, the collapse of fatherhood in the home (as experienced through marriage) is associated with increases in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). The more ACEs a child experiences, the greater the likelihood that child will live in poverty, suffer depression, commit a violent crime, or struggle in his life as an adult.<sup>16</sup> A child who experiences married fatherhood throughout his childhood will, on average, experience far fewer ACEs than one who does not.<sup>17</sup>

Men who arrive at unwed fatherhood through divorce or through not marrying a child's mother are apt to become nonresident fathers.<sup>18</sup>

Nonresident fathers are far less involved in the daily lives of their children than resident fathers. A majority of nonresident fathers have contact with their children less than once per week and less than monthly contact within two years of birth.<sup>19</sup> These fathers are, statistically



**81 percent** of single parents raising children are mothers.

**“The most highly engaged nonresident fathers ... are unable to maintain anything beyond once-per week contact with their children.”**

speaking, much less likely to become the archetypal “authoritative father” who generates optimal parenting outcomes for their children.<sup>20</sup> An authoritative father is one who develops parenting relationships with a healthy balance between closeness and warmth as well as the instruction and discipline that is firm but not overly coercive.<sup>21</sup>

Married fathers are, of course, not guaranteed to become successful parents. However, because married fathers are nearly always resident fathers, they are much more likely to become the balanced father that raises thriving children.<sup>22</sup>

While it might be common sense to most Americans, many of our nation's elite appear less interested in recognizing the link between healthy fatherhood and the institution of marriage. A growing amount of philanthropy and public policy is geared toward mitigating the effects from the collapse of marriage while forgoing any attempt at treating the root cause.

Many secular elites have given up on the idea that

restoring marriage is a good thing at all. Some recognize that while marriage produces the best outcomes, restoring it will be impossible. One progressive scholar has begun to advocate for policy changes to reinvent modern fatherhood absent marriage.<sup>23</sup> The success of such an undertaking seems unlikely when one considers that even the most highly engaged nonresident fathers (the top 32 percent of all nonresident fathers) as a cohort are unable to maintain anything beyond once-per week contact with their children.<sup>24</sup>

Mothers, on the other hand, do not need a host of private and public programs to encourage them to raise their children. A mother's physiology provides a strong drive to raise their children, but men lack a similar biological drive to do the same.<sup>25</sup> Today, 81 percent of single parents raising children are mothers.<sup>26</sup> Marriage has always created the necessary social reinforcement and sense of purpose for men to function as resident fathers who help raise and nurture their children.<sup>27</sup>

## FATHERS AND FAITH

This link between marriage and fatherhood is not limited to positive outcomes in social mobility, education, and overall flourishing—it is also strongly linked to faith. Indeed, a growing body of research on religion shows that a child's relationship with his or her father is critical for faith practice. A four-decade, longitudinal study following 350 families and over 3,000 people across multiple generations published by Oxford University Press seeking to understand reasons for effective religious transmission found:

“...That, for religious transmissions, having a close bond with one's father matters even more than a close relationship with the mother. Clearly the quality of the child's relationship with his or her father is important for the internalization of the parent's religious tradition, beliefs, and practices.”<sup>28</sup>

The researchers go on to conclude:

“Closeness to fathers matters more than closeness to mothers in religious transmission. Among Evangelical fathers, there is a 25-point difference in [the professed faith] similarity [between parent- child] for children

who feel emotionally close to fathers compared to those who are not close; for Evangelical mothers the difference is just 1 percentage point. A similar pattern exists for Mainline and Catholics.”

Research by Dr. Paul Vitz, emeritus professor of psychology at New York University, sheds further light here. Vitz shows that the failure for a child to form a healthy attachment to his or her father often manifests itself in the later loss of faith, interest in New Age spirituality, or the manifestation of agnosticism or atheism.<sup>29</sup>

While unmarried fathers can become effective fathers, in general and on average, unmarried fatherhood does not produce the parenting styles that both lead to human flourishing<sup>30</sup> and adequate faith modeling and formation.<sup>31</sup>

All of this largely explains why both single and married adults who grew up in continuously married homes make up the vast majority of Sunday attendance in churches. Because our family of origin remains an exogenous factor, it is of course impossible for a religious person to choose to grow up in a continuously married home. An adult's decision to attend church is necessarily influenced by the conditions of their childhood.



**In the 21st century West, adults who grew up with married parents appear most frequently to be the healthy soil for the seeds of faith to flourish.”**

Not all adults who stop attending church do so because of a failure in their parents' marriage or a failure in their relationship with their father. Conversely, the failure of a parent's marriage does not always mean an adult will not attend church. For example, the survey found that 1 in 5 attendees at church on Sunday grew up in a home that did not remain married through childhood. Yet, the preponderance of data on the families of origin of church attendees should cause Christian leaders to see the environment produced by a healthy, faithful marriage as a vitally important, but not a sufficient, criteria for effectively transmitting Christian faith at a societal scale.

In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower. In it, the sower throws seed and some fell along the path and the birds ate them. Other seeds fell on rocky soil but were scorched by the sun. Other seeds fell among thorns and were choked when they grew. Finally, "other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."<sup>32</sup>

In the 21st century West, adults who grew up with married parents appear most frequently to be the healthy soil for the seeds of faith to flourish.

## **IT'S A FEATURE, NOT A BUG**

Some critics have concluded that Christianity, and religion in general, is a vestige from more primitive times and has no place in today's post-modern world.<sup>33</sup> Others might conclude that the Church's insistence on the value of marriage and resident fatherhood is just further evidence of the anachronistic nature of Christianity.

To Christians, this close connection of marriage and fatherhood to faith practice reinforces their faith.

Indeed, one could say, "It is a feature and not a bug."

In commerce, when a malfunction or 'bug' is found inside a product, it is seen as a defect that, at times, even requires a full refund on the price paid for that product. A feature of a product is something intended by its designer to be useful in that product. These recent findings on the deep connection between Christian faith, marriage, and resident fatherhood serve to reinforce these core features put there by the Designer millennia ago.

Christianity is the world religion where God reveals himself eternally as Father and where scripture analogizes God's love for humanity and the Church through the marital embrace.<sup>34</sup> We continually see God pursuing His People as a spouse who runs after his bride.

- The Bible begins and ends with a marriage, and heaven is itself revealed as the eschatological wedding feast.<sup>35</sup>
- The Old Testament is replete with spousal descriptions of God's love for his people—from the Song of Solomon, Isaiah, the Psalms, the powerful story of Hosea and in many, many other places.<sup>36</sup>
- In the New Testament, the Church is called Christ's Bride and his love is described in spousal language.<sup>37</sup> For the Christian, God becomes Our Father, and the central message of the gospel is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."<sup>38</sup>

Our survey findings suggest that fewer people seem to



**Christians of all traditions must find ways to restore healthy marriages to our families, to our churches, and throughout society more broadly if the gospel can hold and again gain ground in America and across the rest of the West."**



attend church or accept God as their heavenly Father when they have not experienced a resident father. That is to say, those who avoid church are statistically more likely to have an estranged, difficult, or absent relationship with their father than those who do attend church. Those who lack married parents are many times more likely to lack a healthy father in the home, and they tend not to pass through the church's doors as adults.<sup>39</sup>

It is possible that some Christians and church leaders may be uncomfortable with such a focus on social science arguments when explaining or discussing evangelism and the supernatural gift of faith. The author of this study notes that like Augustine, we believe all truth is God's truth.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as Christians, we believe God is sovereign and all powerful, so, the Holy Spirit is not limited by our social science findings or analysis.

Yet, in Divine Revelation, it is clear that God has chosen to use the human experience of marriage and family as a principle to instruct humanity on salvation and His very identity. Indeed, the example and attractiveness of Christian marriage in ancient Rome played a large role in the conversion of the ancient world.<sup>41</sup>

Christians of all traditions must find ways to restore healthy marriages in our families, in our churches, and throughout society more broadly if the gospel can hold and again gain ground in America and across the rest of the West.

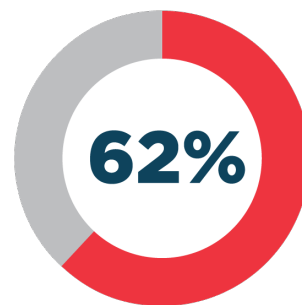
## THE STATE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

With marriage so integral for both understanding Christian soteriology, or salvation teaching, and to ensure faith transmission, it is vital for pastors and church leaders to both know and improve the health of Christian marriage nationally and within their own congregations.

In our nationwide survey, every church attendee who reported being in a relationship (married, engaged, seriously dating, or cohabiting) was asked a question often used by academics to measure their relationship health.



**1 in 5** Christians in church on Sunday are struggling in their marriage.



**Women in church** are 62 percent more likely to report struggling in their marriage than men in church.

# 109%

**Married women** in their 30s are more than twice as likely to report struggling in their marriage than married men in their 30s.

The question has five possible answers and if the person reported being only “somewhat satisfied” or worse in their relationship, that person is less likely to experience marital success.<sup>42</sup> Throughout this study, we will refer to this group as those who report struggling in their marriage.

What stands out in the data is the gap in relationship health reported by married men and women. In all, just 13 percent of married men report struggling while 21 percent of married women report the same. This means a married woman in church on Sunday is 62 percent more likely to report struggling than a married man. This gap in marital satisfaction is numerically close to the gap seen in which spouse more frequently seeks divorce. Women account for roughly 70 percent of those who initiate a marital breakup.<sup>43</sup>

While the survey did not ask whether a person’s spouse attended church on Sunday, this gap in marital satisfaction may well be associated with the fact that there are 50 percent more married women in church on Sunday morning than married men.

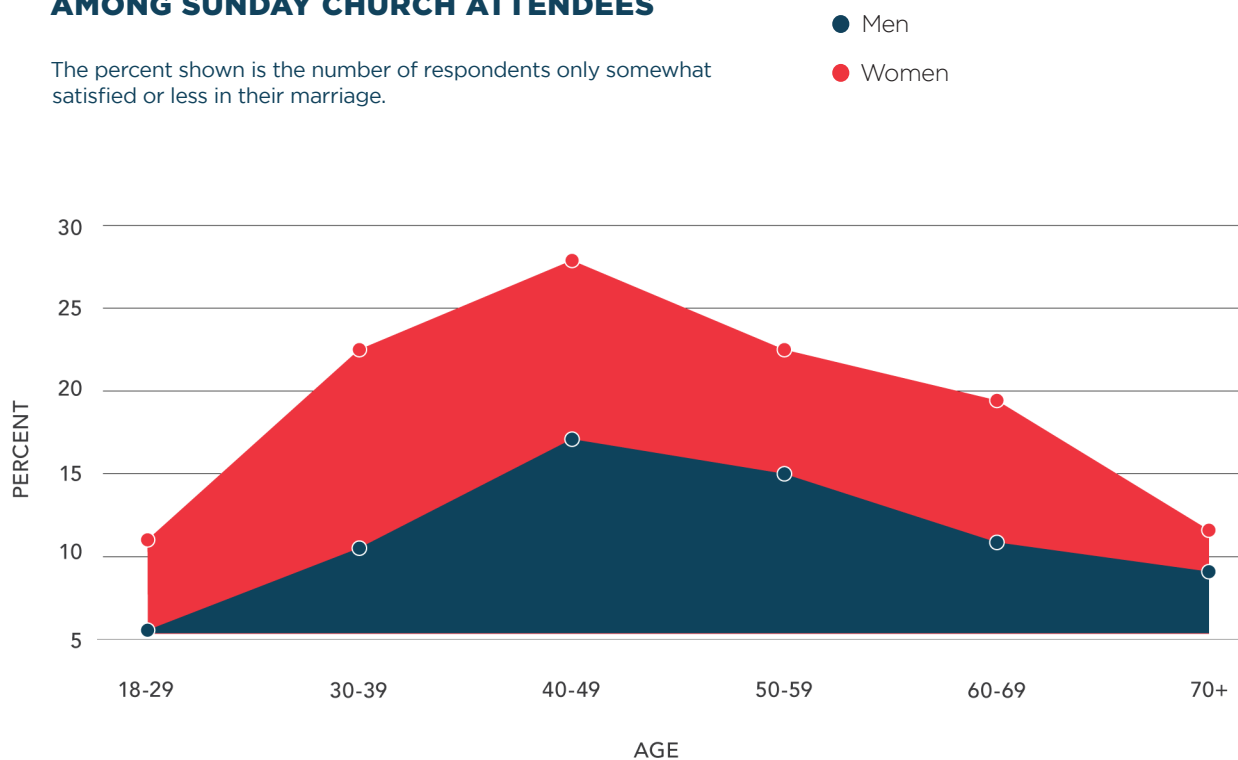
Both men and women married under the age of 30 report the highest levels of relationship satisfaction with only 6 percent of men and 12 percent of women in that age group signaling they are struggling in the survey. Because the average age of marriage now approaches 30 for both men and women,<sup>44</sup> this group is likely closest in time to their wedding day and have the highest portion of newlyweds.

Those in their 20s were the least likely to report having children at this stage in their marriage with 45 percent reporting not yet having children. By comparison, 90 percent and above of all married people in their 30s, 40s, and older report having had children.

Marriage satisfaction dips for those in their 30s and 40s before beginning to improve at age 50 and over. Married men and women in their 40s reported the highest levels of dissatisfaction in marriage with 18 percent of men and 28 percent of women between ages 40-49 reporting being only somewhat satisfied in their marriage.

### PERCENT STRUGGLING IN MARRIAGE AMONG SUNDAY CHURCH ATTENDEES

The percent shown is the number of respondents only somewhat satisfied or less in their marriage.



This data should convince church leaders about the critical importance of creating and normalizing relationship and marriage ministry to help improve the overall health and wellbeing of the married people they serve. It may also point out the importance of family ministry that includes best practices for Christian parenting.

## THE LEGACY OF OUR FAMILY OF ORIGIN

A growing body of research shows an individual’s family of origin, meaning the family that an adult grew up in as a child, substantially influences the marriage they are in today.<sup>45</sup> These findings appear to bear out in the survey data.

Overall, 82 percent of married men and 81 percent of married women in church on Sunday reported that they grew up in a home where the parents remained continuously married (that is, at least through age 18). Those married people who grew up without continuously married parents were 34 percent more likely to report struggling in their marriage.<sup>46</sup> Married men without continuously married parents were 48 percent more likely to do so.<sup>47</sup>

Effective marriage preparation must uncover and address wounds or patterns that arise from differences in families of origin. It reinforces the need for skills-based marriage ministry to coach couples on practicing healthy relationship patterns.

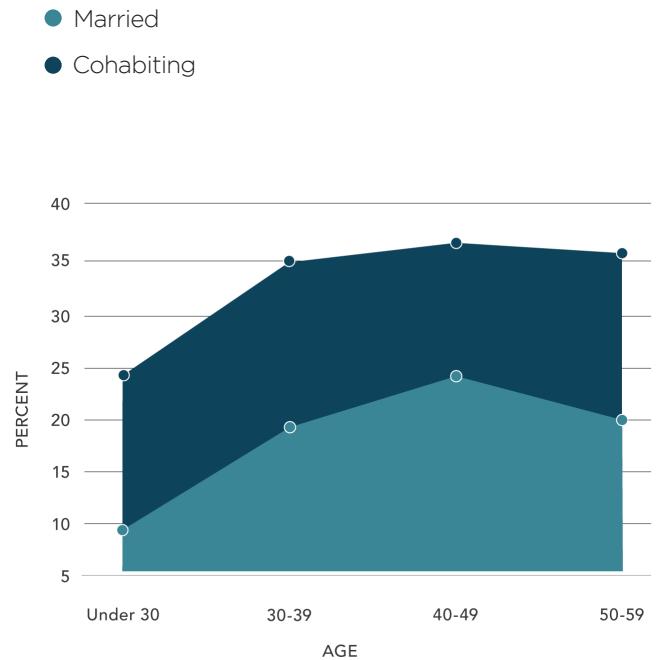
## COHABITING CHRISTIANS

While common in the culture, cohabiting remains rare among regular Sunday worship attendees with just over 1 percent of all survey respondents reporting living together outside of marriage. Yet, there were enough total cohabiting respondents (225 in all) present to give us a glimpse into the quality of these relationships.

In all, 25 percent of church-going cohabitators under age 30 were parents and 81 percent of church-going cohabitators between ages 30 and 49 were parents. When compared to married church attendees, these couples are far less satisfied in their relationship.

## COHABITORS FAR LESS SATISFIED THAN THE MARRIED

The percent shown is the number of respondents only somewhat satisfied or worse in their relationship.



- A cohabiting man in church on Sunday is 53 percent more likely to report struggling in his relationship than a married man.<sup>48</sup>
- A cohabiting man in his 30s is 77 percent more likely to report struggling in his relationship than a married man in his 30s.<sup>49</sup>
- A cohabiting woman is 73 percent more likely to report struggling in her relationship than a married woman in church.<sup>50</sup>

What has been known by researchers for a long time, cohabitation is a deeply unequal arrangement for women. A cohabiting woman in church is almost twice as likely (87 percent more likely)<sup>51</sup> to report struggling in her relationship than a cohabiting man in church.

Beyond being less satisfied in their relationships, as we will explore later, cohabitators are also much more likely to be considered lonely than their married counterparts. Other research has shown cohabitators tend to have worse relationship outcomes than their married counterparts.

Cohabiting relationships are five times more likely to break up than marriages.<sup>52</sup> A person who ends a long-term cohabiting relationship will experience the negative effects of that relationship in subsequent relationships. For instance, a marriage where one of the two people cohabited over a long-term period with someone who is not his or her spouse has the same instability as a second marriage.<sup>53</sup> Cohabiting partners have much higher levels of sexual infidelity than married partners.<sup>54</sup>

Cohabiting relationships are also more dangerous for women than married relationships. When compared to a woman living on her own, or in marriage, a woman in a cohabiting relationship is the most likely woman to experience intimate partner violence and domestic violence.<sup>55</sup> A cohabiting woman is nine-times more likely to be killed by her live-in partner than a married woman.<sup>56</sup>

Cohabiting is not only more dangerous for women, but also more dangerous for children. The most unsafe living environment for any child is to live in a home with his mom and her cohabiting boyfriend.<sup>57</sup>

Too few pastors and Christian parents are aware of this data. Many are resigned to cohabiting being a cultural inevitability. This data should shake family members, single people, and pastors out of such an idea. Parents must begin educating children about the dangers of cohabiting and healthy relationship discernment habits at young ages.

## LONELINESS, THE MEN GAP, AND THE SINGLE LIFE

Discussion around the importance of marriage can lead the unmarried to feel hurt or left out of ministry.

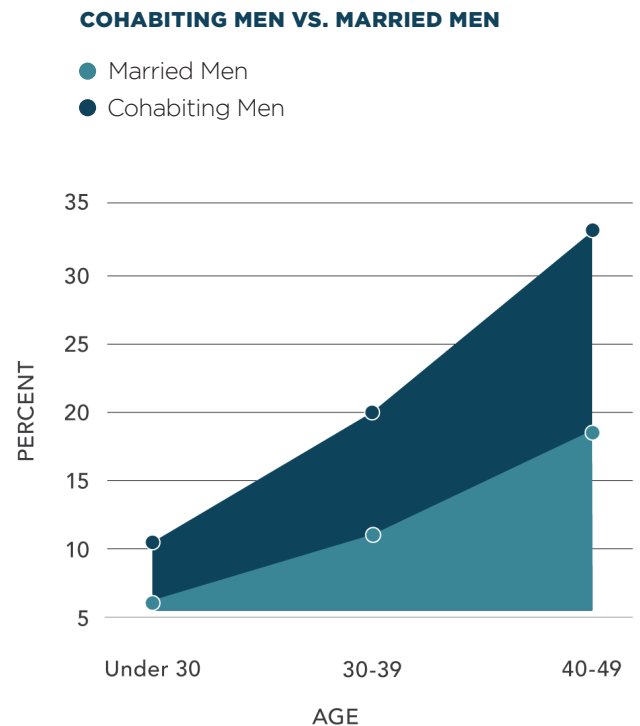
In 2017, the US Surgeon General declared that America was experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. At that time, 40 percent of all Americans were lonely.<sup>58</sup> This epidemic is worsening. A Surgeon General advisory issued in May of 2023 noted that approximately half of all US adults are experiencing loneliness, while the nationwide Cigna study, which leveraged the UCLA Loneliness Survey, found 58 percent of all Americans are lonely.<sup>59</sup>



**A cohabiting woman in church is almost twice as likely to report struggling in her relationship than a cohabiting man in church.”**

### MORE COHABITING MEN STRUGGLE IN RELATIONSHIP THAN MARRIED MEN

The percent shown is the number of respondents only somewhat satisfied or worse in their relation-



Loneliness has been defined by experts in psychology as a state of mind with the perception of being alone and isolated.<sup>60</sup> Being considered lonely has been found to shorten lifespans having the same public health effect as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.<sup>61</sup>

Our survey found that, at 22 percent being considered lonely, Sunday churchgoers are less likely than the average American to report being lonely. Yet, there is a substantial gap between married, cohabiting, and single Sunday churchgoers in feelings of loneliness.

The Three-Item UCLA Loneliness Survey is one of the most widely used survey tools in the world for measuring loneliness in a population. A score of six to nine on the survey places a person into the considered lonely category by public health experts. Employing this device, we found that just 15 percent of all married people, and just 11 percent of married men, in church on Sunday report being sometimes or often lonely. Singles overall are 3 1/3 times more likely to be considered lonely than their married counterparts.

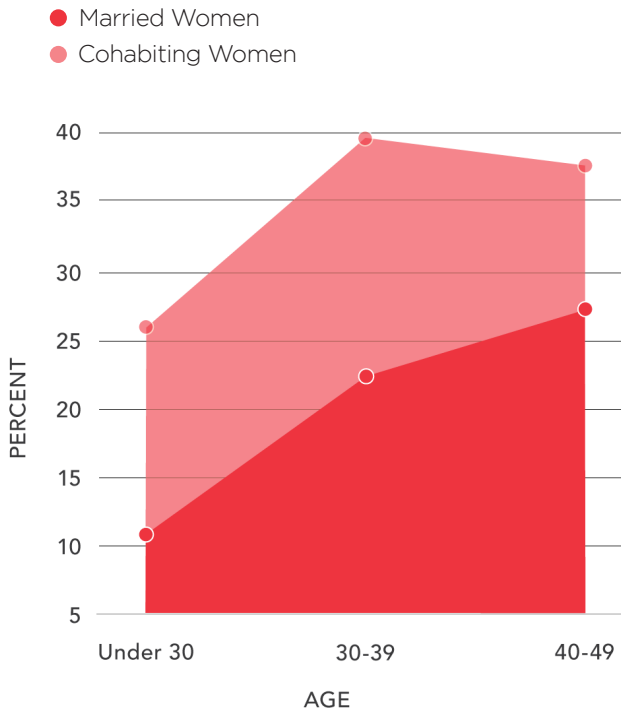
- 50 percent of never-married individuals in church
- 52 percent of divorced Sunday churchgoers are considered lonely.
- 53 percent of widows and 30 percent of widowers under age 50 report being lonely. 38 percent of widowers and 51 percent of widows between 50-69 are considered lonely.

When compared to married churchgoers, cohabiting churchgoers are considered lonely at a much higher rate. Cohabitors in church are 85 percent more likely to be considered lonely than married people in church. Cohabiting women under 30 are 81 percent more likely to be considered lonely than their married counterparts. Cohabiting women ages 30-39 are 71 percent more likely to be lonely than their married counterparts.

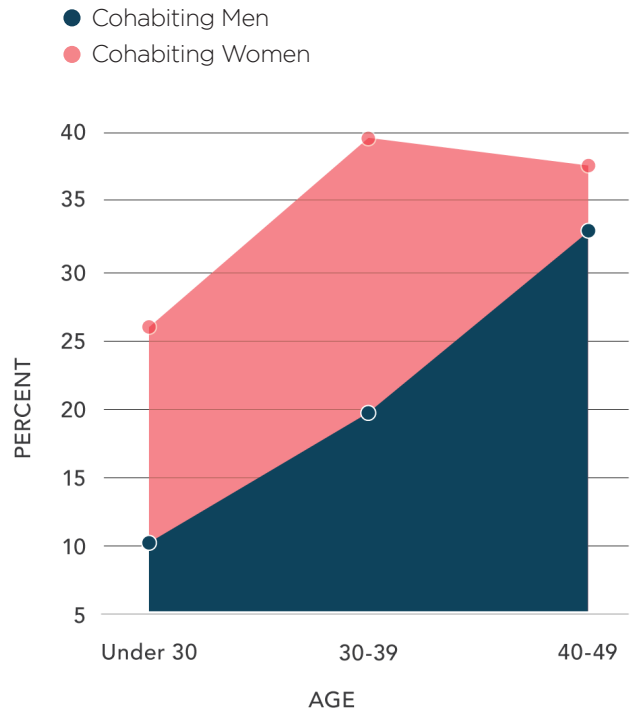
This means cohabitators are both less satisfied in their relationships and feel lonelier than their married counterparts.

Perhaps the widespread feelings of loneliness among single people are part of what fuels critiques from some

**COHABITING WOMEN VS. MARRIED WOMEN**



**COHABITING MEN VS. COHABITING WOMEN**



Christians that many churches make an idol out of marriage.<sup>62</sup> These statements, while well-intentioned, may also be born out of the experience that more and more Christians today are not currently married and may never become married despite so often desiring it.<sup>63</sup>

For single Sunday churchgoers who have never married, reported levels of loneliness increase from 47 percent in their 20s to 66 percent in their 30s.

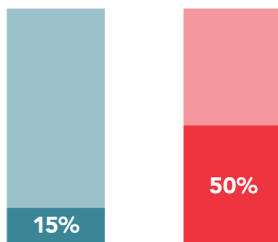
In all, 68 percent of never married men in their 30s are considered lonely while 64 percent of the never married women in this age group are considered lonely

To put this in perspective, there are 10 percent more never-married men in their 30s who are considered lonely than there are widows in their 50s who are lonely. Widows in church between ages 50-59 had the highest percentage of widowed respondents who were considered lonely.

The loneliness data for those who have never married reinforces the truth found in Genesis 2:18 that, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

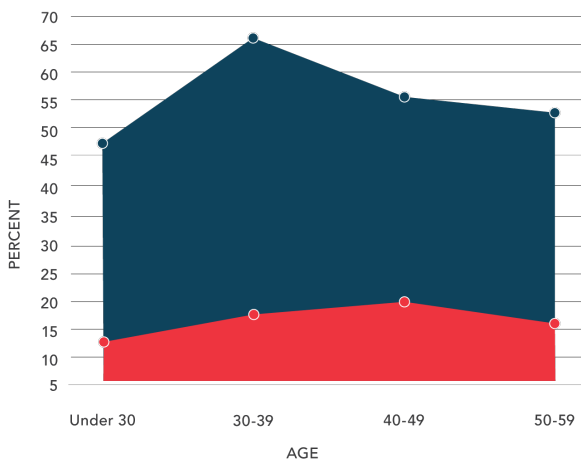
### LONELINESS BETWEEN MARRIED AND COHABITING CHURCHGOERS

● Married ● Never Married



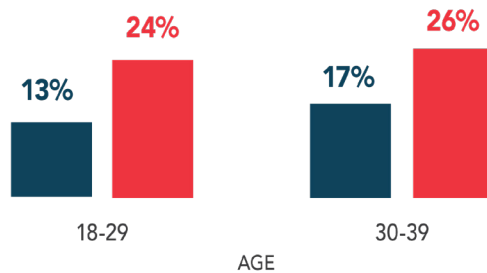
### LONELINESS BETWEEN MARRIED AND NEVER MARRIED CHURCHGOERS UNDER 60

● Never Married ● Married



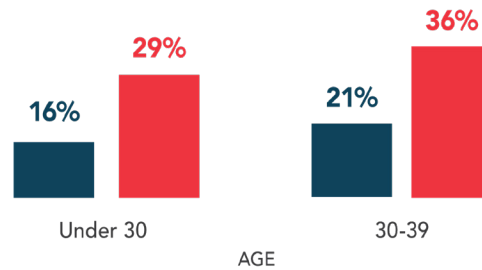
### LONELINESS BETWEEN MARRIED PEOPLE AND COHABITORS

● Married ● Cohabiting



### LONELINESS BETWEEN MARRIED WOMEN AND COHABITING WOMEN

● Married ● Cohabiting



**85%**

**Cohabitators are 85 percent** more likely to be lonely than married people.

**68% & 64%**

of never married men

of never married women in their 30s

**are considered lonely.**

## LAYING DOWN THE CORNERSTONE

Far from being an idol, this data on the loneliness gap between single and married churchgoers reinforces the ongoing importance of marriage as a major solution for what ails the Church and her people.

Despite scriptural teaching to the contrary,<sup>64</sup> research has shown that most never-married Christian men and women are not living lives of sexual chastity.<sup>65</sup> This engagement in sexual relationships outside of marriage coincides with and likely fuels delays and declines in marriage. The delay in marriage represents what some scholars have called the shift from a cornerstone view of marriage to the view of marriage as a capstone institution.<sup>66</sup>

Under a cornerstone model, marriage is seen as an essential relationship to construct a happy and successful life. One accesses marriage, in a cornerstone model, before fully establishing himself or herself professionally. For Christians, it is held up as the most common path to grow in holiness. When this model is embraced, chastity as a single Christian is more common.

In the capstone model, marriage is entered into only after getting ahead in life and after reaching some preset level of financial and personal achievement. Individuals who pursue the capstone model often have a longer list of requirements before selecting an ideal “soulmate.” Sex before marriage is common in this model. While some celebrate this shift, the explosive, and societally dangerous, levels of loneliness among the never married shows one major defect in capstone marriage.

In his book, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, Mark

Regnerus has shown that for every year in a nation when marriage is delayed, the number of individuals who will never marry also rises.<sup>67</sup> Beyond the moral and biblical imperatives, church leaders must not reinforce the current zeitgeist. Instead, they must find ways to push back against the cultural narrative around sex and re-establish a cornerstone model, because, in part, it leads to less loneliness, more relationship satisfaction, and greater happiness. These survey results show that the alternative leads to epidemic levels of loneliness and suffering among their congregants.

Going beyond preaching, churches must also embrace ministry approaches that both champion and give agency to healthy relationships from youth, young adulthood, and deep into the married life. Christian parents and churches must become serious and effective in discouraging the many existing marriage competitors (such as cohabitation) and sexual alternatives to marriage (premarital sex and pornography).

Church leaders must also find ways to balance the gender gap within the pews. Among the never married, there are 42 percent more women than men sitting inside of churches on Sunday.<sup>68</sup> While many women may prefer Christian marriage to the available counterfeits, a lack of marriageable men, faithful to the gospel’s view of sex inside of marriage, remains a real and substantive obstacle to the cornerstone model of marriage. The findings of this study suggest this gap is also a threat to the future vitality of Christian faith.

Moreover, women and men should understand that on this side of the eschaton, it is impossible to experience perfection. Healthy discernment skills, such as those taught by Dr. John Van Epp, are critically important. The incredibly high levels of happiness among married, church-going Christians shows<sup>69</sup> that the perfection often sought in a marital partner via the capstone model is simply not necessary to live the good life in the here-and-now.

If pastors and church leaders fail to re-establish a cornerstone view of marriage among their people, this study demonstrates that the church will continue to shrink, and many more souls will be lost.

Churches must lead a relationship revolution. The very existence of such a significant number of lonely single Christians should convict the hearts of pastors and married Christians everywhere.

While adjusting ministry to both encourage and strengthen marriage is badly needed, the survey findings also expose the need to form authentic community with a focus on effectively engaging singles in fellowship. This may often mean building sustained Christian friendships both inside and outside of church, and amongst those of different marital statuses.

In the Early Church, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42) This example needs to be followed with careful effort to include the unmarried.

For example, a single churchgoer today is far less likely to be invited to someone’s home for dinner, not because anyone seeks to actively exclude them, but because married couples so often naturally pair up with other married couples for fellowship.<sup>70</sup> Authentic Christian fellowship over mealtime between married and single churchgoers is just one intentional step married Christians can take to close the loneliness gap.

Other Acts 2:42 steps to combat loneliness should include forming prayers groups, small groups, and social engagement in churches that intentionally include the single, widowed, and married.

## **CONCLUSION: MIND THE GAP**

The decline of married fatherhood created a shock to our culture leading to increases in the number of bad outcomes for children, and it has caused the rapid decline in Christianity over the last 40 years. Marriage rates have dropped 31 percent since 2000 and 61 percent since 1970.<sup>71</sup> This study concludes the religious nones are likely to continue their growth for two to three decades after the number of married resident fathers stabilizes. Therefore, churches must immediately adopt new strategies and approaches to restore marriage and improve fatherhood.

When the Church fails to preach and teach practical skills around the formation of healthy, Christ-centered

relationships, cultural norms of loneliness, suicide, and social isolation will take their place.

Grace builds on nature. So, it is vital that churches evangelize to both single and married people and draw them into Christian discipleship that includes relationship skills-ministry.

Research has shown that as little as 8 hours of relationship skills education practiced during a 12-month period leads to lower divorce rates and better relationship satisfaction.<sup>72</sup> Relationship skills ministry should become ubiquitous in the church. Such ministry offers human formation that increases the likelihood of healthy Christ-centered relationships and marriages for all age groups. To paraphrase Dr. Tory Baucum, director of Benedictine College’s Center on the Family, Christians must move marriage from a subject of theology to the object of ministry.

While *Communio’s* Nationwide Survey was conducted with those in the pews, those who do not attend church are thought to have a higher rate of marital breakdown<sup>73</sup> and higher levels of loneliness.<sup>74</sup> This means the need for relationship ministry outside of the Church is even higher.

Since the time when Jesus healed the sick and the lame, ministering to and through felt needs has been central to advancing the gospel and bringing souls to Jesus Christ. This study would suggest that relationship dissatisfaction either manifested through loneliness or struggling marriages is common. So, evangelizing through relationship ministry remains the great 21st century opportunity and responsibility of the Church.<sup>75</sup>

The Christian elite should seek to influence and shift the secular elite on this issue. Scholars have noted that our elite embrace marriage in their own lives at high levels, which compounds our growing income and wealth divide.<sup>76</sup> Yet, our nation’s elite have failed to preach what they collectively practice on marriage. This silence is increasingly at odds with the avalanche of evidence that marriage greatly benefits today’s mothers,<sup>77</sup> fathers,<sup>78</sup> and children.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, marriage appears to be an antidote to combat loneliness, produce long-term happiness, and increase human flourishing.



Pastors must grapple with the fact that men are a significant minority in all churches and across both single and married populations. Christian marriage requires both sexes. Our survey found 60 percent of married respondents and 59 percent of all single, never-married respondents were women. The gender gap between single divorced churchgoers is 77 percent women to 23 percent men. Overall, women make up 62 percent of all Sunday church attendees.

To be clear, many single women are in the pews desiring marriage. According to our survey, there are 42 percent more never married women in the pews than never married men.<sup>80</sup> This gender gap does not help efforts to increase marriage. Additionally, among Christians, a capstone idea of marriage has taken hold.<sup>81</sup> This capstone model increases the number who will never marry, leads to greater levels of loneliness, and reduces Christian faith.

The findings of this study make it clear that Christian families and churches must propose and preach the cornerstone model for marriage. The reality remains that even in our modern age, marriage remains an essential ingredient to achieving greater success, avoiding loneliness, and more quickly flourishing as an adult. For those who profess Christ, Christian marriage also remains a vital part of the walk of a Christian disciple.

Christian parents who form their children to value getting good grades, getting into a decent college, and picking a valuable career, should also speak to them, at least as often, about the importance of discerning marriage and finding a good spouse.

Separately, church leaders must recognize that not every person in church today will marry. The skill of forming healthy marriages is often transferable to skills in forming great friendships. A full-circle approach to relationship ministry benefits all singles and married people. While couples' ministry is a deep need, the loneliness data shows cross-generational fellowship that includes building community between singles and married people is also clearly needed.<sup>82</sup>

While solutions for the lack of marriageability of men are numerous and complex, in a given church, ministry must make a deliberate effort to close the gender gap by

# 42%

**There are 42 percent**  
more never married women in  
church than never married men.

attracting, engaging, and forming men – both married and single. For married men, formation is most effective in the context of helping them live out their Christian marriage.

Ultimately, pastors and church leaders must become serious and effective in both increasing the number of marriages and the health of those marriages.

It appears revival across our larger society depends upon it.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE COMMUNIO NATIONWIDE SURVEY ON FAITH AND RELATIONSHIPS**

The more than 19,000 completed surveys of this study came from 112 evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic congregations in 13 different states. The survey was deployed by churches through mobile devices during in-person services or liturgy on Sunday or Saturday evenings. While some small numbers of surveys were conducted in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Burmese, the vast majority were in English.

Questions covered age, sex, relationship status, current marital or relationship health, the structure of the respondent's family of origin, and loneliness.

# 10 TAKEAWAYS FOR THE CHURCH

01

The collapse of resident fathers through the collapse of marriage is at the heart of the unraveling of Christianity. The growth of the religious nones is unlikely to stabilize until 25-30 years after married fatherhood stops its decline. Renewal requires new strategic action.

02

Churches must boldly re-establish healthy norms for Cornerstone Marriage while discouraging Capstone Marriage. Delays in marriage, through the novel Capstone path, lead to increases in those who will never marry and ultimately grows the loneliness epidemic.

03

Churches **MUST** address the gender gap in the pews between men and women.

04

More married women in church struggle in their marriage than married men. Married moms in their 30s are more than twice as likely to struggle than married dads. Normalizing skills-based, relationship ministry for all married people is vital.

05

On average, married people are more satisfied in their relationships and less lonely than anyone else in church. About 4 in 10 cohabiting women struggle in their relationship - nearly double the number of cohabiting men or married women who struggle.

06

Loneliness is an epidemic in the church among the unmarried, correlating to severe negative health & wellness outcomes. Nearly 2/3 of the never married in their 30s are considered lonely - a higher percentage than what is found among widows.

07

The need is greater outside of the Church, so, churches have an opportunity and responsibility to evangelize through the felt need of relationship health.

08

A full-circle approach to relationship ministry benefits both single and married people. Cross-generational fellowship that includes building community between singles and married people is clearly needed.

09

Christian elite must publicly support what they already practice in their personal lives and seek to shift the secular elite on this issue.

10

Pastors and church leaders must become serious and effective in both increasing the number of Christ-centered marriages and the health of those marriages.

## Appendix

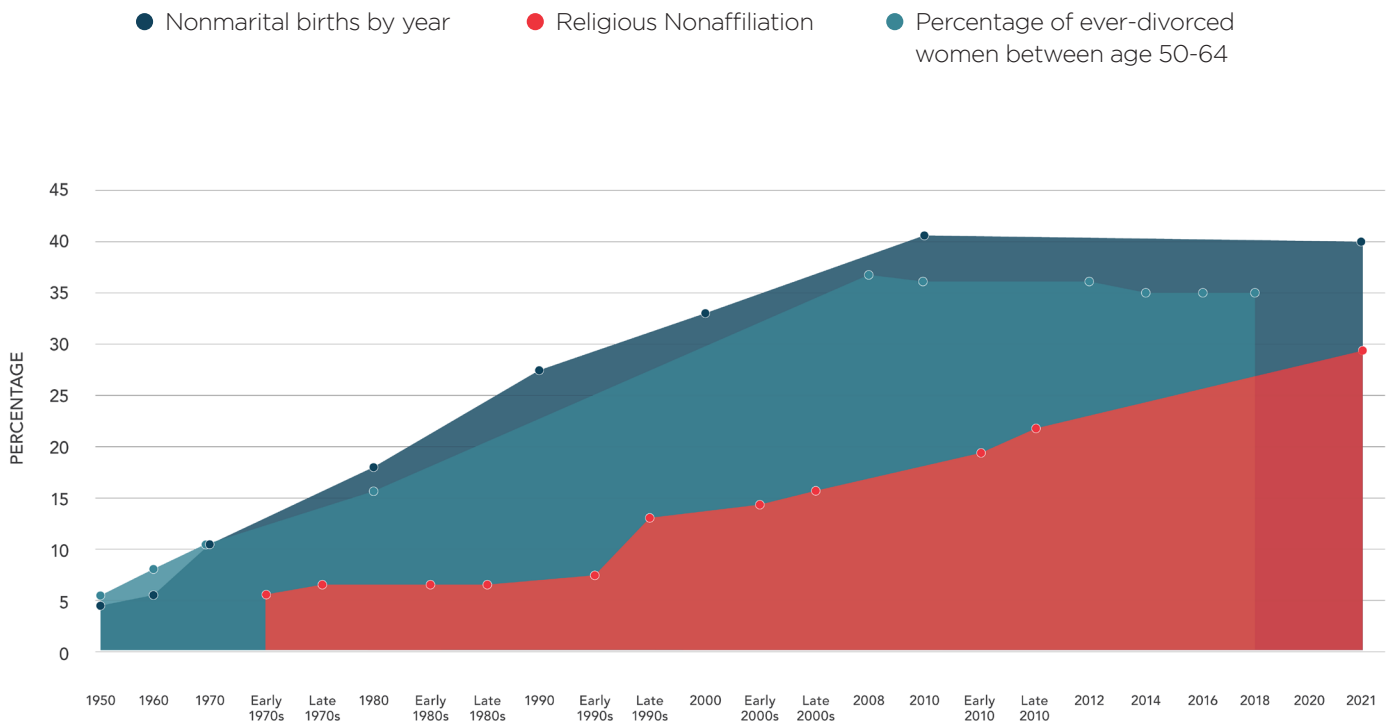
The growth in nonmarital births and the rise of divorce accelerated in 1960 and beyond leading to a revolution in family structure. The current rise in religious non-affiliation began 25-30 years later between 1986-1991 and continues to grow today.

While family of origin is a vital ingredient to influencing adult faith practice, its influence is seen in general trends. It is not determinative in individual cases. For example, our survey found that 1 in 5 churchgoers today come from unmarried homes. Furthermore, it is well-known that not all adults who grew up in married homes attend church.

According to the 2018 American Social and Political Behavior Survey, those who grew up in an intact family are nearly twice as likely (78 percent) to attend church regularly than someone who did not.<sup>83</sup> For White Americans who grow up in a continuously married home through age 18, they are 96 percent more likely to attend church regularly.

This study concludes that the overall population of the religious nones is unlikely to stabilize on a national level until 25-30 years after family structure has stabilized.

### NONMARITAL BIRTHS, DIVORCE, AND THE RELIGIOUS NONES



Data on nonmarital births and ever-divorced women comes from Figures 1 and 4 from "Love, Marriage, and the Baby Carriage: The Rise in Unwed Childbearing" published by the US Congress, Joint Economic Committee. Religious non-affiliation data comes "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," *Pew Research Center*, September 2022, Section 1: "How U.S. Religious Composition has Changed in Recent Decades."

## AFTERWORD

# THE GRAVITY OF MARRIAGE

By John Stonestreet, President of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview

A speed limit is essentially different from gravity. Gravity is baked into reality. It is immaterial if someone understands gravity, prefers it, or has a word for the force that draws one object to another. Gravity is not socially constructed. It is. It is everywhere. To disregard it will have consequences. One cannot, philosopher Dallas Willard observed, step off the roof and choose not to hit the ground.

A speed limit is real, in the sense that it exists over a particular stretch of highway, but it is not real in the same sense as gravity is real. Speed limits are socially constructed. When a road is opened to the public, humans confer on certain conditions in order to determine a maximum safe rate of speed. If these conditions change, for example if the road is widened or curves are made straight or lanes are added, the speed limit may be changed accordingly. To do so is not to violate reality, but to recognize that reality has changed.

Among the most significant questions of our day is whether marriage and the family as a social institution is akin to gravity or to a speed limit. G.K. Chesterton, for example, believed marriage and family to be real in the prior sense. He famously referred to “(t)he triangle of truisms, of father, mother and child,” not to downplay or dismiss other social institutions, but to recognize it as foundational to the others, one of the realities to which we all must adjust. Marriage and family, he continued, “cannot be destroyed; it can only destroy those civilizations which disregard it.”

Of course, many social conditions have changed since Chesterton wrote those words. Most notably, sexual morals have been loosened, so much so that other realities long considered to be fixed are now thought to be in flux. What’s clear in this ever-moving landscape of the late sexual revolution

is that today marriage and family are treated as if they are speed limits, social constructs that can be rethought in light of ever-evolving social conditions.

The reimagining of both the institution of marriage and which fundamental relationships make up a family has been happening in both word and deed, in both culture and in law, for decades now. If expanding marriage to include other relational arrangements or replacing it with cohabitation or rethinking the number of parents in order to accommodate adult desire is like tinkering with which specific number to put on a speed limit sign, then we’d expect minimal consequences. What we’ve reaped suggests otherwise.



**Marital and family stability are at the center of personal and social well-being.”**

Marital and family stability are at the center of personal and social well-being. The success of *Communio* in identifying at-risk relationships and serving up helpful resources has born fruit for entire communities, as well as for individuals. The very fact that their work has been so successful underscores that marriage and family matter, not as some socially constructed, held-over artifact of a prior time and place, but as something real, enduring, tangible, and essential.

The Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships sheds further light by addressing an often mis-diagnosed and poorly understood trend of American culture. Much has been made of the rise of the “nones,” especially among younger Americans. Plenty of experts have weighed in on why more Millennials and Gen Z have rejected traditional religious affiliations and identities. It’s a real phenomenon to be sure, one that corresponds with a declining number of adherents who continue to claim religious affiliation but who reject certain essential beliefs or embrace contradictory lifestyle choices.

Typically, this decline is explained in terms of political allegiances, moral disagreement, generation gaps, and a certain former president. In reality, most of it can be explained by returning to Chesterton’s “triangle of truisms, of father, mother and child,” to the idea that the structure of marriage and family is built into the fabric of reality. To disregard it is to court destruction, in this case the destruction of faith. As the author states: “The *Communio* Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships reveals that the collapse in marriage and the resulting decline in resident fatherhood may offer the best explanation for the decline of Christianity in the United States.”

This ought not surprise Christians, who believe that God has revealed Himself as (among other things) our Heavenly Father. Not only that, but to believe the Biblical account of reality is to believe in God’s creative purposes for His world, which are enabled by humans created in His image, male and female for the purpose of procreating additional

members of the work force. Jesus Himself appealed to God’s purposes in creation and to His intent in creating humans male and female, in answering a legal question about the permanence of marriage. He seemed to consider the Genesis account as binding on human relationships and institutions.

Tragically (and unnecessarily), many Christians will be surprised to learn of the crucial and inseparable connection between family and faith. If they are, it will be because, like our wider world, they have come to believe that the foundational realities of marriage and family are social constructs, and that, at least to some degree, our thinking about these institutions should evolve with the times.

To do so would be a mistake, as this report demonstrates. Certain aspects of marriage and family—such as marital roles, the nature of family enterprise, and educational options—have changed, but the essential form of marriage and the relationships that comprise families have not. It’s almost as if these things are real, in the same way that gravity is real.



**...the structure of marriage and family is built into the fabric of reality. To disregard it is to court destruction, in this case the destruction of faith."**

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## About Communio

Communio is a nonprofit ministry that equips churches to evangelize through the renewal of healthy relationships, marriages, and the family. We support churches in solving the relationship crisis to renew faith in Jesus by providing unique tools, strategies, and resources. Our team accomplishes this through the holistic, Data-Informed, Full-Circle Relationship Ministry<sup>®</sup> approach. Learn more by visiting [www.communio.org](http://www.communio.org).

## About the Author

JP De Gance is the founder and president of Communio and the co-author of the book, *Endgame: The Church's Strategic Move to Save Faith and Family in America*. Communio was originally incubated as the Culture of Freedom Initiative at The Philanthropy Roundtable where he served as the organization's executive vice president. The Initiative raised and spent \$20 million over three years in three different states seeking to identify the most effective strategies to boost marital health, family stability, and church engagement. From 2016 to 2018, the experimental initiative worked with an ecumenical network of churches and drove down the divorce rate by 24 percent in Jacksonville, FL. Today, Communio serves churches across the United States helping them evangelize by applying the learnings from their successful intervention in Jacksonville. A husband and father, JP lives in Virginia with his wife and eight children.



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