

*The Lived Experience of Aging in Faith
Communities: Exploring the Perceptions
of Support for Older Adults*

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Goals

- To familiarize participants with the main ideas and themes of spirituality, religion, and aging
- To understand population as well as aging of religious and faith based communities
- To consider the role communities of faith play in support for people as they age
- Share findings from a recent study

Timeline

- ✧ 40 years ago at the 1971 White House Conference on Aging
 - ✧ National Interfaith Coalition on Aging in 1972
- ✧ 1970s – 1990s
 - ✧ positive correlations associated with religion and well-being older adults
- ✧ 1990s more advanced techniques and individual perspectives taken into account
- ✧ 2000s multi-faith; multi-method; complexity and outcomes for well-being and successful aging
 - ✧ Emerging and translational
 - ✧ Spiritual marketplace

Why All the Interest?

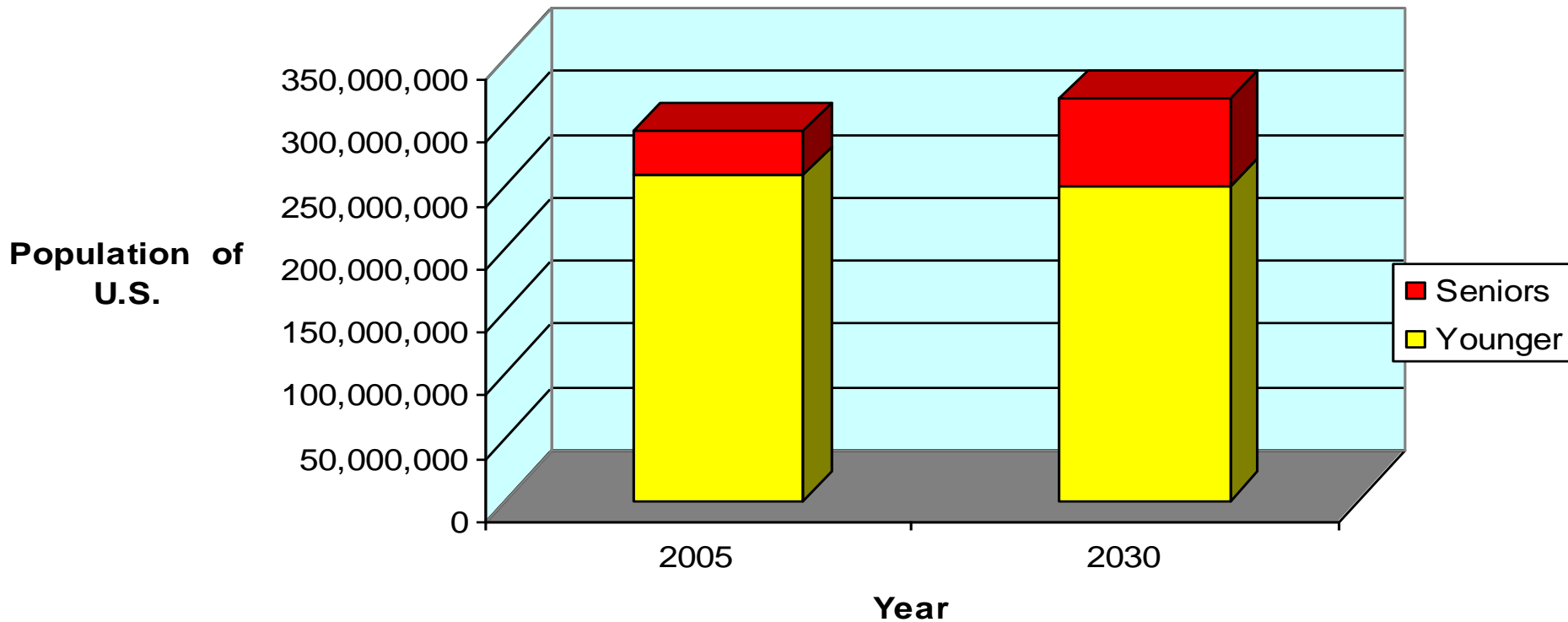


**THE LARGEST GENERATION IN
HUMAN HISTORY IS *AGING*.**

Some Aging Demographics:

We grew from *35 million* Americans 65+ in 2005 to a projected *70-75 million* by 2030, or from *12%* of the population to *22%*!

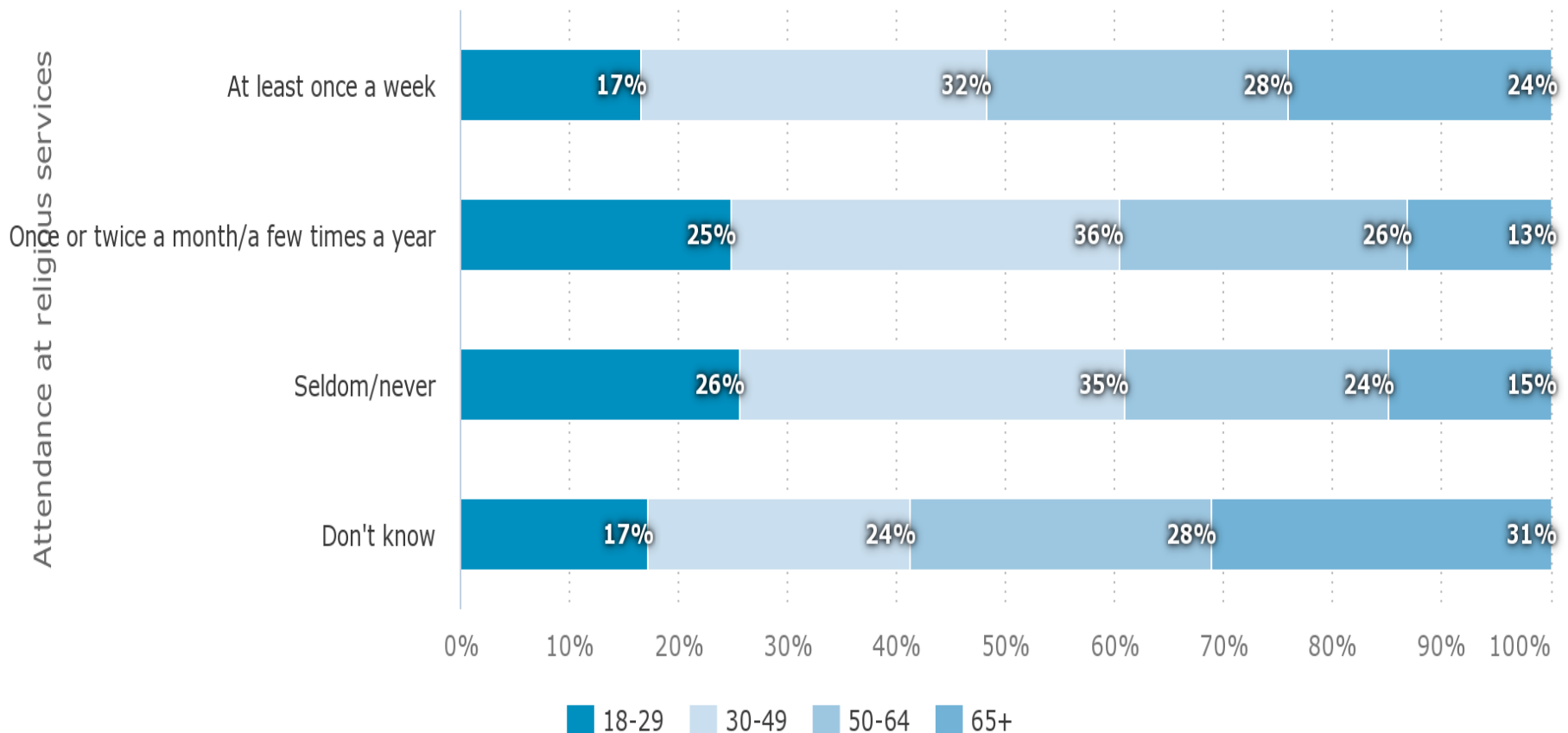
Increasing Senior Population



Communities of Faith Are Aging Too

Age distribution by religious attendance

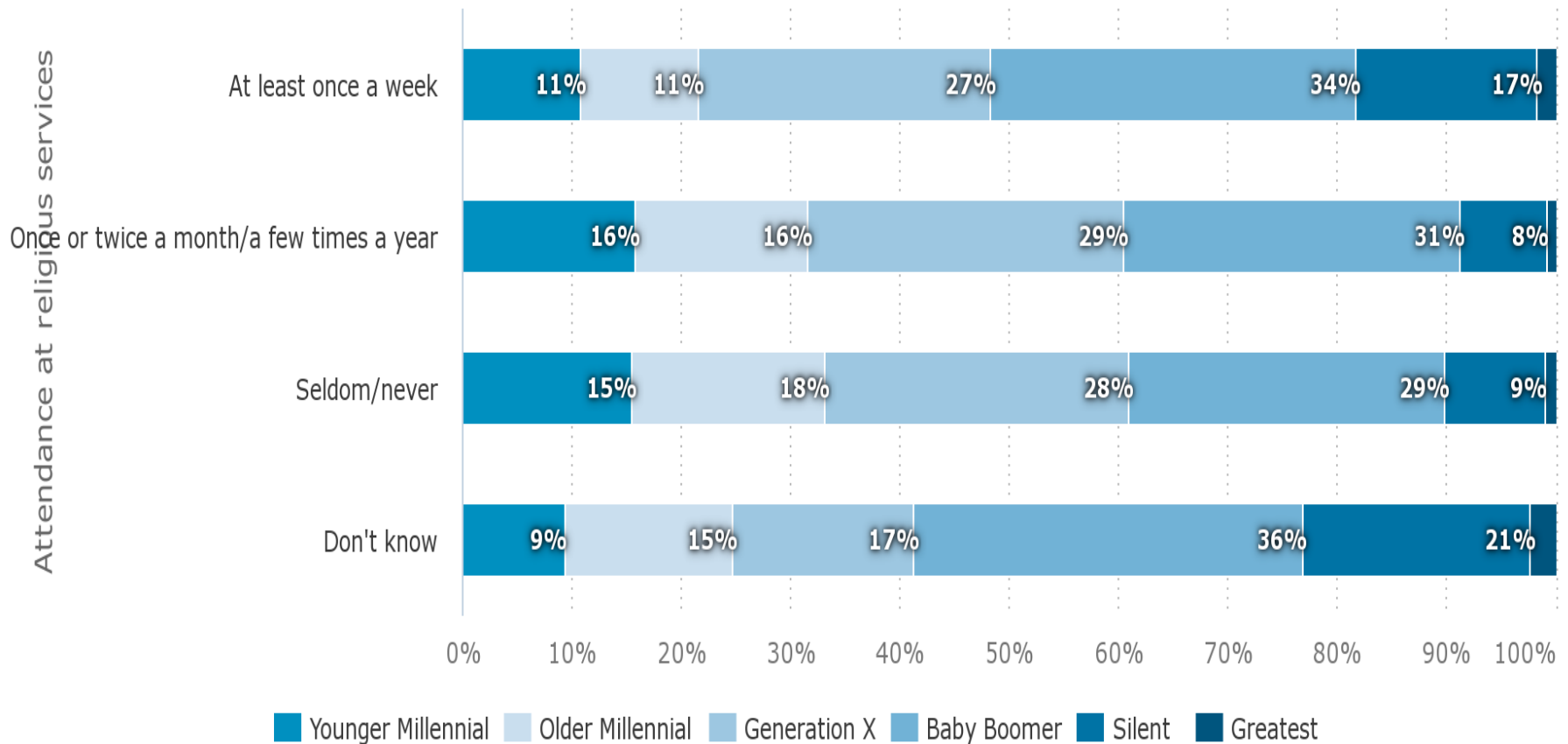
% of adults who are ages...



Generations All Gathering Together

Generational cohort by religious attendance

% of adults who are...



Spirituality

Spirituality relates to the person's search for meaning and morally fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ground of existence, whether a person understands this in terms that are theistic, atheistic, non-theistic, or any combination of these.

Religion

Religion involves the patterning of spiritual beliefs and practices into social institutions, with community support and traditions maintained over time.

Why Does Spirituality and Religion Matter in Later Life?

- ✧ It's good for us and has protective qualities!
- ✧ High levels of spirituality:
 - ✧ Improved marriage quality
 - ✧ Higher levels of hope for their own future
 - ✧ More optimism
 - ✧ Better self-esteem
 - ✧ Longer life expectancies
 - ✧ Lower level of death anxiety
 - ✧ Slower rates of cognitive decline
 - ✧ Less addiction, anxiety, and depression
 - ✧ Happiness

(Moberg, 2008; Koenig, 2005; George, Larson, Koenig, McCullough, 2000)

Spirituality/Religiosity, Aging and Health

Over 1,000 empirical studies validate the benefits of spirituality/religion on health and mental health outcomes.

Research Findings on Spirituality and Older Adults

- 76% of persons 65+ regard religion as highly important in their lives
- Of 4,000 older persons, the “religiously active were half as likely to be depressed, regardless of age, gender, race, social support or disability
- Coping through faith predicted positive outcomes in a study of 586 persons

Spirituality and the Life Course

- Some studies find religiosity a constant across the individual life course.
- Some studies indicate people may become more religious with age.
- As outward signs of religiosity decline, non-organizational religious activities may increase (private prayer, meditation).

The Uniqueness of Being Old

- Ability to look back across a life course integrate parts into a whole
- Ability to engage in inner or integrative activity that crosses the life span, despite limitations
- Ability learned over a lifetime to face loss and change

Social Support in Communities of Faith

- Strong social support system is essential for good physical and mental health
- Majority of studies focus solely on social support provided by family members and close friends
- Social support exchanged in religious institutions may be even more consequential for well being than support in secular settings

Purpose of This Study

1. To understand how older adults perceive feeling supported or not supported in their communities of faith
2. To better understand the experiences of older adults with relation to support, connection, acceptance, belonging, exclusion, or isolation within their respective communities of faith

Sample

- N = 14
- Ages 63 to 84
- 13 women; 1 man
- All participants Jewish or Christian
- Mostly white
- High levels of education

Methods

- Qualitative Study
- Phenomenology
 - Essential, invariant structure
 - Bracketing
 - Naïve reading
 - Horizontalization and clustering of significant statements
 - Composite understanding

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world.
- Phenomenologists attempt to understand those whom they observe from the subjects' perspective.

What I Asked....

- Describe for me what it has been like to age in your community of faith?
- Do you feel supported as an older adult? Why or why not?
- Do you experience connection within the community (acceptance/belonging)?
- Do you ever feel isolated or excluded in the faith community?
- How can your faith community better support and serve you spiritually as well as emotionally/physically/socially as you age?
- Describe any concerns you have as an aging member of your faith community?

Findings

Major Themes:

1. Aging in communities of faith is a positive experience
2. Older adults generally feel supported
 - More support among peers
 - Less support in terms of leadership

Findings

3. Participants described feeling connected to their community

- Recognized that notions of support and connection were directly related to how much they invested and put into to fostering relationships within the community
- Some expressed concerns that despite aging communities much of faith based community business and worshipped focused on youth and younger families

Findings

4. No participants reported feeling isolated or excluded from their community of faith

- Exclusion were described it was more about philosophical issues or lack of alignment with a changing nature of a community

5. Participants described wanting more content related to aging; more ministry or worship specifically aimed at aging and intersection with faith

- Wanted leadership or point person to have more knowledge about aging services

Findings

6. Participants had concerns about the uncertainty of the future in terms of their mobility and cognition and what this may mean for being able to engage in their faith community
 - Spiritual investment
 - Out of sight/out of mind
 - Concerned about leaderships ability to meet the needs of aging members and their families
 - Transportation
 - Role of faith community in their life may change or diminish with advancing age

Faith Communities are...

well positioned to offer programming that can help people explore their spirituality, need for meaning making, and help to bolster spiritual as well as social engagement for older adults.

- ✧ Meaning and Purpose
- ✧ Well-Being (spirituality part of the wellness model)
- ✧ Health
- ✧ Quality of life
- ✧ Resilience
- ✧ Happiness

What May This Mean for Communities of Faith

- ✧ Taking aging seriously in the context of faith
- ✧ Aging competency; combat ageism; gero-literacy
- ✧ Asking elders about meaning and purpose
- ✧ Offering a space - safety, resilience, preparedness
- ✧ Doing spiritual life review or spiritual biographies that encourage meaningful reflection (worship/Bible)
- ✧ Listening
- ✧ Paying attention to spiritual and social support
- ✧ Fostering cross-generational connections
- ✧ Creating *Age Friendly Congregations* (UCC)

Ideas for Programming

- Work to create opportunities for: wonder, stillness, majesty, playfulness, peace, mystery and connectedness
- Ask Enduring Questions of our members:
 - What is your faith story?
 - What makes an experience spiritual or religious?
 - How does your faith manifest in your world?
 - What do you think about your spiritual journey?
 - Do you want faith to be a central factor in your life decisions? What does this look like as you plan for your aging and dying?

Craft an Age Friendly Covenant

- Faith Story Corps
- Prayer Groups
- Volunteer Groups
- Visiting Committees
- Meditation Groups
- Religion/Spirituality Education Series
- Spiritual Life Review/Spiritual Journey
- Creative Expression (art, music, dance)
- Designating a “specialist in aging ministry”
- Helping to provide or source services in the aging network or in the community – care corps models
- Creating educational series on aging related issues

Examples of Spiritual Programming for Older Adults?

What are examples of programs that bolster faith development, social connection, and support for older adults in your congregations?

Thank You!