

It would be fair to say no other institution in the United States (aside from the government) provides as directly and personally for community needs. Community here does not mean some residential community. In an urban world, every city, and almost every suburb, is home to several congregations. The community of primary interest to each congregation is the community of co-worshippers, not the city or suburb (Chaves 2004).

In most churches, membership qualifies you for help with all kinds of problems and for a variety of other services.

The large congregations, attended by more than half of all churchgoers, are much more than religious institutions. They often provide alternatives to public schools, counseling for troubled parishioners, sports and social programs for teenagers, financial counseling, help with elderly parents, nursing homes, and even graveyards. Even small churches will help members in trouble, with visits to the sick and personal support when needed. However, Chaves (2004) warns that despite their charitable rhetoric, charity is actually a minor and sporadic activity of most congregations.



14.2 How Does Social Structure Impact Religious Choice?

PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS CHOICE

With all the religions in the world, how do people pick one religion as their own? Of course, this is a trick question. Most people don't sit down, consider a list of religions, and then choose to be one or the other. Most people are born into a religion—the religion of their parents. And throughout history most parents belong to the religion that has long been institutionalized in their society, community, or perhaps just in their family. Thus, if you manage to hear about religions other than the one you are born into, you might decide to change, but the odds, and social pressure, are decidedly against that. Besides, most children love and respect their parents and are very likely to want to maintain their relationships by being like their parents in their views of the world.

In today's world most, if not all, people are aware that there are other religions than their own. They are also very aware that some form of irreligion (the absence of religion) is an alternative embraced by at least some people, somewhere. So, yes, many people change religions, or at least denominations. However, even in the United States, the most religiously pluralistic of all countries, it is estimated

that only one-fifth of all people formally change their religions or denominations during their lifetimes (Newport 2006). On the other hand, given the fluidity of real religions, individuals may change their personal religious feelings or ideas or practices but remain within the same denomination over time.

Religious Segregation: Birds of a Feather

14.2.1 Discuss the causes of segregation in American churches.

We do know that there are definite patterns regarding the social backgrounds of people who end up in different religions, denominations, and congregations. In the United States, Sunday remains the most segregated day of the week and church the most segregated place in the country—and not just by race. They are also segregated by class and lifestyle and various forms of preferences. Adults attend churches voluntarily, so birds of a feather are permitted to flock together, and they do so even