

Duke study explores views of three generations on church and religion

DURHAM — The church-going habits, worship styles and religious beliefs of three generational groups of Americans have been examined in a new study by a Duke University Divinity School professor who says the results could be used to help reverse the nationwide trend of declining church membership.

As part of a larger study of 20 congregations of various faiths in North Carolina and California, Jackson W. Carroll, Williams professor of religion and society at Duke, and Wade Clark Roof, Roney professor of religion and society at the University of California at Santa Barbara, surveyed a random sample of 1,150 North Carolinians and Southern Californians.

THEY DIVIDED THE sample into three groups — Generation X-ers, those who were born between 1964 and 1979; (baby) boomers, born between 1946 and 1963; and preboomers, those born prior to 1946. In telephone and face-to-face interviews and by using questionnaires, the groups were asked detailed questions about religious and congregational life.

"One of the most striking findings of our study is the difference between the family experience of X-ers and that of the two older generations," Carroll says. "Forty-five percent of the X-ers went through some sort of family disruption — the divorce or separation of their parents, or they were raised by a single parent. That compares to 27 percent of the boomers and 23 percent of the preboomers.

"IT MAY BE that the high incidence of family disruption is one of the defining characteristics of the X-er generation and con-

tributes to their general distrust of institutions," he said.

THAT FAMILY disruption, Carroll said, could also account for the low percentage of X-ers who reported that they were very involved in religion while growing up. In the two-state survey, only 35 percent of X-ers said they had religious involvement during their formative years, compared to 45 percent of boomers and 53 percent of preboomers, and the differences were greater among the generations in North Carolina than they were in California.

"This represents a striking decline in involvement among the three generations," Carroll said. "X-ers evidently felt less pressure or encouragement to participate in religious activities than their parents or grandparents."

IN GENERAL, members of Generation X said they are less religious than their elders, but agreed in nearly equal numbers with the members of the two older generations that religion is very important in their lives. More than 80 percent of each group indicated that they believe in God, and the majority of all three groups said they are dissatisfied with the spiritual vitality of their congregations. X-ers agreed more strongly than the other generational groups that individuals should arrive at their own religious beliefs independently of their church or religious group. The younger generation also believed more strongly that people who have God in their lives don't need the church.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES between North Carolinians and Californians were evident in most responses, with Californians usually 10 or more percentage points lower on most measures of religious involvement. California

boomers and X-ers were especially more likely to affirm cultural themes of individualism, choice, distrust of institutions and acceptance of religious diversity, although X-ers and boomers in both states supported these themes more strongly than the preboomers.

CARROLL SAID the X-ers also stand out in other ways from the other two generational groups:

- X-ers are more likely to define themselves in terms of spirituality, somewhat more so than as being religious.

- While all generations might be described as spiritual explorers, willing to learn from other religious traditions, this is especially true of X-ers.

- X-ers are more inclined to regard the rules of congregations as too restrictive — much more so than other generations.

- Denominational labels aren't very important, especially for X-ers and boomers.

- X-ers, like boomers, are more likely to prefer contemporary worship styles, more so than preboomers.

- While boomers and X-ers are about evenly split in preference for contemporary or traditional music in worship services, they are much more likely to prefer contemporary music than are preboomers.

- X-ers express more confidence in religious institutions than do boomers, but less than preboomers.

Carroll said even though the X-ers and the boomers aren't strikingly different in their religious involvements and understandings, they are very different from preboomers.

"There's much more interest in autonomy, freedom, making up one's own mind and religious exploration and less commitment

to institutional involvement in religion," he said. "Churches need to take those differences into account and not take for granted that people have been raised in a religious tradition."

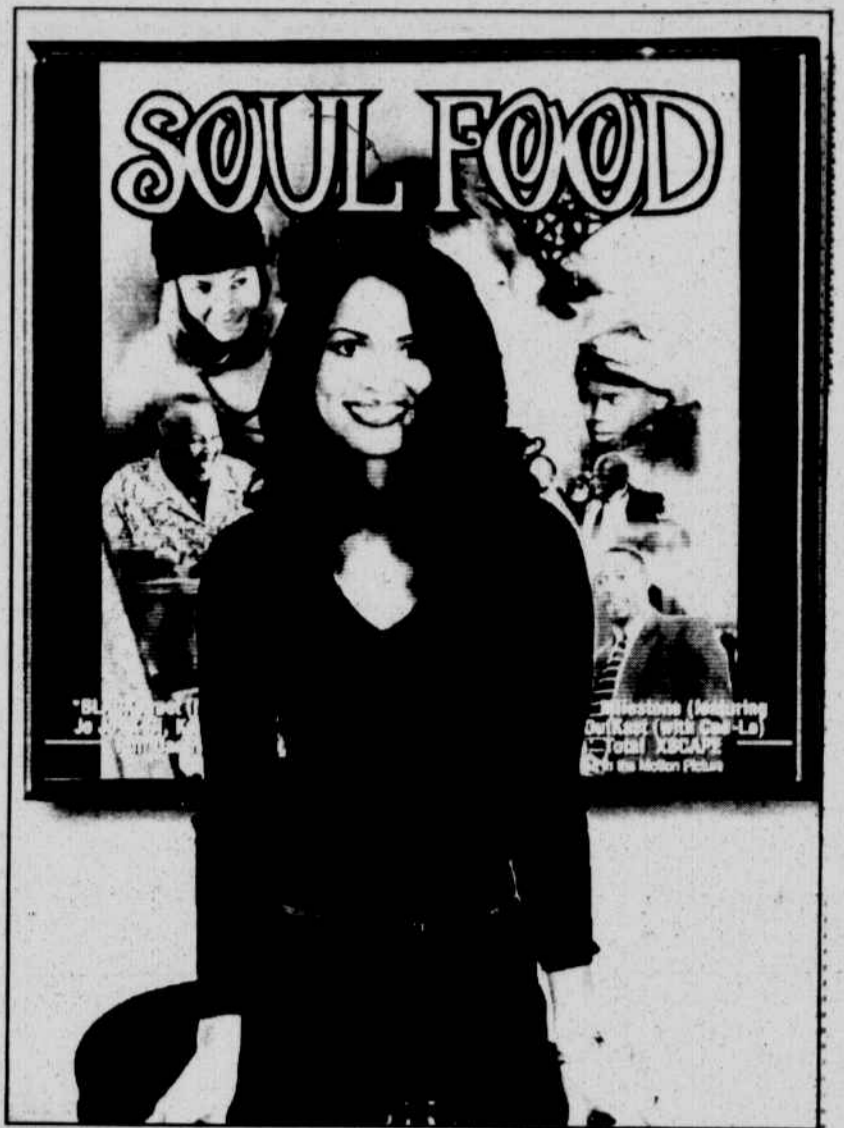
CARROLL SAID he hopes that the results of the study will provide leaders of church congregations with a better understanding of what they're up against as they try to minister to different generational groups. Churches also can't assume that young people today know much about religion, Christian traditions or the Bible, Carroll said, and that means that there is a "major educational task facing churches today."

GIVEN THE RESULTS of the study, which was funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., Carroll said it's not surprising that the most successful churches today in terms of attendance are those that function like a "shopping mall."

"People pick and choose among small groups that meet their particular needs like a variety of shops and boutiques. And they come in and out. Churches have to find ways of encouraging a greater sense of commitment, longer staying power and offer more direction."

BUT IN THEIR desire to appeal to X-ers, Carroll warns churches of the dangers of abandoning centuries of tradition.

"The ultimate challenge is to find one's way between an over-reliance on traditional ways of doing things and an over-reliance on innovation for innovation's sake," Carroll said. "There really does need to be a discovery of what it means to be faithful and free to respond to new situations, but at the same time we should guard against tossing out tradition just to be relevant."



More than just a pretty face

Soul Food producer Tracey Edmonds, who is married to singer/songwriter Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, says, "I was never the type to just sit around and be somebody's wife," in the December *Ebony*.

Besides being a wife and mother, Edmonds manages Yab Yum Records and Edmonds Entertainment. "I'm not going to say it's a piece of cake," she said. "You just have to try to have the best time-management you can."

Edmonds said she could easily be a stay-at-home wife and mother and enjoy her family in their new 15,000-square-foot home, but she finds that the joy of working with her husband on entertainment projects and managing all three aspects of her life more gratifying.

The couple has five other movie projects in development for next year and are producing a television sitcom.

"Unfortunately, I think, the person who is now at the bottom of the priority list is me," Tracey said. "I don't get much private time. When I'm working, I'm with Kenny and (my son) Brandon. I might have eight meetings during the day ... It's really hard."

But Tracey said she wouldn't have it any other way. "I'm really happy with the way my life is now," she said.

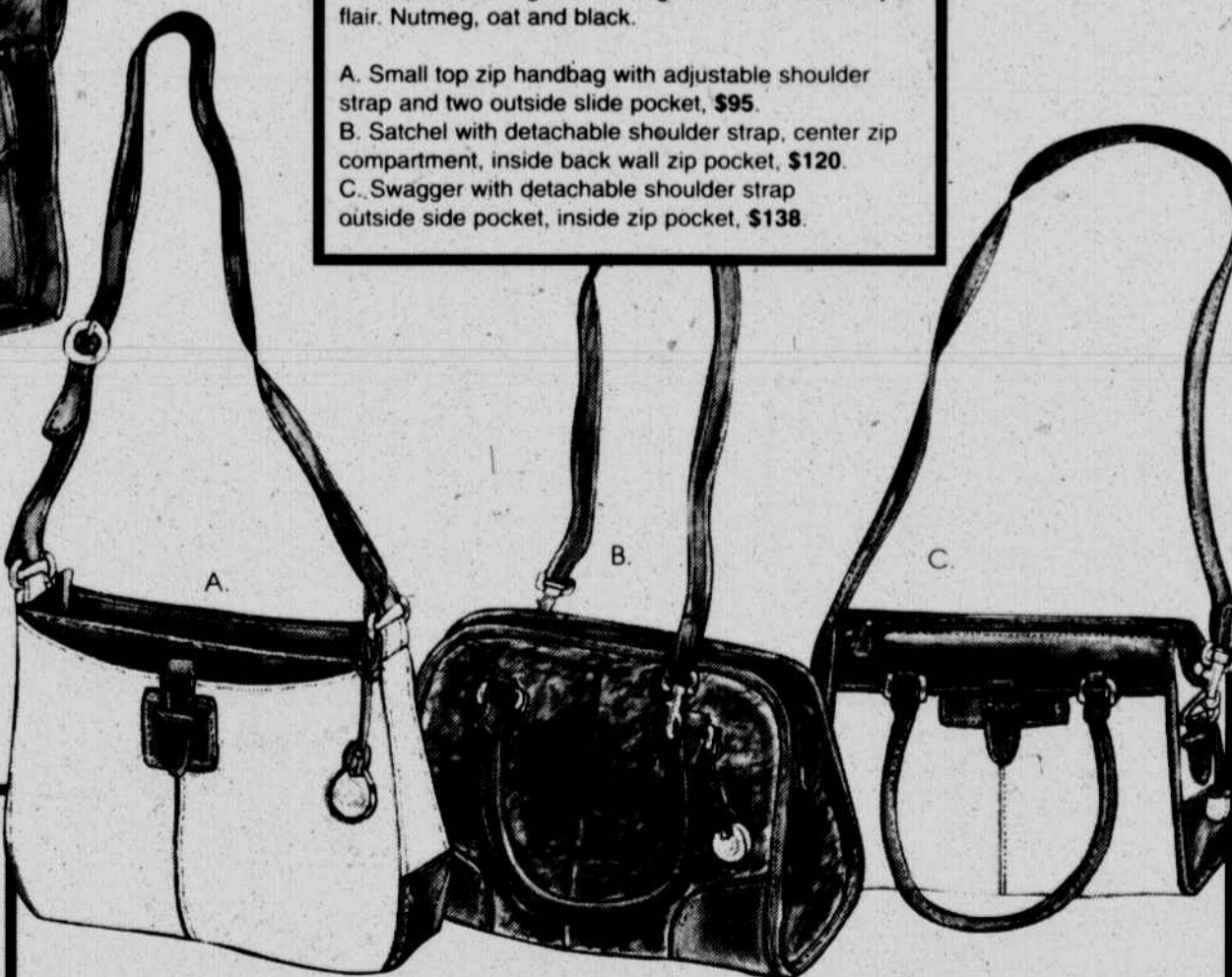
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