



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Fewer Children in America by Jill M. Johnson



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According to numerous studies, the fertility rate in the United States is at one of its lowest points in history. Why are Americans making the choice to have fewer children or none at all? What concerns does this raise? What role does the church play in addressing these concerns?

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Population Replenishment

“The children are our future.” Americans use that phrase frequently, and it can mean different things depending on the context. Sometimes we say it to remind ourselves that our future is dependent upon how we raise, educate, and care for the children in our communities. Healthy, well-loved children will hopefully become well-adjusted and productive adults. However, if a demographer were to use this phrase, he or she might be referring to the relationship between current birth rates and a sustainable economic future.

In 2017, 3,853,472 babies were born in the United States, according to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That sounds like a big number, but births were down two percent from 2016 and marked the lowest number in 30 years. The general fertility rate, a common measurement used by demographers, also sank to a record low. It’s important to clarify the use of the word *fertility* in this context. In the world of statistics, the term doesn’t refer to a person’s ability to have children but rather to the output of reproduction. The *general fertility rate* (GFR) is the number of births per 1,000 women of childbearing age (ages 15–44).

Demographers use another metric called the *total fertility rate* (TFR) to predict the future population of an area. A TFR of 2.1 is considered the current replacement rate. This means that in order for the population of a country to remain stable, any given woman needs to replace herself

and her partner. If women give birth to an average of 2.1 children and these children survive to age 15 (assuming immigration and emigration are equal), then all parents will have replaced themselves when they die. In general, if the TFR of a population is greater than 2.1, it's growing; if it's less than 2.1, it will likely decline. The TFR of the United States in 2017 was 1.76, a three-percent drop from 2016.

REFLECT:

- What are your initial thoughts on the declining birth rate in the United States?
- Is the population of your area growing or declining? What initial concerns does either scenario bring to mind?

Consequences of Declining Populations

Social scientists pay close attention to fertility rates because they affect countries in important ways and help government officials when planning for economic development. After World War II, in the era we now call the baby boom era, the TFR peaked at 3.8. That's almost twice the average of our current generation. This unexpected surge in births left communities unprepared and lacking the schools, healthcare, transportation, housing, and other resources needed for such rapidly growing communities. Baby booms can also have a dramatic effect on employment, especially if the number of people drastically outpaces the number of jobs.

The effects of a low TFR are also concerning. The United States is now considered an "aging society" because the proportion of the population over 65 exceeds the population under 15. How will safety-net programs such as Social Security and Medicare be funded if fewer younger workers are paying taxes into these programs? How can the United States maintain a healthy economy if there aren't enough workers to replace those who are retiring? This is also a pertinent question for the church. How will churches keep their doors open if the United States is comprised of fewer people

who are also less committed to church attendance than previous generations?

While the national debate surrounding immigration remains intense, a recent article from NPR about the declining fertility rate argues we must come to terms with a stark reality: "America's population growth will increasingly depend on immigrants," writes journalist Bill Chappell, "after decades in which the U.S. enjoyed a relatively high fertility rate when compared with that of other developed countries."

REFLECT:

- If you're of the baby boom generation, share some stories of what it's like to be part of that group.
- How do you think the current low birth rate will affect the economy in 20 years? How will it affect the Christian church?
- What are your thoughts on the need for immigrants to sustain our population and our economy?

Causes: It's Not Just the Economy

When birth rates decline, researchers usually find a connection to a poor economy in the years before. The causes for the current low TFR, however, are more complex. The United States has enjoyed a healthy economy for the past several years, and researchers are looking to other factors leading couples to have fewer children or none at all.

The New York Times partnered with Morning Consult, a market research company, to delve into the *why* of these choices. In a July article, Claire Cain Miller writes that economic insecurity is a top reason why adults are having fewer children. Unpaid parental leave, childcare expenses, student debt, and housing costs topped the list of factors. Worries over work-life balance and climate change were also given as reasons why adults don't want to raise children.

However, as Miller points out, this survey "tells a story that is partly about greater gender equality. Women have more agency over their lives, and

many feel that motherhood has become more of a choice.” In the same article, sociologist Philip Cohen of the University of Maryland notes that the relationship between gender equality and fertility rates is very strong. “There are no high-fertility countries that are gender equal,” he says. When women have more opportunities to advance their career, travel, or spend time with friends, the desire to start a family takes a spot on the backburner.

As the Christian church in the United States struggles with declining attendance, we should refrain from viewing these problems merely through a lens focused on our own survival. Making disciples of Jesus will undoubtedly take on different forms in the future than how we’ve practiced our

faith in the past. Rather than engaging in hand-wringing, Christians should strengthen our call to hope. What if we were to address—head on—the concerns and barriers that keep families from thriving? Grounded with an attitude of trust in God’s future, we should allow the Holy Spirit to guide us as we minister to a changing world.

REFLECT:

- What are your thoughts on the reasons adults give for not having as many children or not having any at all?
- Why do you think countries with higher gender equality have lower fertility rates?
- How should churches shift their ministry efforts to adjust to changing trends in society?

Multitude of Generations

For anyone who wants children but is unable to conceive, certain passages in Scripture may cause more pain than solace. Especially in the Old Testament, we see favor resting on those who are blessed with offspring. When Abram (later Abraham) is concerned he won’t have an heir of his own, God comes to him in a vision and promises him offspring that will be greater than the number of stars in the sky (**Genesis 15:5**).

We see Rachel’s deep pain when her sister Leah is able to bear children for Jacob, but Rachel herself is called barren. She pleads with Jacob, “Give me children! If you don’t, I may as well be dead.” Jacob becomes angry at Rachel and replies, “Do you think I’m God? God alone has kept you from giving birth!” (**Genesis 30:1-2**).

We have to keep in mind that these are stories from ancient cultures with vastly different social norms than we have today. In the same way that we no longer consider it okay to have multiple wives, we shouldn’t judge those who don’t have children.

Jesus brought us the good news of a new covenant—a blessing based neither on the laws of man nor the production of offspring. In **Romans 8:16-17**, we read, “The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God’s children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God’s heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.”

REFLECT:

- Were you ever part of a conversation where someone was made uncomfortable because they were childless? How did you handle it?
- What does it mean to you to be a child of God and a coheir with Christ?

Niger: Gender Equality Struggles

The Central African country of Niger currently has the highest total fertility rate in the world at 6.49. Just south of Algeria and Libya, this country is currently populated by 21 million people. While Africa's population is expected to double by 2050, Niger is on track to triple. Teenage mothers are common, as more than half the girls marry before the age of 15. In this country, having children is considered a sign of wealth and power, yet Niger is also one of the world's poorest countries.

Government officials worry about the health of the country in the long term, as well the short-term concerns of feeding, educating, and caring for all these young children. Aid workers have created "safe spaces" for girls and young women so they can discuss difficult topics such as forced marriages and family planning. In these spaces, they can also learn about contraceptive methods, breastfeeding, and how best to space births.

Unsurprisingly, men in Niger have the final say in family decisions, and a wife can access birth control only if her husband agrees. In response, Niger's government is supporting "husband schools," where men are encouraged to have smaller families and learn about how this will benefit both the health of women and the future of their homeland. Midwife Furera Umarou says that even if couples can be persuaded to have only four or five children rather than eight or nine, that's progress.

REFLECT:

- If you're familiar with aid groups who support family planning in overpopulated areas, share what you know about their efforts.
- In your opinion, should the Christian church play a role in helping poor countries with family planning? Explain your answer.

"The Nurturing Community"

In the Social Principles section of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016*, Methodists confirm their commitment to "The Nurturing Community" (§161). Because all human beings are created by God and loved by Jesus Christ, "we believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals."

Regarding family, the *Discipline* states, "We affirm the importance of loving parents for all children. We also understand the family as encompassing a wider range of options than that of the two-generational unit of parents and children (the nuclear family)." It also affirms shared parenting responsibility for couples (§161.B).

The *Discipline* also contains several statements about gender equality and equality in marriage: "We affirm with Scripture the common humanity of male and female, both having equal worth in the eyes of God. We reject the erroneous notion that one gender is superior to another" (§161.F). Regarding the marriage covenant, it states, "We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage" (§161.C). The *Discipline* also affirms single parents and single persons, saying, "We reject all social practices that discriminate or social attitudes that are prejudicial against persons because they are single" (§161.E).

REFLECT:

- What is your definition of a modern family? How does it differ from our understanding of the nuclear family of past decades?
- If you know a single parent, consider finding a way you can help them or affirm them this week.

Helpful Links

- You can find the cost of childcare in each state on the Economic Policy Institute's website: <https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/AL>
- More on 2017 US birth data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/report004.pdf>
- A list of the total fertility rate of all countries: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html>
- NPR article "U.S. Births Dip to 30-Year Low; Fertility Rate Sinks Further Below Replacement Level," by Bill Chappell, May 17, 2018: <http://tiny.cc/g467zy>
- Opinion piece "Effects of Historically Low Birth Rate Will Reverberate for Years to Come," published on The Hill website, May 21, 2018: <http://tiny.cc/oc77zy>

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Christmas Music and the Incarnation

by Jeanne Torrence Finley

Throughout the Christmas season, the airwaves have been filled with a variety of Christmas music. Amidst all of these songs, which ones have spoken to you most powerfully about the message of Christmas? How can Christmas music speak to the idea that God is with us?

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Opening Prayer

Father, you love us more deeply and fully than our human minds and hearts can comprehend. As we engage in discussion today, help us to be open to different definitions of family. Guide us and encourage us to be vessels of hope in a world that wallows in discouragement. Help us always to remember that we are children of God. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- If anyone in the group is confused about how the term *fertility* is used by demographers, take some time to clear up that definition. It might be helpful to search “fertility vs. fecundity” on the Internet for additional information.
- If you have time for a Bible study, ask three different participants to read aloud the following verses in 1 John: 3:1-3; 4:7-10; and 5:1-2. Ask: What are your thoughts on these passages? What attributes define God’s family? In what ways do you feel like you belong to a Christian family that’s larger than your family of origin? Do any of you feel closer to your Christian family than to your natural family? If so, explain why.
- Close the session with the provided United Methodist Prayer for Families, written by MaryJane Pierce Norton, or use one of your own. Alternatively, you can play a video of the prayer at the following link: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/united-methodist-prayer-for-families>

Teaching Alternatives

Host an intergenerational discussion about the topic of lower birth rates. If your group is made up mostly of empty nesters or older individuals, invite families with young children to join you for this session. If you can identify some newly married or single young adults in your congregation, invite them as well. The perspectives of different generations will only add to your understanding. Use the reflection questions for the “Causes: It’s Not Just the Economy” section to start a dialogue about why more adults are choosing not to have children. Be open to their thoughts on how their generation views these issues.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, who created all of humankind and showed to us the importance of relationships with one another, we commend to your care all the families of our community and our world. We pray that each home may be a home where love is felt. We pray for homes where, instead of love, hurt, abuse, and suffering abide. We pray for children, youth, and adults, recognizing the importance of and the gift of every age as we grow. May your grace be present to all. Grant us wisdom to know where there is no love, courage to act out of love for others, and peace to trust in your grace. Help us to live so that the commandments of love for you and love for others are shown in the ways we live together. Amen.