

Study reveals 'secret ingredient' in religion that makes people happier

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While the positive correlation between religiosity and life satisfaction has long been known, a new study in the December issue of the *American Sociological Review* reveals religion's "secret ingredient" that makes people happier.

"Our study offers compelling evidence that it is the social aspects of religion rather than theology or spirituality that leads to life satisfaction," said Chaeyoon Lim, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who led the study. "In particular, we find that friendships built in religious congregations are the secret ingredient in religion that makes people happier."

In their study, "Religion, Social Networks, and [Life Satisfaction](#)," Lim and co-author Robert D. Putnam, the Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, use data from the Faith Matters Study, a panel survey of a representative sample of U.S. adults in 2006 and 2007. The panel survey was discussed in detail in the recently published book *American Grace* by Putnam and David E. Campbell.

According to the study, 33 percent of people who attend [religious services](#) every week and have three to five close friends in their congregation report that they are "extremely satisfied" with their lives. "Extremely satisfied" is defined as a 10 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10.

In comparison, only 19 percent of people who attend religious services weekly, but who have no close friends in their congregation report that they are extremely satisfied. On the other hand, 23 percent of people who attend religious services only several times a year, but who have three to five close friends in their congregation are extremely satisfied with their lives. Finally, 19 percent of people who never attend religious services, and therefore have no friends from congregation, say they are extremely satisfied with their lives.

"To me, the evidence substantiates that it is not really going to church and listening to sermons or praying that makes people happier, but making church-based friends and building intimate social networks there," Lim said.

According to Lim, people like to feel that they belong. "One of the important functions of religion is to give people a sense of belonging to a moral community based on religious faith," he said. "This community, however, could be abstract and remote unless one has an intimate circle of friends who share a similar identity. The friends in one's congregation thus make the religious community real and tangible, and strengthen one's sense of belonging to the community."

The study's findings are applicable to the three main Christian traditions (Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Catholic). "We also find similar patterns among Jews and Mormons, even with a much smaller sample size," said Lim, who noted that there were not enough Muslims or Buddhists in the data set to test the model for those groups.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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