

# Church support networks of African Americans: The impact of gender and religious involvement

Ann W. Nguyen<sup>1</sup>  | Robert Joseph Taylor<sup>2</sup> | Linda M. Chatters<sup>2</sup>  |  
Meredith O. Hope<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Case Western Reserve University

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan

## Correspondence

Email: nguyena@case.edu

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## Abstract

We examined the sociodemographic and religious involvement correlates of church support networks in a nationally representative sample of African Americans across the adult life span. Data from the National Survey of American Life was used for analysis. Ordinary least squares regression was conducted to identify correlates of frequency of contact, subjective closeness, provision and receipt of overall support, receipt of emotional support, and negative interactions with church members. We also investigated differences in church support networks separately for men and women. Religious involvement was positively associated with church support network indicators (i.e., frequency of contact). Church support network indicators also varied by age, gender, education, family income, marital status, and region. The findings indicate that for many African Americans, church members are an integral component of their support networks and underscore the importance of social integration in church networks for social support exchanges. Moreover, these church support network characteristics are patterned by sociodemographic characteristics.

## KEYWORDS

black church, church support, informal support network, religion, religious involvement, social network, social support

Religious congregations have an enduring and prominent role in the development of African American communities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Formally organized congregational initiatives and programs, as well as informal social support networks within religious communities, have provided a range of civic, educational, political, and cultural resources that enhance individual and community well-being. Further, given

acknowledged difficulties in access, affordability, and appropriateness of traditional health and social welfare services (Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000), African Americans often engage religiously sponsored initiatives, programs, and supports at rates that exceed their involvement in the professional service sector.

Despite the centrality of the Black Church in African American communities, the academic literature has given only sporadic attention to examining the potential strengths and resources that exist within religious communities. In contrast, community psychology, public health, and social work traditionally emphasize understanding the person within their social, cultural, and community environments. This body of research is notable for examining the types of assistance (e.g., material, emotional) provided by religious communities, as well as identifying the pathways and mechanisms through which church-based assistance promotes individual well-being (Chatters, 2000; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Maton, 1989, 2001; McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004). Moreover, this study explores how sociodemographic characteristics and religious involvement factors are associated with receiving church assistance (Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004).

This study examines the sociodemographic and religious involvement correlates of church support networks among African Americans across the adult age range. Identifying sociodemographic correlates of church support networks provides more in depth information on the nature of social relationships and social support exchanges within the context of the church. Identifying sociodemographic correlates of church support networks also provides a more nuanced picture of how social resources are differentially distributed across subpopulations. In examining supportive exchanges, we focus on interactional features of church networks (e.g., frequency of contact), as well as emotional and qualitative characteristics (e.g., subjective closeness, negative interactions). The following literature review provides an overview of extant research on the characteristics and correlates of informal church support among African Americans and a discussion of negative interactions with church members.

## 1 | CHURCH SUPPORT

Given the historical importance of the church and the prominence of religion in the lives of African Americans, support from church members (i.e., church support) constitutes an important form of assistance for this population. Church support is distinct from other types of support, such as family and friendship assistance, because it is exchanged exclusively within a religious community among individuals who share similar values, beliefs, and norms (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Moreover, church support complements assistance that is provided by family members (Chatters, Nguyen, Taylor, & Hope, 2018). Individuals who are estranged from their family or do not live near relatives often substitute support from church members for family support (Taylor et al., 2004) and identify church members as their surrogate “church” family.

Overall, African Americans are well-integrated into their church support networks (Krause, 2008; Taylor, Lincoln, & Chatters, 2005). National survey data indicate that the vast majority of African Americans who are religiously involved (88%) perceive their relationships with other congregants to be either very close or fairly close (Taylor et al., 2005) and over half of respondents reported frequent interactions with church members. With regard to support exchanges between church members, 60% reported receiving frequent support from church member, including emotional support, tangible aid (e.g., money, services, in-kind), informational support, and counseling and advice (Taylor et al., 2004).

Church support is particularly important for community psychology because of its relationship to both mental and physical health. For instance, research has found that church support is associated with higher levels of self-rated health (Krause, 2002), higher rates of health care utilization (Krause, 2010) and lower rates of mortality (Krause, 2006). With regard to mental health outcomes, church support is associated with lower rates of depressive symptoms, serious psychological distress, and anxiety (Chatters et al., 2018). Church support is also associated with higher rates of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998). In addition, support from church members is protective of suicidal behaviors (Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, Nguyen, & Joe, 2011).

Church support seems to be a more important aspect of the support networks of African Americans than Whites. This is somewhat logical considering that African Americans have higher rates of weekly religious service attendance than Whites (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2009). Although the findings are mixed, the vast majority of research on church support networks also finds that African Americans are more involved in these networks than Whites (Krause, 2016; Krause & Bastida, 2011; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013).

Research also finds that church support networks may be more important for African Americans' mental and physical health than for non-Hispanic Whites. For example, research on depressive symptoms (Assari & Lankarani, 2018) and self-rated health (Krause, 2002) indicate that church support networks are more beneficial for the health of African Americans. Some have found that higher levels of church support and religious experiences more strongly predicted life satisfaction among African Americans than among Whites (Assari, 2013; Skarupski, Fitchett, Evans, & Mendes de Leon, 2013). Assari's (2013) examination of race and ethnic differences in the association between church support and self-rated health found that church support predicted more positive self-rated health among African Americans.

However, among non-Hispanic Whites, church support was not predictive of self-rated health. Skarupski et al. (2013) suggested that this is due to a "faith advantage" for African Americans. Assari and Lankarani (2018) posited that congregational relationships may vary qualitative between African Americans and Whites, which could lead to a faith advantage for African Americans. Additionally, they suggested that racial and ethnic variations in the organization and programmatic emphasis of religious service and churches, patterns and contents of religious activities, and the structure and mission of church may contribute to these Black-White differences.

## 1.1 | Negative interactions with church members

Although positive social interactions with church members far outnumber problematic interactions, negative interactions are, nonetheless, an important aspect of church networks that have significant implications for mental and physical health. Empirical studies link negative interactions with church members to a range of mental (e.g., depressive symptoms, psychological distress) and physical health problems (e.g., heart disease; Chatters et al., 2018; Chatters, Taylor, Woodward, & Nicklett, 2015; Ellison, Zhang, Krause, & Marcum, 2009; Krause, 2005; Krause & Hayward, 2012). Limited evidence on the correlates of negative church interactions indicates that women and individuals who have more frequent contact with church members experience more negative interactions (Nguyen, Taylor, & Chatters, 2016). Conversely, income is negatively associated with negative church interactions (Nguyen et al., 2016); individuals with higher levels of income report fewer negative interactions than those with lower levels of income.

## 1.2 | Focus of the present study

Given the prominence of religion and churches for African Americans, it is important to understand the degree to which individuals are involved in their church support networks. An in-depth understanding of church support networks requires attention to both the positive (receipt and provision of support) and problematic (negative interaction) aspects of these relationships. The present study examines how sociodemographic factors and religious involvement relates to multiple characteristics of church support networks, including frequency of contact with, subjective closeness to, social support exchanges between, and negative interactions with church members. This analysis is based on a national probability sample.

Research on frequency of contact, subjective closeness, and negative interactions with church members, while limited, identifies several sociodemographic and religious involvement correlates. Consistent with prior research on age, gender and regional differences in religious involvement (Taylor et al., 2004), we anticipate that older adults, women, and residents of the South will interact more frequently and endorse stronger perceptions of closeness to congregants.

Similarly, Pentecostal affiliation and higher levels of service attendance will be associated with more frequent contact with and perceptions of closeness to church members. With regard to church support itself, we anticipate that women, those who were married, and those with less education and family income will receive and provide support to congregants more frequently than their respective counterparts. Further, high levels of religious engagement (contact with and closeness to members) and denominational identification as Pentecostal (as compared to Baptist) will be associated with providing and receiving church support more frequently.

Finally, based upon research on the correlates of negative church interactions (Nguyen et al., 2016), we expect that women, those with lower levels of income, those who have frequent contact with church members will experience more frequent negative interactions with church members.

Research on church support have identified gender differences in the receipt and provision of support. However, these gender differences are equivocal. Some studies have indicated that women receive more support from church members than men (Krause, 2004; Taylor et al., 2005). This is likely due to the fact that women tend to be more religious and attend religious services more frequently (Taylor, Chatters, & Brown, 2014). Women also have more frequent contact with church members, which affords more opportunities for supportive exchanges to occur (Taylor et al., 2005). Thus, women not only receive more support from church members but also provide more support to church members than men (Nguyen et al., 2016).

In contrast, some studies have found that men receive support from church members more frequently than women (Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Taylor, Chatters, Lincoln, & Woodward, 2017). A possible explanation for this is that men who are involved in the church often hold positions of high status and visibility (e.g., deacon, board member), which may result in more support from church members (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Given these gender differences, correlates of church support may vary by gender as well. Thus, an additional aim of this study is to identify how correlates of church support may vary by gender. Because no study, to our knowledge, have examined how sociodemographic correlates of church support varies by gender, we do not make specific hypotheses for this gender stratified analysis.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Sample

The analytic sample for this analysis was drawn from the National Survey of American Life: Coping with Stress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (NSAL), which was collected by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The African American sample is the core sample of the NSAL. Sixty-four primary sampling units composed the core sample, 56 of which overlapped substantially with existing Survey Research Center National Sample primary areas. The remaining eight primary areas were selected from the South to ensure representation of African Americans in the proportion in which they are nationally distributed.

#### 2.1.1 | Primary sampling units

The African American sample is a nationally representative sample of households located in the 48 coterminous states with at least one Black adult aged 18 years or older who did not identify ancestral ties in the Caribbean. The data collection was conducted from February 2001 to June 2003. A total of 6,082 interviews were conducted with individuals aged 18 years or older, including 3,570 African Americans, 891 non-Hispanic Whites, and 1,621 Blacks of Caribbean descent.

Of the interviews, 14% were completed over the phone and 86% were administered face-to-face in respondents' homes. It is important to note that, consistent with research in this field, only those who indicated that they attend religious services at least a few times a year were asked the church support network questions. Those who attended religious services less than once a year were not asked the church support network questions.

Thus, the analytic sample for this study comprised African Americans who attend religious services at least a few times a year ( $N = 2991$ ).

Respondents were compensated for their time. The overall response rate was 72.3%. Final response rates for the NSAL two-phase sample designs were computed using the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) guidelines (for Response Rate 3 samples) (AAPOR, 2006; for a more detailed discussion of the NSAL sample, see Jackson, Neighbors, Nesse, Trierweiler, & Torres, 2004). The NSAL data collection was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

## 2.2 | Measures

### 2.2.1 | Church contact and relationships

It is important to note that the term *church members*, to which the church contact, relationships, and support items refer, is defined as congregants and does not include pastors or church leaders. *Frequency of contact* with church members was measured by the question: "How often do you see, write or talk on the telephone with members of your church? Would you say nearly every day (6), at least once a week (5), a few times a month (4), at least once a month (3), a few times a year (2), or never (1)?" *Subjective closeness* to church members was assessed by the question: "How close are you to the people in your church? Would you say very close (4), fairly close (3), not too close (2), or not close at all (1)?" *Negative interactions* with church members was assessed using a three-item Likert type scale, with response categories ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Respondents were asked, "How often do the people in your church: 1) make too many demands on you, 2) criticize you and the things you do, and 3) try to take advantage of you?" ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

### 2.2.2 | Church support

*Receipt of overall social support* from church members was measured by the question, "How often do people in your church help you out? Would you say very often (4), fairly often (3), not too often (2), or never (1)?" *Provision of social support* to church members was measured by the question, "How often do you help out people in your church? Would you say very often (4), fairly often (3), not too often (2), or never (1)?" *Receipt of emotional support* from church members is assessed using a three-item Likert type scale, with response categories ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Respondents were asked "How often do the people in your church: 1) make you feel loved and cared for, 2) listen to you talk about your private problems and concerns, and 3) express interest and concern in your well-being?" ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

### 2.2.3 | Religious involvement

*Church attendance* was measured by the question, "How often do you usually attend religious services? Would you say nearly everyday, at least once a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or less than once a year?" *Denomination* was measured by the question: "What is your current religion?" More than 35 different denominations were identified which were recoded into nine categories: Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Seventh Day Adventist, Other Protestant (e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian), Other Religion (e.g., Buddhist, Muslim), and Unaffiliated. Baptists were set as the reference group in the multivariate analysis.

### 2.2.4 | Sociodemographic correlates

The sociodemographic variables used in this analysis include gender, education, age, family income, marital status, and region. Gender was coded 0 for male and 1 for female, and education (number of formal years of schooling), age, and family income (in dollars) were assessed as continuous variables. Missing data for family income and

education were imputed using an iterative regression-based multiple imputation approach incorporating information about age, sex, region, race, employment status, marital status, home ownership, and nativity of household residents.

Parental status was coded 1 for parent and 0 for not a parent. Incarceration history was coded 1 for ever been incarcerated in a prison, jail, detention center or reform school and 0 for never been incarcerated in a prison, jail, detention center or reform school. Marital status was represented by five categories: married or cohabiting, divorced, widowed, separated, and never married; married/co-habiting was designated as the reference category in multivariate analyses. Region was represented by four categories (South, North Central, Northeast, and West). South is the reference category in multivariate analyses.

### 2.3 | Analysis strategy

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were performed to identify the correlates of frequency of contact, subjective closeness, receipt of overall and emotional support, provision of support, and negative interactions with church members. The analyses were conducted for the total sample as well as separately for men and women. In instances in which there were ostensibly meaningful differences in the gender stratified analysis, interactions by gender were tested to determine if these differences were significant. Only interactions that were significant at the 0.05 level were included in the final regression analysis. Regression coefficients and standard errors are presented. The regression coefficients and standard errors take into account the complex multistage clustered design of the NSAL sample, unequal probabilities of selection, nonresponse, and poststratification.

A correlation matrix for all of the variables is included in Appendix. In all analyses, we checked for collinearity between the independent variables using the variance inflation factor diagnostic test. The largest variance inflation factor was less than 2.1, which is below both the threshold of 10 and the more stringent threshold of 4, which many researchers regard as an indicator of severe multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007).

## 3 | RESULTS

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample and distribution of the study variables. Women made up 56% of the sample and respondents were, on average, 42 years of age. Overall, mean years of formal education was just over 12 years and the average family income was \$36,832. Eight of 10 respondents were parents (82%) and 17% had been incarcerated at some point in their lives. Approximately, two of five respondents were either married or cohabiting; about one-third of the sample had never married. Slightly over half of the sample (56%) resided in the South.

Close to half of all respondents (49%) reported Baptist religious affiliation; the second most prevalent reported religious affiliation was other Protestant (18%). With regard to religious involvement, the average church attendance level (mean [ $M$ ] = 3.79, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 1.21) was between a few times a year and a few times a month. The average level of contact with congregants was 3.79 ( $SD$  = 1.74), and the average level of subjective closeness to congregants was 2.63 ( $SD$  = 1.03). Overall, respondents reported similar levels of provision ( $M$  = 2.64,  $SD$  = 0.90) and receipt ( $M$  = 2.41,  $SD$  = 0.97) of overall support. On average, respondents reported receiving more emotional support from church members ( $M$  = 8.86,  $SD$  = 2.10) than negative interactions with church members ( $M$  = 4.49,  $SD$  = 1.65).

Findings from the multivariate analysis for frequency of contact with church members (Table 2) indicated that older respondents, women, and those who attended church more frequently had more contact with church members. Relative to Baptists, respondents who were Pentecostal had more frequent contact with church members. In contrast, compared with Baptists, religiously unaffiliated respondents had less contact with church members. Respondents in the West reported less contact with church members than their Southern counterparts. There was a significant

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the sample and distribution of study variables

	%	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Age		3570	42.33	14.50	18	93
Gender						
Male	44.03	1271				
Female	55.97	2299				
Education		3570	12.43	2.23	0	17
Family income		3570	36832.7	33068.1	0	520000
Parental status						
Parent	82.17	2992				
Not a parent	17.83	561				
Incarceration history		3519	0.17	0.33	0	1
Marital status						
Married/cohabiting	41.65	1220				
Separated	7.16	286				
Divorced	11.75	524				
Widowed	7.90	353				
Never married	31.55	1170				
Region						
Northeast	15.69	411				
North Central	18.81	595				
South	56.24	2330				
West	9.25	234				
Denomination						
Baptist	49.08	1865				
Methodist	5.88	216				
Pentecostal	8.62	304				
Catholic	5.96	202				
Other Protestant	17.70	566				
Other religion	2.25	71				
Unaffiliated	10.51	344				
Church attendance		3570	3.79	1.21	1	6
Frequency of contact		3569	3.20	1.74	1	6
Subjective closeness		3561	2.63	1.03	1	4
Provision of support		2803	2.64	0.90	1	4
Receipt of overall support		2347	2.41	0.97	1	4
Receipt of emotional support		2981	8.86	2.10	2	12
Negative interactions		2980	4.49	1.65	2	12

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Percents and N are presented for categorical variables and means and standard deviations are presented for continuous variables. Percentages are weighted and frequencies are unweighted.

interaction between gender and incarceration history. This interaction revealed that women who were formerly incarcerated had less contact with church members than women who had never been incarcerated; this was not the case for men. Possible interactions between gender and age, gender and marital status, and gender and region were not significant.

For subjective closeness (Table 2), women reported lower levels of subjective closeness to congregants than men and higher education was associated with lower assessments of subjective closeness. Individuals residing in the West had lower levels of subjective closeness than those residing in the South. Respondents belonging to other

**TABLE 2** Multivariate analysis of the correlates of frequency of contact with and subjective closeness to church members among African Americans

	Frequency of contact			Subjective closeness		
	Total Sample B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)	Total Sample B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)
Age	0.00(0.00)*	0.00(0.00)	0.01(0.00)*	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)
Gender						
Male	0	--	--	0	--	--
Female	0.19(0.06)**	--	--	-0.12(0.03)***	--	--
Education	-0.00(0.02)	0.00(0.02)	-0.01(0.02)	-0.03(0.00)***	-0.03(0.01)***	-0.02(0.01)**
Family income	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.01)	0.00(0.01)	0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)
Parental status						
Parent	-0.07(0.08)	-0.08(0.14)	-0.07(0.11)	0.01(0.04)	-0.02(0.06)	0.03(0.05)
Not parent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Incarceration history	-0.6(0.09)	-0.08(0.09)	-0.47(0.12)***	0.05(0.05)	0.08(0.07)	0.01(0.07)
Marital status						
Married/cohabiting	0	0	0	0	0	0
Separated	0.18(0.12)	0.18(0.20)	0.19(0.13)	-0.05(0.05)	-0.10(0.09)	0.00(0.08)
Divorced	-0.08(0.08)	-0.08(0.14)	-0.09(0.11)	0.02(0.05)	0.01(0.08)	0.02(0.06)
Widowed	0.14(0.12)	0.20(0.32)	0.08(0.12)	0.08(0.05)	-0.04(0.11)	0.12(0.06)*
Never married	-0.15(0.08)	-0.22(0.13)	-0.08(0.12)	-0.03(0.04)	-0.05(0.06)	-0.02(0.04)
Region						
South	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northeast	0.01(0.10)	0.19(0.18)	-0.11(0.16)	0.00(0.04)	0.09(0.05)	-0.06(0.06)
North Central	-0.12(0.06)	-0.13(0.09)	-0.12(0.08)	-0.08(0.05)	-0.09(0.07)	-0.07(0.05)
West	-0.39(0.08)***	-0.29(0.08)**	-0.47(0.12)***	-0.19(0.06)**	-0.12(0.09)	-0.25(0.05)***
Denomination						
Baptist	0	0	0	0	0	0
Methodist	-0.05(0.15)	0.19(0.26)	-0.24(0.16)	0.08(0.06)	0.12(0.10)	0.07(0.11)
Pentecostal	0.33(0.11)**	0.32(0.17)	0.33(0.13)*	-0.07(0.04)	-0.11(0.07)	-0.04(0.05)
Catholic	-0.30(0.16)	-0.27(0.21)	-0.32(0.19)	-0.14(0.08)	-0.09(0.12)	-0.17(0.10)
Other Protestant	0.01(0.08)	0.07(0.11)	-0.04(0.12)	-0.11(0.05)*	-0.12(0.07)	-0.09(0.05)
Other religion	0.08(0.20)	0.01(0.33)	0.16(0.23)	0.11(0.18)	0.32(0.20)	-0.21(0.19)
Unaffiliated	-0.22(0.08)**	-0.32(0.09)***	-0.09(0.11)	-0.22(0.05)***	-0.24(0.07)***	-0.20(0.06)**
Frequency of contact	--	--	--	0.24(0.01)***	0.20(0.02)***	0.27(0.02)***
Church attendance	0.88(0.02)***	0.86(0.03)***	0.90(0.02)***	0.37(0.01)***	0.43(0.02)***	0.31(0.02)***
Gender X Incarceration History	-0.42**	--	--	--	--	--
<i>R-Square</i>	0.45	0.44	0.44	0.60	0.61	0.60
<i>F</i>	385.52	205.63	222.78	2130.56	550.41	313.95
Prob > <i>F</i>	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001
<i>N</i>	3505	1244	2261	3498	1242	2256

Note. B = regression coefficient; SE = standard error.

Significance test of the individual parameter estimates were based on a complex design-corrected *t* test.

\**p* < 0.05.

\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.



Protestant denominations and religiously unaffiliated respondents reported being less subjectively close to other congregants as compared to Baptist respondents. Both frequency of contact and church attendance were positively associated with subjective closeness. That is, frequent service attendance and frequent interaction with church members were both associated with higher levels of subjective closeness to church members. Possible interactions between gender and marital status as well as gender and region were not significant.

Table 3 presents findings for the regression analysis of the provision and receipt of overall support. With regard to the provision of support, women were less likely than men to provide support to church members, whereas those with higher levels of family income provided more support to congregants than those with lower incomes. Respondents who were divorced provided church support to congregants more frequently than those who were married or cohabiting. Similarly, Methodists and respondents of other religious affiliations provided support to congregants more frequently than Baptists. Frequency of contact, subjective closeness, and church attendance were positively associated with the provision of support to church members. A possible interaction between gender and marital status was tested but not significant.

With regard to receiving overall support (Table 3), older people received less support than their younger counterparts. Respondents who were previously incarcerated received overall support less frequently. Residents of the Northeast and North Central regions reported receiving overall social support from their fellow congregants more frequently as compared to residents in the South. Higher levels of religious involvement (i.e., church attendance, contact with church members, and subjective closeness) were associated with receiving overall support from congregants more frequently. There was a significant interaction between gender and parental status among men, such that those who were parents received support less frequently than those who did not have children. However, among women, there was no association between parental status and receipt of overall support. Possible interactions between gender and age as well as gender and region were not significant.

Table 4 presents the multivariate analysis of the receipt of emotional support and negative interactions. Findings for emotional support indicate that older adults received less emotional support from congregants, whereas residents of the Northeast and West received more emotional support compared with residents in the South. Denominational differences indicated that Pentecostal and Catholic affiliations were associated with more frequent emotional support from church members compared with Baptist affiliation. In addition, higher levels of contact, subjective closeness, and church attendance were associated with more frequent emotional support. Interactions were tested between gender and education, and gender and region and were not significant.

Finally, findings for negative interactions with church members showed that women had fewer negative interactions than men (Table 4), whereas divorced respondents had more negative interactions. Respondents residing in the Northeast and those with higher levels of contact and subjective closeness to church members also reported more frequent negative interactions with church members. Church attendance, however, was unrelated to negative interactions with congregants. Interactions were tested between gender and marital status, and gender and region and were not significant.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Overall, our findings indicate that for many African Americans church members are an integral component of their social support networks. They report being emotionally close to their church support networks. Further, they indicate that they receive emotional support and both provide and receive overall assistance from church members on a relatively frequent basis. The findings of this study add to the emerging body of research on the importance of church support networks among African Americans.

One of the most consistent findings in this analysis is that integration and involvement in church networks were associated with receiving and providing more support. This is evident for service attendance, frequency of contact with church members, and degree of subjective closeness to church members. Previous studies involving different

**TABLE 3** Multivariate analysis of the correlates of the frequency of provision of social support to and receipt of overall social support from church members among African Americans

	Provision of social support			Receipt of overall support		
	Total sample B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)	Total sample B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)
Age	0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)***	-0.00(0.00)	-0.01(0.00)**
Gender						
Male	0	--	--	0	--	--
Female	-0.11(0.04)**	--	--	-0.01(0.05)	--	--
Education	-0.00(0.01)	-0.01(0.01)	0.00(0.01)	-0.01(0.01)	-0.00(0.02)	-0.01(0.01)
Family income	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)**	0.01(0.00)**	0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.01)	0.00(0.00)
Parental status						
Parent	0.04(0.06)	-0.08(0.09)	0.14(0.07)	0.24(0.08)**	-0.25(0.09)**	0.01(0.09)
Not parent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Incarceration history	0.01(0.05)	0.03(0.07)	-0.05(0.07)	-0.12(0.06)*	-0.10(0.09)	-0.18(0.10)
Marital status						
Married/cohabiting	0	0	0	0	0	0
Separated	0.11(0.08)	-0.04(0.12)	0.21(0.09)*	-0.04(0.10)	-0.09(0.19)	-0.01(0.12)
Divorced	0.15(0.06)*	0.11(0.11)	0.20(0.06)**	-0.09(0.08)	0.01(0.12)	-0.15(0.09)
Widowed	0.00(0.09)	-0.00(0.15)	0.04(0.10)	0.09(0.10)	0.15(0.16)	0.09(0.10)
Never married	0.07(0.05)	0.03(0.07)	0.11(0.06)	0.08(0.06)	0.19(0.09)	0.03(0.08)
Region						
South	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northeast	0.13(0.08)	0.12(0.10)	0.15(0.11)	0.28(0.09)**	0.12(0.14)	0.39(0.10)***
North Central	0.05(0.05)	0.02(0.10)	0.07(0.04)	0.13(0.05)*	0.05(0.08)	0.18(0.08)*
West	-0.04(0.06)	0.09(0.12)	-0.15(0.10)	-0.05(0.06)	0.06(0.11)	-0.12(0.07)
Denomination						
Baptist	0	0	0	0	0	0
Methodist	0.16(0.08)*	0.19(0.15)	0.13(0.12)	-0.14(0.08)	-0.28(0.15)	-0.05(0.06)
Pentecostal	0.11(0.06)	0.05(0.12)	0.12(0.08)	-0.02(0.08)	0.05(0.15)	-0.06(0.11)
Catholic	0.12(0.09)	0.21(0.11)	0.03(0.09)	0.10(0.08)	0.26(0.13)*	-0.00(0.09)
Other Protestant	0.03(0.05)	0.11(0.08)	-0.04(0.06)	0.03(0.07)	0.05(0.11)	-0.01(0.08)
Other religion	0.43(0.15)**	0.40(0.19)*	0.44(0.15)**	0.06(0.18)	0.02(0.21)	0.15(0.25)
Unaffiliated	0.08(0.10)	-0.05(0.14)	0.21(0.11)	0.06(0.09)	-0.14(0.15)	0.28(0.09)**
Frequency of contact	0.11(0.01)***	0.11(0.02)***	0.10(0.02)***	0.09(0.01)***	0.12(0.02)***	0.07(0.02)***
Subjective closeness	0.43(0.03)***	0.45(0.04)***	0.42(0.03)***	0.45(0.02)***	0.43(0.04)***	0.46(0.03)***
Church attendance	0.14(0.02)***	0.10(0.04)**	0.17(0.03)***	0.13(0.03)***	0.13(0.05)*	0.14(0.04)**
Gender X Parental Status	--	--	--	-0.24(0.12)*	--	--
R-Square	0.37	0.38	0.37	0.31	0.35	0.30
F	145.19	67.89	224.93	138.83	101.14	114.83
Prob > F	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001
N	2745	916	1829	2297	758	1539

Note. B = regression coefficient; SE = standard error.

Significance test of the individual parameter estimates were based on a complex design-corrected *t* test.

\**p* < 0.05.

\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

**TABLE 4** Multivariate analysis of the correlates of the frequency of receipt of emotional support and negative interaction with church members among African Americans

	Receipt of emotional support			Negative interactions		
	Total B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)	Total B(SE)	Men B(SE)	Women B(SE)
Age	-0.01(0.00)**	-0.02(0.01)**	-0.01(0.01)*	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)
Gender						
Male	0	--	--	0	--	--
Female	-0.01(0.10)	--	--	-0.23(0.09)*	--	--
Education	-0.04(0.02)	-0.08(0.03)*	-0.01(0.02)	0.02(0.02)	0.02(0.03)	0.02(0.03)
Family income	0.01(0.01)	0.01(0.01)	0.00(0.01)	0.01(0.01)	0.00(0.01)	0.01(0.01)
Parental status						
Parent	-0.01(0.13)	0.12(0.22)	-0.14(0.17)	0.09(0.11)	0.16(0.20)	0.06(0.15)
Not parent	0	0	0	0	0	0
Incarceration history	-0.01(0.12)	-0.06(0.16)	0.02(0.19)	0.25(0.13)	0.31(0.16)	0.13(0.22)
Marital status						
Married/cohabiting	0	0	0	0	0	0
Separated	0.25(0.16)	0.18(0.27)	0.34(0.22)	0.25(0.17)	0.20(0.27)	0.25(0.17)
Divorced	0.06(0.12)	0.06(0.19)	0.12(0.15)	0.19(0.09)*	-0.05(0.22)	0.31(0.14)*
Widowed	0.12(0.15)	0.11(0.29)	0.16(0.23)	-0.04(0.15)	-0.05(0.24)	-0.06(0.18)
Never married	0.08(0.09)	0.06(0.21)	0.14(0.11)	0.08(0.12)	0.29(0.23)	-0.02(0.16)
Region						
South	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northeast	0.42(0.08)***	0.34(0.23)	0.50(0.15)**	0.26(0.11)*	0.58(0.18)**	0.05(0.11)
North Central	0.15(0.15)	0.26(0.20)	0.07(0.20)	0.20(0.15)	0.18(0.33)	0.21(0.08)*
West	0.33(0.16)*	0.50(0.19)*	0.25(0.33)	0.13(0.19)	0.25(0.24)	0.02(0.21)
Denomination						
Baptist	0	0	0	0	0	0
Methodist	-0.24(0.13)	-0.24(0.20)	-0.27(0.20)	-0.05(0.15)	-0.25(0.21)	0.09(0.23)
Pentecostal	0.24(0.11)*	-0.08(0.17)	0.38(0.13)**	0.01(0.12)	0.37(0.29)	-0.08(0.17)
Catholic	0.35(0.14)*	0.28(0.29)	0.35(0.18)	0.22(0.24)	0.19(0.43)	0.29(0.17)
Other Protestant	0.08(0.12)	0.03(0.18)	0.13(0.13)	-0.09(0.13)	0.01(0.18)	-0.20(0.15)
Other religion	0.53(0.33)	0.74(0.34)*	0.23(0.49)	-0.12(0.35)	-0.18(0.51)	-0.13(0.33)
Unaffiliated	-0.29(0.21)	-0.69(0.32)*	0.15(0.26)	0.12(0.16)	0.14(0.23)	0.12(0.26)
Frequency of contact	0.17(0.03)***	0.21(0.04)***	0.13(0.04)**	0.14(0.02)***	0.20(0.04)***	0.09(0.03)*
Subjective closeness	1.19(0.07)***	1.10(0.08)***	1.27(0.08)***	0.16(0.03)***	0.18(0.07)*	0.14(0.06)*
Church attendance	0.21(0.06)**	0.14(0.07)*	0.25(0.08)**	-0.04(0.06)	0.01(0.09)	-0.10(0.06)
R-Square	0.35	0.36	0.35	0.04	0.08	0.03
F	163.64	43.01	79.66	9.91	5.19	5.65
Prob > F	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001	<0.0001
N	2923	975	1948	2922	974	1948

Note. B = regression coefficient; SE = standard error.

Significance test of the individual parameter estimates were based on a complex design-corrected t-test.

\**p* < 0.05.

\*\**p* < 0.01.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

samples (elderly and adult African Americans and adult Black Caribbeans) similarly confirm the importance of church attendance, frequency of contact with church members, and subjective closeness to church members for congregational support exchanges (Hayward & Krause, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2005). Krause (2004) and Hayward and Krause (2013) found that older African Americans who reported more frequent service attendance also reported receiving more frequent support from church members. Among Black Caribbeans, frequent service attendance is predictive of receiving and providing church support on a more frequent basis (Nguyen et al., 2016). People who are more involved in their church networks have more opportunities to develop and strengthen social ties with fellow congregants. This leads to greater social embeddedness within the church network and higher levels of support exchanges with congregants, which the current findings demonstrate.

Nevertheless, higher levels of involvement in the church network affords additional opportunities for conflicts and disagreements with congregants. Consequently, respondents who reported more frequent contact with church members also reported more frequent negative interactions with these same individuals. We also found that respondents who reported higher levels of subjective closeness to church members also reported more frequent negative interactions with church members.

These findings are similar to prior results suggesting that it is not uncommon for close relationships to be simultaneously positive and negative (Birditt et al., 2018; Mouzon, Taylor, Nguyen, & Chatters, 2016). Negative interactions are likely to be less prevalent in relationships that are not subjectively close because individuals in these relationships are able to use avoidance as a means to manage negative interactions. However, with close relationships, avoidance proves to be a difficult strategy for maintaining support networks. Thus, negative interactions are virtually unavoidable in subjectively close relationships.

Our findings for demographic differences in church support networks both confirmed and diverged from prior work. Research on family and friendship networks typically finds that gender is one of the strongest and most consistent correlates of network integration. Similar to previous research on kin and nonkin networks (Turner & Turner, 2013), our analysis found that women had more frequent contact with church members than men, possibly reflecting gender and cultural norms that emphasize women's roles as social facilitators ("tend and mend"). Women also reported fewer negative interactions with church members compared with men. In contrast, however, women also reported lower levels of subjective closeness to church members and provided support less frequently. In essence, African American men were more subjectively close and provided support to church members more frequently compared with women, but they also had less contact with church members and more negative interactions.

The present finding that men provide more support may owe to the fact that they are more likely to hold positions of higher status and visibility within the church (e.g., deacon or member of the board of trustees) that place them in roles of responsibility and oversight for church resources and support exchanges within the congregation (Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Taylor et al., 2017). Additionally, it is important to note that gender differences were significant only in the presence of controls for service attendance and contact with church members, both of which African American women reported higher levels. As such, discrepant gender differences might be attributable to the absence of controls for church attendance and contact with members in many previous studies.

Nonetheless, these findings collectively demonstrate that African American men who are heavily involved with their churches are both subjectively closer to congregants and provide support at relatively high levels. In previous research on older African Americans (Taylor et al., 2009), men reported significantly more hours per week at their place of worship compared with women. In addition to specific congregational roles and activities (men's club, choir), men may be involved as volunteers for maintaining the church building and grounds and general stewardship (e.g., cleaning, cutting grass, shoveling snow, opening and closing buildings; Taylor et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2017). For this group of men, churches and their members are major components of their informal support networks.

The data also revealed a couple of gender interactions, indicating that certain demographic characteristics predicted church relationships differently for men and women. First, the significant interaction between gender and

parental status demonstrated that compared to their nonparent male counterparts, African American men who were parents were less likely to receive overall support from congregants. Among African American women, there was no association between parental status and receipt of overall support. This pattern of support may owe to the fact that men may be more likely to seek support from family rather than from church members and other nonkin individuals.

Indeed, Chatters, Taylor, Lincoln, and Schroepfer (2002) investigation of patterns of social support from family and church members among African Americans indicated that compared with women, men are more likely to receive support from family members than church members (Chatters et al., 2002). As a result, men who were parents may have relied more on their children and other family members for support than on church members, which would explain why these respondents received less emotional support from congregants than men who were not parents. In contrast, men who did not have children may have relied more heavily on church members for emotional support; this is consistent with the notion that church members act as surrogate family to individuals who lack family ties (Chung, Bemak, & Wong, 2000).

A second significant interaction indicated that women who were previously incarcerated had less contact with church members than women who had no history of incarceration. On the other hand, incarceration history had no bearing on how frequently men interacted with church members. This is likely due to the stigmatization of incarceration (Austin, 2004). This stigmatization is particularly magnified among women because incarceration rates are substantially lower among women than men; women comprise only 7% of the prison population (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2018). Because incarceration is far less common among women, the stigma that accompanies it is much greater, which results in women who were previously incarcerated being socially isolated and, to a certain extent, ostracized from their church networks (Bengtson, 2001).

Study findings indicated that older people as opposed to younger people had more frequent contact with church members, yet they were less likely to receive overall support and emotional support. Higher rates of contact with church members among African Americans is consistent with their higher service attendance and religious participation rates (Chatters, Nguyen, & Taylor, 2014). That is, African Americans frequently attend church services and tend to be more involved in church activities, which translates to more opportunities for social interactions with church members.

Negative associations between age and support are consistent with research on African American family support networks in which older adults are less likely than their younger counterparts to receive assistance from family members (Taylor, Mouzon, Nguyen, & Chatters, 2016). However, findings for age differences in relation to church support are mixed. Some studies indicate that younger African Americans receive more church-based social support than their older counterparts (Krause, 2004; Taylor & Chatters, 1988), whereas other work reports that no significant age differences (Taylor et al., 2005). The current findings on age may be indicative of the shrinking of the size of church support networks among older adults. Because of mortality of friends, older adults have smaller friendship networks. This is especially true of older adults of advanced age (75 years and older). Although church support networks may be a bit more intergenerational than strictly peer based friendship networks, they may still be much smaller than networks of younger adults. The smaller church networks of older adults may be the reason that older African Americans receive support from church members less frequently.

Regional differences found in this analysis show an interesting pattern of findings. First, African Americans residing in the South had more frequent contact with church members compared with those residing in the West region. Southerners also had higher levels of subjective closeness to church members compared with those residing in the West. These findings are consistent with well-established research showing that African American Southerners have higher rates of service attendance and participation in other activities at their places of worship (choir, women's and men's club; Taylor et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2004). These higher rates of participation are likely attributable to the historical centrality of religion and religious communities in the South (Chung et al., 2000), in contrast to the lower rates of religious participation in the West.

Given this, we would also expect that African American Southerners would be more likely to provide and receive social support. African Americans in the Northeast, however, were more likely to receive both

overall and emotional support. Similarly, respondents in the North Central region were more likely than Southerners to receive overall support, and those who resided in the West were more likely to receive emotional support. These findings are counterintuitive and inconsistent with prior findings and expectations. However, it is important to remember that this analysis controlled for frequency of both church attendance and contact with church members and subjective closeness.

Further, both measures of integration with church networks (i.e., church attendance and contact with church members) are associated with region, with Southerners reporting higher levels of integration. As such, controlling these variables reduces the impact of the higher level of church integration reported by Southerners. Ancillary analysis (not shown) without controls for service attendance and contact with church members revealed two significant region differences. Namely, Southerners were more likely than those residing in the West to both receive overall support and give support.

As with other correlates, the issue of denominational differences in church support networks is seriously understudied. The present analysis found that compared with Baptists, (a) Pentecostals had more frequent contact with church members, (b) Methodists provided more support, and (c) Pentecostals and Catholics received more emotional support. This pattern of findings is consistent with previous research indicating higher levels of service attendance and participation in church-based activities from members of this denomination (Taylor et al., 2014).

#### 4.1 | Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study's cross-sectional design does not permit an assessment of the ongoing and reciprocal nature of church support exchanges and relationships. More broadly, our interpretations of sociodemographic differences are suggestive and await confirmation with prospective data. Second, the analyses were conducted on data collected in 2001–2003, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, despite the acknowledged advantages of survey formats for exploring a broad range of issues, in-depth qualitative data could provide additional insight into how support operates in particular situations (e.g., health problems) and the specific form that it takes. Despite these limitations this study provided a comprehensive examination of church support networks among African Americans. The study had the benefit of a large national sample, which allowed the investigation of a full range of sociodemographic and church network (e.g., frequency on interaction, subjective closeness) independent variables.

#### 4.2 | Implications for future research

A major contribution of the present study is the resulting practice implications. Prior empirical work has indicated that higher levels of social integration within the church network and social support from church members can protect against a range of mental health problems, such as depressive symptoms, suicidality, and psychological distress (Chatters et al., 2018; Chatters et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2017). The current findings identified correlates of social integration and support within church networks. Given the association between social support and mental health problems, these correlates can be used to identify vulnerable clients who are at risk for developing or deteriorating mental health problems and to assess clients' social resources. Being able to identify vulnerable clients will permit practitioners to target interventions that would bolster the social support needs of clients. These interventions can be tailored to address issues of social disengagement, problematic relationships, and inadequate supports.

#### 4.3 | Directions for future research

Several directions for future research include dedicated research on church support based on samples of the entire adult age range that explore potential age group differences in the correlates and nature of church support. This

could involve examining age-specific types of support for young, middle-aged, and older people and exploring age differences in patterns of giving versus receiving assistance. Future research could also examine antecedent events (e.g., sudden financial hardship, death of a loved one) associated with providing and receiving church support. Taken together, this study provided a unique opportunity to systematically investigate and clarify sociodemographic and religious involvement correlates of church support and negative interactions among African American adults.

#### 4.4 | Conclusion

The present study provided important information concerning church support networks of African Americans. Findings for the positive relationships between church involvement factors and church support underscore the importance of integration in church networks for receiving assistance. Study findings also contribute to a growing body of research on the nature of negative interactions with social groups (e.g., family, friends). In the case of church networks, higher levels of involvement comes at some cost with regard to perceptions that others criticize you, take advantage of you, and make too many demands. Further, the data indicated that some sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., parental status and incarceration history) function differently for men and women in relation to congregational relationships. These findings extend the literature on gender differences in social relationships.

#### ORCID

Ann W. Nguyen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2592-0773>

Linda M. Chatters  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4678-2541>

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## APPENDIX A

## Correlation matrix of study variables for african Americans respondents

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1 Age	1															
2. Female	0.02	1														
3. Education	-0.16***	0.00	1													
4. Family income	-0.01	-0.14***	0.35***	1												
5. Parent	0.36***	0.13***	-0.09***	0.00	1											
6. Ever incarcerated	-0.06***	-0.23***	-0.11***	-0.05**	0.03	1										
7. Separated	0.05**	0.03	-0.06***	-0.07***	0.11***	0.06***	1									
8. Divorced	0.16***	0.02	0.06***	-0.09***	0.10***	0.01	-0.10***	1								
9. Widowed	0.46***	0.16***	-0.17***	-0.11***	0.10***	-0.06***	-0.08***	-0.11***	1							
10. Never married	-0.49***	0.02	-0.02	-0.15***	-0.44***	0.00	-0.19***	-0.25***	-0.20***	1						
11. Northeast	-0.01	0.00	0.06***	0.09***	-0.02	0.01	0.03	0.00	-0.01	0.00	1					
12. North Central	-0.00	0.03	0.06***	0.02	0.02	0.06***	-0.05**	0.02	0.03	0.01	-0.21***	1				
13. West	0.03*	-0.03	0.08***	-0.00	0.04*	0.04*	0.05**	-0.01	-0.01	0.02	-0.14***	-0.15***	1			
14. Methodist	0.08***	-0.00	0.03	0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.00	0.02	0.05**	-0.06***	0.01	-0.07***	-0.03	1		

(Continues)

15. Pentecostal	-0.02	0.07***	-0.03	-0.04*	0.04*	0.00	0.02	0.00	-0.00	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.08***	1
16. Catholic	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.00	-0.02	0.01	-0.06***	-0.08*** 1
17. Other Protestant	0.00	-0.04*	0.12***	0.08***	-0.03	0.02	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.04*	0.05**	0.07***	-0.12***	-0.14*** -0.12***
18. Other religion	-0.01	-0.04*	0.04*	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.00	-0.03	0.00	0.08***	-0.02	0.02	-0.04*	-0.05** -0.04*
19. Unaffiliated	-0.18***	-0.10***	-0.03	-0.02	-0.16***	0.04*	-0.00	-0.04*	-0.08***	0.17***	0.06***	0.05**	-0.01	-0.09***	-0.11*** -0.09***
20. Church attendance	0.19***	0.16***	0.09***	0.08***	0.12	-0.14***	-0.04*	0.02	0.11***	-0.17***	-0.11***	-0.07***	-0.03	0.04*	0.14*** 0.00
21. Church contact	0.18***	0.15***	0.04*	0.04*	0.10***	-0.14***	0.01	0.01	0.12***	-0.16***	-0.05**	-0.07***	-0.07***	0.03*	0.14*** -0.04*
22. Church closeness	0.18***	0.09***	-0.02	0.03*	0.11***	-0.09***	-0.02	0.02	0.12***	-0.16***	-0.07***	-0.08***	-0.09***	0.06***	0.11*** -0.03*
23. Provision of support	0.12***	-0.00	-0.04	0.06**	0.05**	-0.05*	0.02	0.03	0.06***	-0.09***	0.03	-0.02	-0.08***	0.04	0.09*** -0.02
24. Receipt of overall support	-0.02	0.03	-0.03	0.04	-0.06**	-0.08***	-0.02	-0.06**	0.04	0.03	0.07***	-0.01	-0.09***	-0.05*	0.07** -0.01
25. Receipt of emotional support	0.03	0.04*	-0.07***	0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.02	0.05**	-0.04*	0.04*	-0.02	-0.04*	-0.03	0.11*** -0.01
26. Negative interaction	0.00	-0.05**	0.03	0.05**	0.02	0.05*	0.03	0.02	-0.02	-0.02	0.04*	0.02	-0.00	-0.01	0.02 0.02

(Continues)

	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1. Age										
2. Female										
3. Education										
4. Family income										
5. Parent										
6. Ever incarcerated										
7. Separated										
8. Divorced										
9. Widowed										
10. Never married										
11. Northeast										
12. North Central										
13. West										
14. Methodist										
15. Pentecostal										
16. Catholic										
17. Other Protestant	1									
18. Other religion	-0.07***	1								
19. Unaffiliated	-0.16***	-0.05**	1							
20. Church attendance	0.11***	-0.01	-0.30***	1						

(Continues)

