

A Portrait of the 2020 Faith Communities Today Study

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Abstract

This article offers an overview of the congregational landscape of the United States using the 2020 Faith Communities Today national key-informant survey. Offering representative results from 15,278 congregations in over 80 different denominations and 4 religious traditions, the article describes the characteristics of the average American congregation as well as significant variations within the results. Overall, this picture is one of diminished health and gradual decline. Following this summary picture, several key trends, including size disparities, aging memberships, generational changes, and a more diverse religious context, are discussed along with their implications for future congregational vitality. These trends further illustrate the challenges facing US faith communities presently. The article concludes with a focus on the most prominent characteristics of those faith communities within the survey that are spiritually vital and growing to highlight possible avenues of revitalization for the country's congregations. These results suggest that congregations need a combination of innovative leadership, a clear sense of mission and purpose, passionate and relevant worship, and an engaged membership willing to adapt and change to address an ever-evolving social and religious context.

Keywords

congregations, vitality, research, multifait, faith communities, national profile, sociological

Religious life in the United States is anything but a flat, monotonous landscape. Rather it is fractured into denominational, racial, and regional craggy peaks and valleys as diverse as our nation's physical topography. This diversity is what makes the religious scene so interesting, but it also means that unless we are intentional about drawing from a broad

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perspective, we seldom have a complete picture of the entire terrain. Our perceptions of this landscape are usually shaped by one or more of these disparate components of the total reality. Implicit impressions of congregational life are often colored by the reality of the churches we are closest to or encounter most often. Therefore, it is a worthwhile exercise to take an intentionally expansive survey of the overall landscape and national trends to better understand how one's own favored segment of that picture compares to the totality of congregational life in the nation.

This article portrays just such a panoramic overview of the congregational landscape using the most recent 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study's results. This national key-informant survey of 15,278 congregations includes results from over 80 different denominations and 4 religious traditions. These results were weighted to correct for sampling errors and better reflect each group's distribution by denomination, size, and region in the overall national picture. To date, this is the largest and most comprehensive picture of religious communities in the USA that has ever been sketched. As David Roozen described in the previous article, this research effort has been underway since 2000, with six nationally representative surveys and nearly 50,000 responses in total.

The article sketches a portrait of the "typical" congregation with important variations on this norm. Thereafter, the article highlights a number of influential trends we have identified across the 20 years of FACT research that are crucial in understanding the strengths and challenges facing American congregations in the present and coming years.

The Typical American Congregation

While there clearly is no such thing as a "typical" faith community, it does help to grasp a picture of what the average congregation looks like from this national perspective. This typical congregation is Evangelical Protestant Christian and small—with fully 50% of them having a worship attendance of 65 persons or less. Over the past five years this representative congregation has also declined in size by 7%. However, this congregation was originally constructed with a larger community in mind, having an average seating size of 200. And when founded, on average in 1950, it was likely nearly full of worshippers. However, now it is considerably less than 50% full. This congregation owns its building and has a solo pastor who is likely a white male, aged 57, working full time at the church, earned an M.Div., and having a leadership tenure there of seven years so far. In terms of regularly attending membership, they too are likely to be white and older, more female than male, American-born, having grown up in the tradition they are currently a part of, and live within 15 minutes of the congregation.

This sketch might strike you as a fairly typical image of an American Christian congregation. However, as contradictory as it might sound, this is not the typical lived experience of "church" for a majority of religious attenders. It may be what the average faith community in the nation looks like but average attenders finds themselves in a considerably larger faith community of several hundred worshippers. This is part of the reason that many people have a skewed perception of the overall religious landscape. Roughly 70% of faith communities have under 100 persons attending weekly, while just 10% have over 250 in services. Yet, that tenth of congregations are home to over

60% of all the people who attend religious services. In other words, a relative few of the largest congregations contain the most people, while the majority of congregations are very small and have significantly fewer people, just 16% of total attendees. Therefore, it is more likely that a random participant will experience worship in a larger faith community than in a smaller one. This size dynamic is such a significant factor for congregational flourishing that we devote a full article to it later in this issue.

However, it is also immediately obvious that this median congregational picture masks much of the variety and vitality evident in the religious landscape. This average picture erases the considerably diverse distribution of congregational characteristics. The FACT survey had responses from congregations that range from being home to a few people to those with well over 40,000 attendees of many different races, faith backgrounds, and founding dates (from a dozen communities founded less than a year ago to 50 who are over 325 years old). The clergy ranged in age from 18 to 90. Likewise, the clergy were not all full-time white males—10% were female, 25% clergy of color, and a quarter served part time. A few were brand new to the ministry while several had pastoral tenures of 50 years.

Although the average rate of attendance change shows a significant decline of 7% in the past five years, this too varied considerably, with 52% in decline, nearly 14% stable, but 34% growing. Comparing these results to the findings from our two previous decadal surveys shows an evolving reality (Fig. 1). Consistently across the 20 years of tracking, a smaller percentage of congregations is growing or maintaining their size, and more are in decline. Likewise, both the 2020 average congregational size and growth rate vary considerably by faith tradition, as Table 1 shows, with all families showing overall decline except non-Christian religious communities.

Those congregations of any tradition growing by more than 5% were more likely to be larger, newer, and led by younger clergy than those plateaued or in decline. Respondents

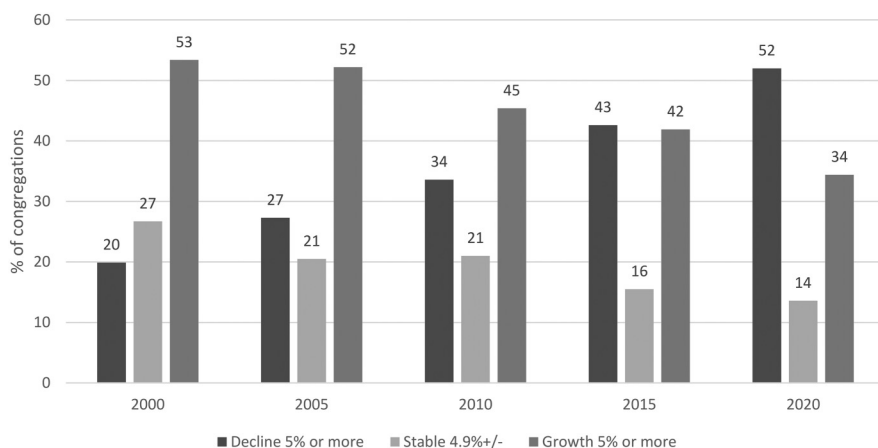


Figure 1. Two decades of less growth and more decline.

Table 1. The Congregational Picture Varies by Religious Family.

Religious Family	Median Worship Size	Median Growth rate
Mainline Protestant Christian	50	−12.5%
Evangelical Protestant Christian	65	−5.4%
Catholic & Orthodox Christian	400	−9.11%
Other Faith Traditions	90	+25.0%

from these communities described their religious services as innovative and contemporary. If they were Christian, these growing churches were more likely to use electric guitars and, conversely, were less likely to have a formal liturgy or use organs and choirs. They had a stronger sense of a clear mission and purpose and experienced less conflict. They were also highly involved in the local community, had more programs of community service, and were likely to have a greater number of all sorts of programs for members and the larger neighborhood. They were more likely to describe themselves as stressing personal and family faith practices, including living out their faith in everyday life, and had a larger percentage of members who were active in recruiting new people. These growing communities were more likely to say they were striving to be diverse and, in fact, were more diverse in terms of racial composition. This diversity correlated with having more new people, fewer life-long members of their tradition, less American-born members, and more recent immigrants among the membership. Not surprisingly, these congregations were better at incorporating new people into the community. They were much more likely to say they were willing to change to meet new challenges and describe themselves as “spiritually vital and alive” than congregations that were stagnant or in decline. Finally, growing congregations were also much more likely to be either congregations of color or communities in faith traditions other than Christian.

Membership

On average, the typical congregation’s regular participants were more likely women (56%) than men (44%). The average age breakdown for religious participants skewed older than the US profile, especially in terms of having fewer young adults and significantly more attendees over 65 years of age, as Figure 2 shows.

The average participant is also more likely to be a college graduate than the national population (41% to 35%). Nearly half a congregation’s participants volunteer (44%), over two-thirds (68%) live within 15 minutes, and 46% are lifetime members of their denomination or faith group. Most faith group participants are American-born (87%, which is quite similar to the national average of 86%), while 13% are first-generation immigrants, 4% of whom immigrated in the last five years. Additionally, the average congregation claims to have 5% of members who are individuals with special needs. Although the typical congregation is experiencing decline, this community also indicated on average that a quarter of the participants were new in the past five years. This certainly implies that there is considerable member flux due to switching, dropping out, and

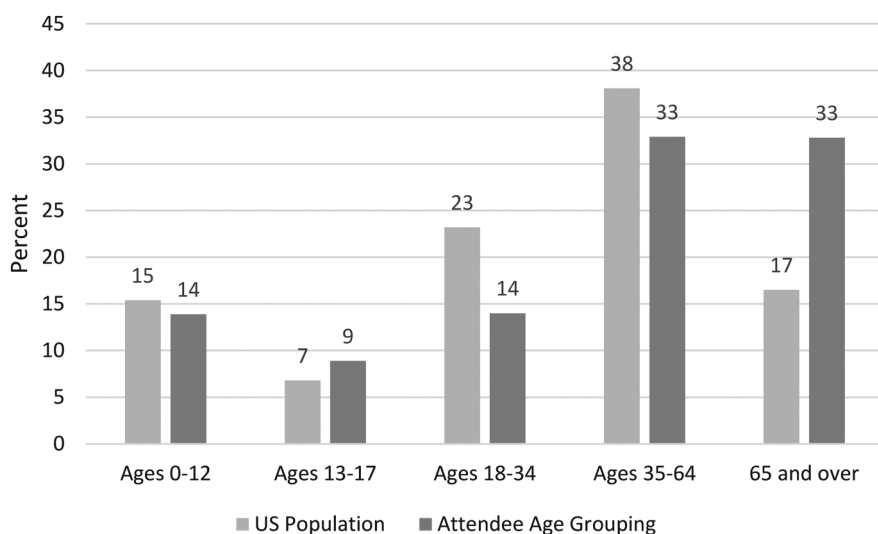


Figure 2. Congregational ages don't parallel the US population.

mortality. And, not surprisingly, the typical congregation, as well as a majority of them (70%), are actively looking for new members.

Financial Resources

Another important component of congregational life is its financial health. This factor is significant for multiple reasons most of which will be discussed in a later article. A quick sketch of the fiscal picture from the 2020 survey shows the typical congregation in a relatively good financial position (mostly pre-Pandemic data). The 2019 median income in the average congregation was \$120,000 which is nearly \$15,000 more than they claimed to have spent in that fiscal year (\$105,624 median). This typical congregation claimed it had “good or excellent” financial health pre-Pandemic, marking a slight increase over its self-assessment of five years prior. Nearly all its income was derived from member donations, though within the overall survey a number of Christian congregations and those from other faith traditions departed considerably from this fund-raising model. The average per capita giving was \$1,876 based on a calculation of attendance over income. The breakdown of typical budget expenses is shown in Table 2.

Nevertheless, both size and denominational/faith group tradition had a significant influence on this typical financial picture. Smaller congregations, especially those under 50 people, expended a larger percentage of their budget on building costs than did other-sized congregations. However, their participants gave more on average than those in larger-sized communities. These very small congregations also indicate that they spent more annually than they brought in. Likewise, these smallest congregations said on average that they were

Table 2. Average Budget Expenditure Breakdown.

Percent of Average Budget	Type of Expenditure
44%	Total staff salaries and benefits (clergy and non-clergy)
26%	Buildings and operations (e.g., utilities, mortgage, insurance)
11%	Program support and materials (e.g., education, evangelism)
13%	Mission and benevolence (including denominational assessments)
5%	All other expenditures

doing worse financially at present than they were five years ago. Conversely, the larger congregations received less per capita. They also spend more on programs and staffing but less on buildings and operations than smaller faith communities.

Worship Services

Although the ritual, content, and energy within worship services are all vastly different between congregations across the religious spectrum of the study, the typical faith community as well as a great majority of them assessed their worship as reverent, thought-provoking, and spiritually uplifting. As such, nearly all (84%) placed significant emphasis on regular worship attendance. Most agree or strongly agree that “spiritually vital and alive” describes their congregation. Worship, prayer and spiritual practices, religious education, and music form the heart of most congregations. How this is expressed, though, varies widely with a third saying they are very informal and an equal percentage not at all informal with an identical pattern of those embracing a formal ritual or liturgy or not. Sixty percent never use an electric guitar and nearly 50% never use an organ either. Thirty-one percent report that “contemporary” describes their worship well or very well, as do 24% with “innovative.” Identification of a congregation’s worship as “contemporary” or “innovative” is not automatically synonymous with electric guitars and projection screens nor does it negate the use of organs or choirs (see Fig. 3). Clearly the meaning of these terms is more contextually determined than it is strict adherence to particular worship practices.

Community Outreach

The typical congregation and nearly all others indicate some or a lot of emphasis on sponsored community service activities (84%) and almost three-quarters are actively involved in their community (71.4%). A majority also affirm some or a lot of emphasis on global ministry (70%) whether for service, missions, or fund-raising. A somewhat smaller percentage have programs or activities on social justice and advocacy (30%).

Congregational outreach programs provide a wide network of human services that extends to virtually every community. This extensive community involvement noted above suggests that roughly 300,000 congregations throughout the country support their communities in a variety of ways from most having programs and outreach to 57% opening their building to other organizations. A quarter of faith communities share space

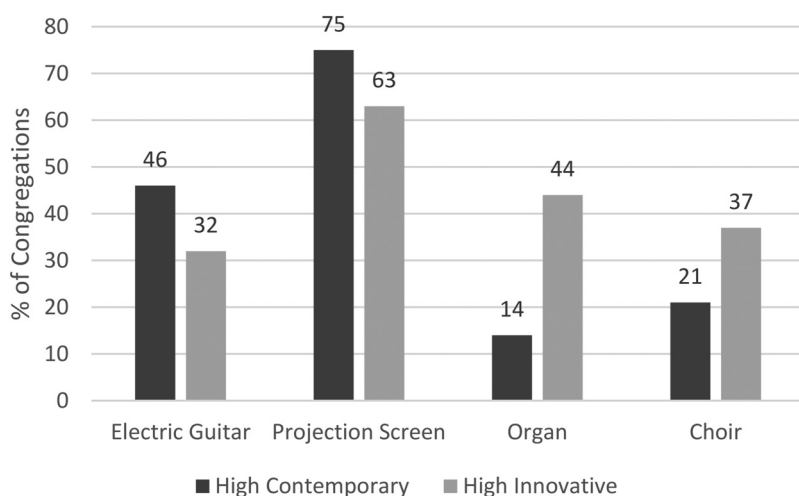


Figure 3. Very contemporary or innovative worship looks different.

with nonprofits, one in five host support groups, a tenth offer space for government services, and another tenth host other types of groups. This significant contribution to the welfare of communities and civic groups is essential and of inestimable good to society.

Because of the importance given to this commitment to community, it is clear that for many participants, community outreach is as much an essential expression of faith as participation in prayer, liturgical practices, or doctrinal study. Additionally, congregations with a strong commitment to community service are more likely to express spiritual vitality.

The FACT research effort allows for a rich look at the present reality of the nation's congregational health, a brief sketch of which has just been presented. However, because this effort has been undertaken since 2000, the survey also allows for identification of trends over the past 20 years. This trend analysis often illuminates patterns that are influential for the vitality of organized faith communities. This article now turns to a few of these more significant trends initially with a look at two significant challenges of declining size and aging congregations and then to more constructive trends of the vitality of congregations of color, multiracial, and non-Christian communities. Finally, an exploration of the characteristics of growing communities highlights the importance of leadership that embraces innovation, with a strong sense of mission and purpose, dynamic relevant worship, and a willingness to change to address a shifting social reality.

The Challenge of Declining Size

The changing congregational size reality an important dynamic, so much so that a later article in this volume takes up the topic. Nevertheless, this obvious change across the past two decades is worth highlighting repeatedly. The median worship attendance of

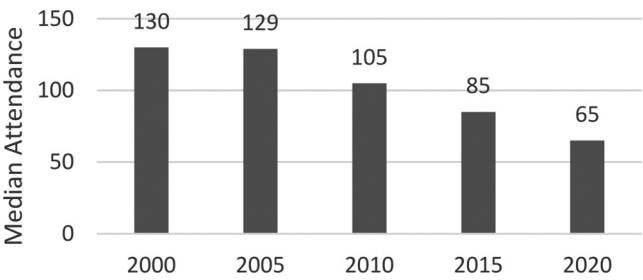


Figure 4. Median worship attendance is in rapid decline.

the country’s faith communities has decreased dramatically in the past two decades. Half of US congregations have 65 or fewer weekly attendees (Fig. 4). This median size of a congregation has declined by 50% in the 20 years of FACT surveys. Although size isn’t the only factor in determining the vitality of a faith community, it is strongly correlated to other critical components of flourishing such as full-time clergy employment, adequate financial and physical resources, robust community presence, the potential for growth, and an adequate level of community service and vital spiritual ministry.

When one factors in the rates of growth or decline over this time period, a smaller percentage of congregations are growing and a larger group of them are in decline. The last 20 years of research provide evidence of increasing numbers of small congregations, which are getting smaller by the year, while those communities above 250 worship attendees are getting larger. This shifting size distribution is reconfiguring the religious terrain in significant ways.

The Challenge of Aging Members and Clergy

Hand in hand with the changing size reality is the rapid aging of various aspects of congregational life. The combination of increasingly older participants and aging clergy reinforce one another and strongly correlate with diminished growth and less possibility of congregational change or revitalization. Since 2008,¹ the average percentage of congregational participants who are 65 years of age or older has increased from a quarter to a third. This is considerably older than the US population where just 15% fall into this age category. Twenty-five percent of congregations reported their regular attenders who fall within the 65 or older age bracket to be half or more. Another quarter reported 33–49% of their attenders in this age demographic. This trend is especially dire for mainline denominations where 42% of congregations had at least half their participants in this age group. Those over 65 are often the most faithful and committed attendees, dedicated volunteers, and staunch financial supporters for a majority of faith communities

1. In the 2000 and 2005 FACT surveys, attender ages were collected in such a manner that makes their results incompatible with more recent findings.

as well as being the living repositories of spiritual wisdom and community memories. Nevertheless, statistically speaking, having an aging attender population correlates with a number of diminished measures of flourishing, including less spiritual vitality, less willingness to change, smaller congregational size, fewer new people, and a greater likelihood of decline.

This dynamic of an aging membership is compounded when tied to the trend of the increasing age of religious leadership. Over the past 20 years median clergy age continues to track older from 52 in 2000 to 55 in 2010 and 57 in 2020. The older the leader, the less likely the faith community is to have younger participants, to use technology, to have new people in the past five years, or to be growing. Likewise, older memberships correlate with older clergy resulting in a compound challenge for the vitality of the faith community. The more senior attenders there are, the greater the likelihood of having a clergy person 65 years or older. Conversely, religious leaders 65 years or older find 61% of their congregations having a third or more senior participants, and a 33% of these faith communities have half or more senior participants. Likewise, these 65 years old or older clergy, combined with an older attender base, have the highest rate of decline in five years (-14%), less willingness to change, are unlikely to be looking for new members, and seldom describe the congregation as spiritually vital and alive compared to clergy in younger age groups. Interestingly, the older the clergy and congregational members, the more likely the faith community also had an older founding date. This trio of age challenges also correlates to less willingness to change, to be spiritually vital, or to have grown in the past five years.

The Growth and Appeal of Diversity within Congregations

The past several decades of American religious history have been marked by increasing racial and ethnic diversity and a greater presence of religious traditions other than Christian. The congregational vitality of these influences are clearly evident in the FACT findings. Greater congregational growth can be seen for multiracial faith communities, congregations of color, and communities of other faith traditions as compared to majority white congregations (Fig. 5). The growing presence of multiracial congregations (where 20% or more of a congregation's participants were of a different race than the majority or there was no racial majority) stood out in the recent survey. In 2000, the first national survey found that 12% of congregations had this level of racial minority presence. A decade later this number had climbed to 18%. In the 2020 survey, a quarter (25%) of congregations were found to have this level of member diversity, doubling the 2000 figure.

Each of these groupings of more diverse congregations has a greater percentage of younger participants, fewer seniors, a clearer mission and purpose, greater involvement in the community, more new attendees, and a greater percentage of growing faith communities than do majority white congregations.

Overall, the congregations in the study that most strongly emphasized efforts to be more diverse were indeed more racially diverse. However, they were also diverse in other ways as well, having a greater percentage of immigrants, a larger percentage of

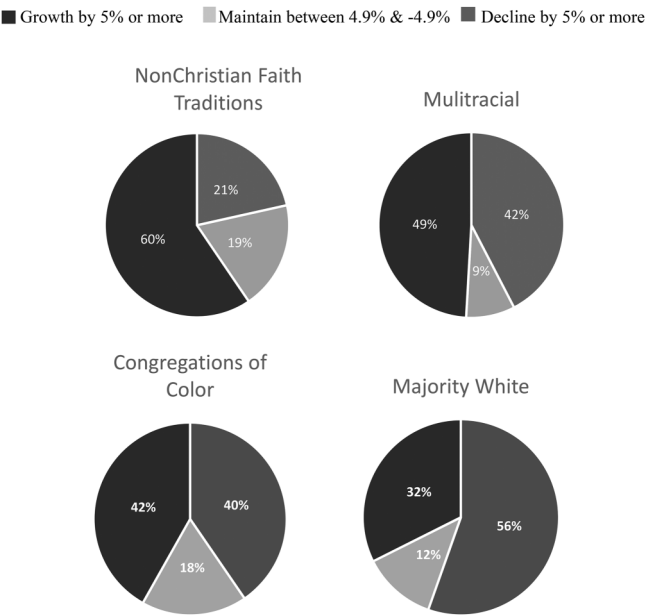


Figure 5. Diversity and immigration help congregational growth.

individuals with special needs, fewer lifelong members of their particular faith tradition, and a more diverse age, economic, and educational profile among their participants.

The Characteristics Contributing to Vitality and Growth

Although the overall tenor of a majority of congregations in this study is one of decline and aging, nevertheless it is important to remember that a third of faith communities were growing and many of those by 5% a year or more. Additionally, a larger percentage of congregations in this study strongly affirmed being spiritually vital and having a willingness to change than in the past two FACT survey efforts. These more spiritually vital and growing communities had distinctive characteristics and qualities that offer a window into the components of congregational thriving, as was mentioned earlier in this article. Interestingly, these features that correlate with congregational flourishing have not changed dramatically across the six surveys and 20 years of our research. What has changed, however, is the external situation, organizational pressures, and increased sense of urgency for congregations to embrace these qualities and live into a new reality. These qualities associated with flourishing and growth are not mysterious or complex. Although they are found more frequently in larger faith communities, a number of smaller congregations in the survey also exemplified these traits. The following section highlights the patterns and approaches of visionary leadership and vibrant congregational functioning found in flourishing congregations along with recommended paths faith communities should follow.

Leadership that is Innovative and Visionary

Carl Dudley and David Roozen wrote in the initial report from the 2000 FACT study, “Leaders in such congregations face the challenge to recover a fresh sense of mission and purpose, to help the congregation ‘to dream again’.”² That injunction written over 20 years ago is even more critical today. The message of this research is clear: the standard traditional ways of gathering, leading, and worshipping do not work as effectively as they once did for a large segment of society. Incremental change and minor alternations, while helpful, are likely inadequate. Innovative approaches must become the norm.

Visionary leadership should offer new models of being a gathered faith community. They must aim to inspire greater involvement and commitment in the midst of a busy and distracting social milieu. Inventive spiritual gatherings need to provide appealing communal alternatives to generations of digital individualists, shaped by personally customized experiences, and an eclectic DIY spirituality. While such creativity can be generated from within existing congregations, some of the inventiveness necessary for disruptive change will likely need to come from younger clergy leaders and often outside current congregational and denominational structures.

A Mission that is Compelling

Innovation for its own sake is inadequate. The vision and purpose of this community has to be clear, purposeful, and faith-filled. The community must have a well-defined sense of mission which is both meaningful and compelling as well as deeply spiritual and emotionally moving. It has to involve service to others and an active commitment to a community larger than just the congregation. This vision is more effective when it takes into account the diversity of society and actively addresses these racial, ethnic, economic, and political realities. This strong sense of congregational mission should be at once unifying and also cognizant of the challenge of heterogeneity. Creativity, intentional change, and a willingness to embrace diversity all engender friction. Some level of conflict is essential for health and growth; however, a powerfully compelling sense of purpose and mission also channels disagreements toward positive outcomes rather than derailing or fracturing a community.

Worship that is Relevant

A mission without a strong worshipping community is just a personal cause. This worship, however, must be as relevant and meaningful as the congregation’s sense of purpose. Relevance doesn’t necessarily mean contemporary Christian choruses delivered by a praise team accompanied by drums and electric guitar. Rather relevant worship must address daily felt needs and be congruent with the lived reality of participants. This worship, whatever the style or approach, should stimulate an emotive and passionate

2. Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today*, 2001.

response in participants. These gatherings, the worship, music, prayers, and interactions, ought to motivate those involved to live out their faith every day in expressive ways that demonstrate their spiritual vitality. In fact, those congregations that most identified themselves as spiritually vital also stressed personal and family faith practices, living out their faith in everyday life, and had a larger percentage of members who were active in recruiting new people.

A Congregation that is Willing to Change

The active engagement of participants is a critical component in this formula for flourishing and spiritual vitality. In the survey this connection could be seen in both the intentions and actions of the membership. Vibrant and growing communities exhibited a greater desire to attract new participants and were more willing to change to meet new challenges. These congregations were also more active in volunteering, incorporating new people into their community, and engaging in recruitment. Without this commitment and engagement of the laity, no amount of quality leadership, a strong mission, or passionate worship are adequate for vitality. Fortunately, each of these components are strongly correlated to one another and must be demonstrated with intentionality for vitality to flourish.

Conclusion

The 2020 FACT survey results portray a distinct set of present and very likely future challenges for congregations. A clear message from the research is that the traditional ways of worshipping, ministering to spiritual needs, and organizing the business of congregations are no longer working adequately for a majority of faith communities. Many factors contribute to this reality so the situation cannot entirely be attributed to a lack of congregational imagination and adaptation; however, this moment demands real change if a large percentage of faith communities are to survive with any spiritual vibrancy and ministry effectiveness.

The survey has shown that rapidly changing size disparities among congregations lead to other significant financial and resource inequities. Further compounding factors eroding congregational vitality include the dramatic aging of members and clergy, the dynamics that correlate with this reality, and the implications this has for coming generations of attendees. As the average membership trends over 65 years of age and smaller percentages of younger generations either affiliate with organized religion or are primarily attracted to larger faith communities, something radical must take place to reverse this dynamic. Counterbalancing these trends, the growth of congregations of color, the increasing presence of multiracial churches, and growing congregations of other religious traditions play an important part in the developing religious picture.

This moment clearly demands institutional change. Religious leaders must be willing to generate innovative visions and novel ways forward. Much of this adaptation rests on the shoulders of these quality leaders who are able to communicate the necessity for change, strategize a path forward, rally congregational will, and then mediate conflictual

moments that will inevitably arise. Dynamic change also requires a body of individuals willing to embrace new paths. It also means the invention and implementation of original but sustainable congregational models. The significant cultural and societal pressures at play require increasing numbers of faith communities to engage in this process of experimentation and reinvention. Additionally, the pressures of the lingering Pandemic have surely intensified this innovation imperative. The spiritual message of faith communities can still be powerful and life-changing but the earthen vessels and the modes by which this good news is delivered urgently need a reformation. For the churches who are able to respond to this challenge, the national landscape could indeed look bright, otherwise the present and imminent challenges may well spell closure for many US congregations in the next two decades of the FACT study.


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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