

6 facts about how American congregations are changing

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NATIONAL CONGREGATIONS STUDY

1. People are increasingly concentrated in very large congregations.

The average congregation in America is small – and getting smaller, down from a median of 80 regular participants in 1998 to 70 in 2012 – but the average churchgoer attends a larger congregation, and one in 10 churchgoers worships in a multi-site congregation.

2. There is growing diversity among and within American congregations.

Ethnic diversity is more likely to occur in larger congregations and those congregations with fewer senior citizens. American solo or senior pastoral leaders are more ethnically diverse and older (though not more female) in 2012 than they were in 1998. However, women could, in principle, serve as the sole or senior pastoral leader in 58% of congregations, up from 49% in 2006. Congregational acceptance of gays and lesbians as members and lay leaders increased substantially between 2006 and 2012, though acceptance levels vary widely across traditions.

3. Many pastors are bi-vocational.

More than a third of solo or senior pastors also hold another job. Nearly 14% of congregations are led by unpaid senior or solo pastoral leaders.

4. Worship services are becoming more informal and expressive.

More churches are using contemporary music and musical styles, more spontaneous speaking from people in the pews, and more unscripted bodily movement. Most of the increase in informality has occurred among historically white Protestant groups. The decline of choirs occurred among historically white Protestant congregations, but not among Catholic churches or black Protestant churches, where it held steady. Use of choirs in evangelical congregations dropped from 44% in 1998 to 35% in 2012, but the most significant drop was in mainline congregations: down from 61% to 37%.

5. People in smaller churches give more money to their churches than do people in larger churches.

While the average donation level varies across different religious groups, the trend in giving holds steady: as the congregational size increases, the median annual per capita donation decreases. Far fewer congregations gave money to their denominations in 2012 (63%) than did in 1998 (74%), but the median amount given held steady at about \$7,500 in 2012 dollars.

6. Congregations focus more on serving the needy than on trying to effect systemic change.

Most congregations (87%) engage in some form of social service. Food assistance is by far the most common kind of social service activity pursued by congregations, with more than half (52%) of all congregations listing food assistance among their four most important social service programs in 2012. The typical way in which congregations pursue social services is by organizing small groups of volunteers to carry out well-defined tasks on a periodic basis.

About a third of congregations are politically active, engaging in efforts to promote or prevent social and cultural change.

The most common forms of political activity among congregations in 2012 were: advertising opportunities for political activity during worship services (15%), distributing voter guides (13%), participating in a demonstration/march (13%) and helping to register voters (11%).