American Congregations 2010

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FAITH *Communities* TODAY

A Decade of Change In American Congregations 2000 – 2010

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Despite bursts of innovation and pockets of vitality, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a slow, overall erosion of the strength of America's congregations, according to the Faith Community Today series of national surveys of American congregations.

Conducted in 2000, 2005, 2008 and 2010, the FACT series shows that the decade brought:

- ***A continued increase in innovative, adaptive worship***
- ***A surprisingly rapid adoption of electronic technologies***
- ***A dramatic increase in racial/ethnic congregations, many for immigrant groups***
- ***A general increase in the breadth of both member-oriented and mission-oriented programs***

It also gave witness to:

- ***An increase in connection across faith traditions***
- ***A twist in the historical pattern of religious involvement in support of the electoral process***

But the decade also saw:

- ***A steep drop in financial health***
- ***Continuing high levels of conflict***
- ***Aging memberships***

The net, overall result:

- ***Fewer persons in the pews***
- ***Decreasing spiritual vitality***

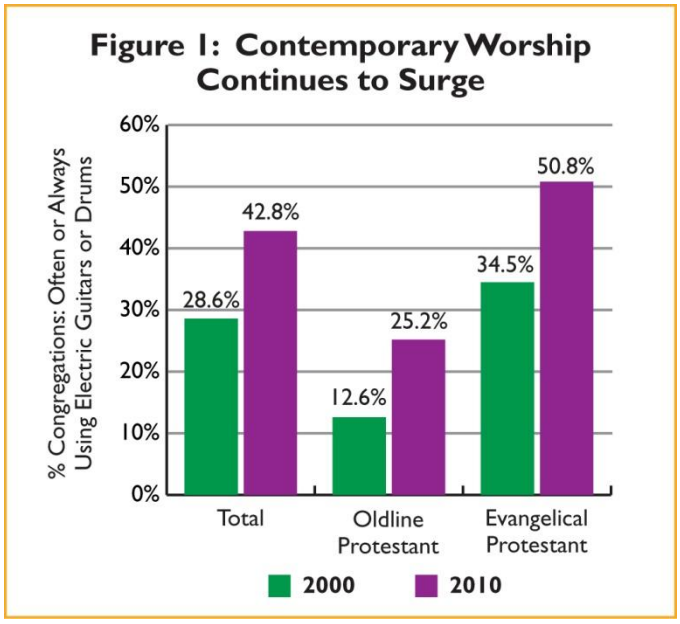
One purpose of the FACT survey series is to monitor the vital signs and health of American congregations. As is evident in the above outline of this report, several vital signs have improved over the decade, others remained critical, and still others worsened. The overall prognosis: ***American congregations enter the second decade a bit less healthy than they were at the turn of the century.***

The FACT survey series totals responses from 28,789 randomly sampled congregations. The decadal *FACT*^{2000} and *FACT*^{2010} surveys each include over 10,000 congregations, the mid-decade *FACT*^{2005} *and FACT*^{2008} tracking surveys are more in the 1,000 range. A description of the FACT surveys and the Faith Communities Today project is provided on the back page, with additional details at www.Faith*Communities*Today.org. Statistics reported for a single year are from the 2010 survey.

Findings for individual denominations and faith groups for several key items are contained in the appendix. In the body of text we only report total national findings and, where relevant, findings for Oldline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant congregations as groups (see the appendix for the definition of these groups).

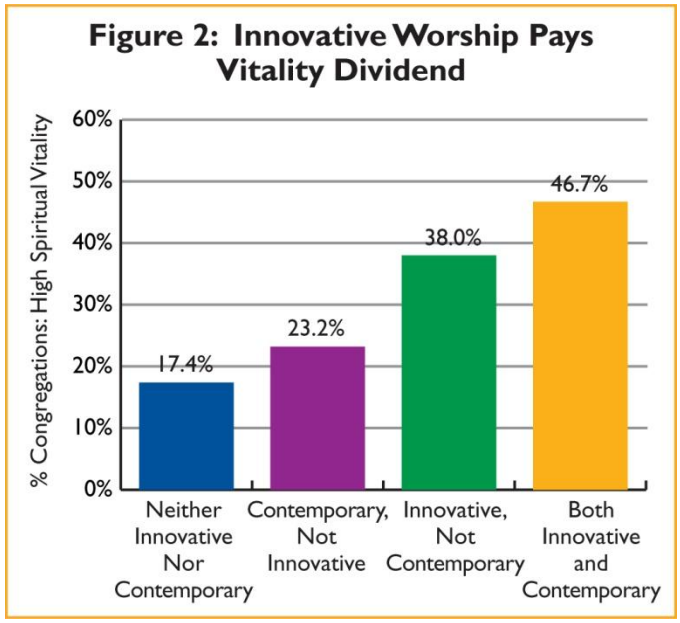
Innovative Worship

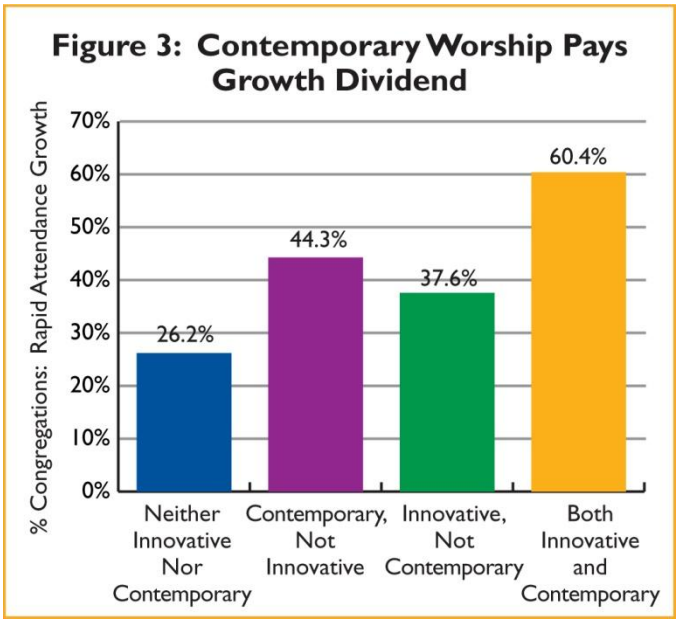
The edges and images of congregational vitality continually shifted over the last half of the twentieth century. In the post-war 40s and 50s one thinks of the incredible burst of new church development following Americans to the suburbs. In the mid-60s one pictures Oldline (then, Mainline) Protestant's solidary in the streets with the civil rights movement. In the 70s one sees Pentecostalism's move into the middle class. In the 80s, the rise of the "religious right." And in the 90s, new styles of worship. On the one hand, and most visibly, we were introduced to the jam-packed arena sized sanctuary of the seeker-friendly mega-church, complete with concert quality music and large screen video. On the other hand, and more numerically dominant because of its accessibly to typical congregations, the contemporary worship movement swept from its West Coast origins north and east, along with its less formal style and California praise music backed by electric guitars and rock-style drums – decidedly more Pentecostal than Presbyterian.



As seen in Figure 1, the surge in contemporary worship continued in the first decade of the new century. Indeed, the increase is dramatic, especially for those who carry lingering memories of the church as the "Rock of Ages." Using our measure of "often or always using electric guitars or drums in worship" the Figure shows a 50% increase across the decade to the point where over four in 10 congregations often or always use electric guitars or drums in worship.

The figure also shows that while Evangelical Protestant congregations were the early adaptors of contemporary worship, it has gained a strong foothold in Oldline Protestantism, even as the Oldline/Evangelical worship gap widens. The FACT surveys also show that Northeastern congregations have been least receptive to contemporary worship, although even in the Northeast around a third of congregations in FACT2010 said they often or frequently use electric guitars or drums in worship. The West and South lead the way, with the South edging past the West over the decade in percentage of congregations using contemporary forms of worship.



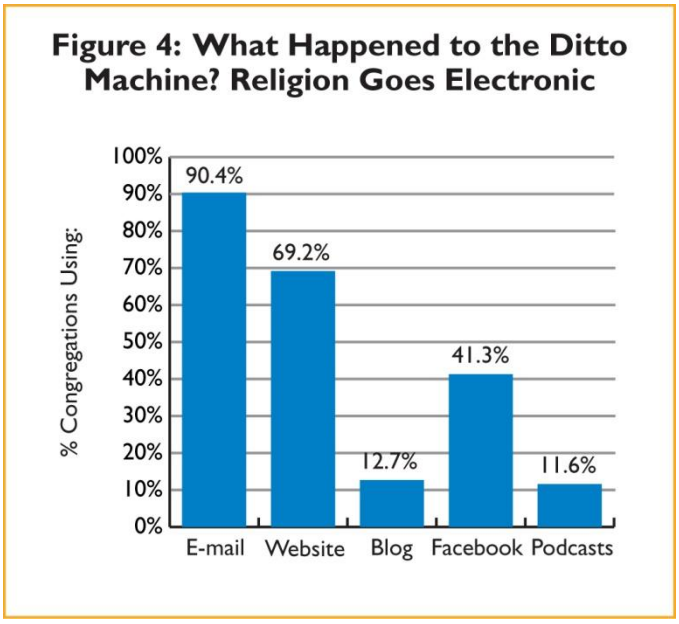


The significance of innovative worship is shown in Figures 2 and 3. Recognizing that "contemporary" is not the only expression of innovative worship, we combined our guitar/drum measure of contemporary worship with a more general measure of innovative worship, providing the four categories used in the figures. Other types of worship innovation at the congregational level could include, for example: A Catholic parish reestablishing a Latin mass, a traditionally non-liturgical congregation instituting weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, a congregation adding a Saturday evening worship service, a congregation adding a "kids' sermon," or a congregation removing seating restrictions during worship.

The figures document two critical facts about the impact of innovative worship. First, there is a more than doubling in the percentage of congregations with high spiritual vitality and a high rate of worship attendance growth as one moves from congregations that had neither innovative nor contemporary worship to congregations that had both innovative and contemporary worship. Second, one sees that while both innovative and contemporary worship are catalysts of spiritual vitality, the relationship is stronger for innovative worship than contemporary worship. In contrast, while both innovative and contemporary worship are catalysts for attendance growth, the relationship here is stronger for contemporary worship than innovative worship. Part of the reason for this difference is that age of membership is more strongly related to growth than vitality, and vitality is less influenced by age of membership than is growth -- e.g. older congregations are more likely to have innovative worship than contemporary worship.

Religion Goes Electronic

Some readers will know what a ditto machine is. It is a pre-Xerox means of low-cost duplication, relatively labor intensive and messy. Many articles explicitly identify its use as prominent in religious organizations; and even though the Xerox machine came on-line in the 1960s, some congregations still rely on the iconic, blue ditto masters today. Truth be told, when the designers of the original FACT questionnaire completed their work in the late 1990s, they did not even bother to waste precious space on communication technology. The "word" dominated -- overwhelmingly in verbal or printed form; and while computers were beginning to show up in church offices, websites and email were an insignificant factor. What a difference a decade makes! By 2010 over 90% of congregations used email; seven in ten had websites, and four in ten had Facebook pages (Figure 4).



Indeed, the adoption of electronic communication technology has been so rapid and pervasive within religious organizations that a separate FACT2010 report on the subject is forthcoming in November, 2011. Suffice it to note just a few basic facts here. As one might expect, the extent of a congregation's use of technology is strongly related to its openness to change and the age profile of its members. Congregations with significant numbers of young adults are roughly twice as likely as older congregations to be heavy users of electronic technology. Evangelical congregations are more likely to be heavy users of technology, even when age of members is controlled.

Congregations that are marginal technology users also have marginal spiritual vitality, but there is relatively little difference in vitality between modest and heavy technology users. The pattern for worship attendance growth has somewhat of the same dynamic. As shown in Figure 5, spikes in technology use are found at both the growing and declining extreme. It appears that heavy users effectively use the new technology for marketing purposes, and that congregations struggling with growth the most are turning to technology with the same hope.

The use of visual projection screens brings electronic technology to worship and Figure 6 shows the relationship between the two. Most dramatically, the use of visual projection equipment has become almost a hallmark of contemporary oriented worship with six in ten congregations who identity their worship as contemporary also indicating regular use of projection equipment. This is three times the usage found for congregations whose worship is neither innovative nor contemporary or congregations whose worship is innovative but not contemporary. Equally noteworthy, there is no difference in usage between the latter.

Majority of Minorities

We're not there as a nation yet, but most of us are well aware of the reality – specifically, according to census bureau projections by 2050 minorities will be a majority of Americans. Perhaps more startling, because it is only a bit more than a decade away, is the related projection that by 2023 more than half of all children in the United States will be minorities. What drives the trend: high minority birth rates, new waves of immigration and the

Figure 5: Both the Struggling and the Pro-actively Evangelical Turn to Tech

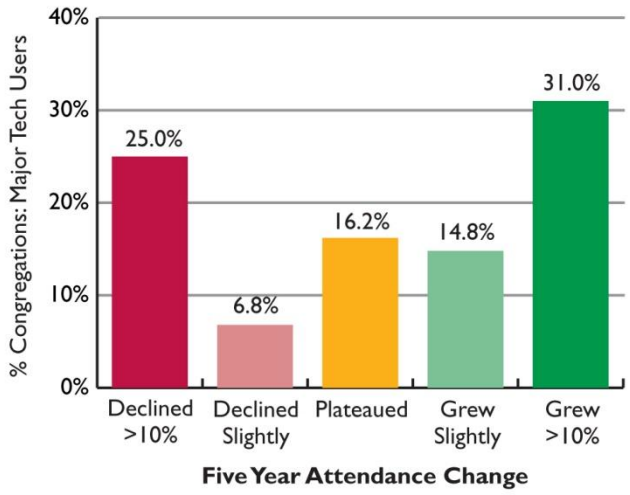


Figure 6: It's a "Contemporary" Thing

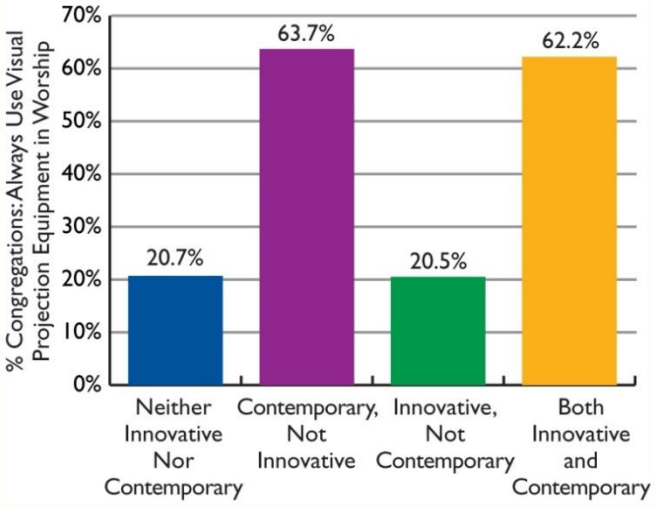
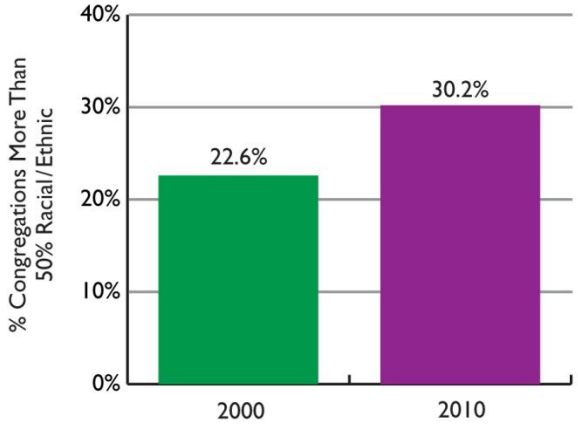


Figure 7: A Big Increase in Racial/Ethnic Congregations



rapid aging of the white, non-Hispanic population. The implications: just about everyone agrees they will be profound, although the scenarios vary dramatically from the fulfilling of the American dream to the muddying of the melting pot. One ironic fact: a society that honors its immigrant roots faces complex and deeply ingrained ethnic and racial divisions today. From 2000 to 2010 census data tells us that the white, non-Hispanic population of the Unites States declined from 69% to 64% overall, from 61% to 56% for children. Against this larger background the increase in racial/ethnic congregations shown in Figure 7 for the same period – from 23% to 30% -- should come as no surprise. If there is a disappointment for some religious leaders in these figures it may be that it appears that the nation's new minority population is, by and large, creating its own congregations rather than participating in historically white congregations. Then again, to the extent it is true that the American congregational form originally emerged as a melding of European parish and ethnic center, this should hardly be surprising.

One clear implication of the increase in racial/ethnic minority congregations is that they inject a strong dose of growth and vitality into America's religious life (see Figure 8). Their participants are also considerably younger, as seen in Figure 9 such that just like the American population overall, their numbers are sure to increase faster than for majority white congregations, even if immigration were to slow. One significant area in which they lag, however, is financial health (see Figure 10). [Note: "None" in Figures 8-10 refers to congregations that have no majority racial/ethnic group.]

Racial/ethnic congregations are also disproportionately Evangelical Protestant or Non-Christian. They are also disproportionately urban and Southern if you include the historically black denominations, Western for other racial/ethnic groups. Their worship is more likely contemporary and innovative in comparison to white congregations; their theology more moderate to liberal; but their technology usage is more modest to marginal and they have, on average, fewer college graduates among their participants. There is no significant difference in size of congregation.

Figure 8: Providing a Growing Edge

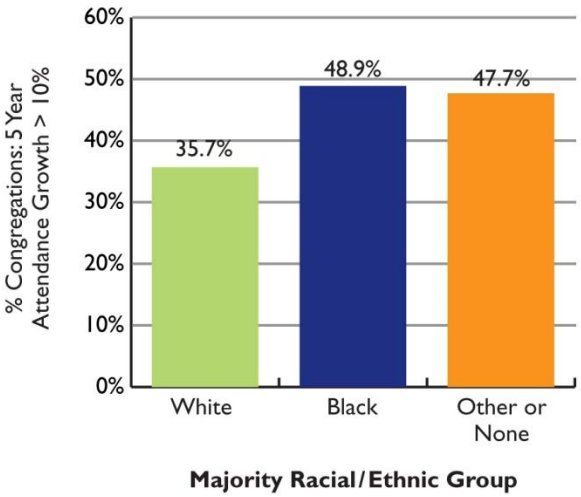


Figure 9: And Keeping Their Young Adults

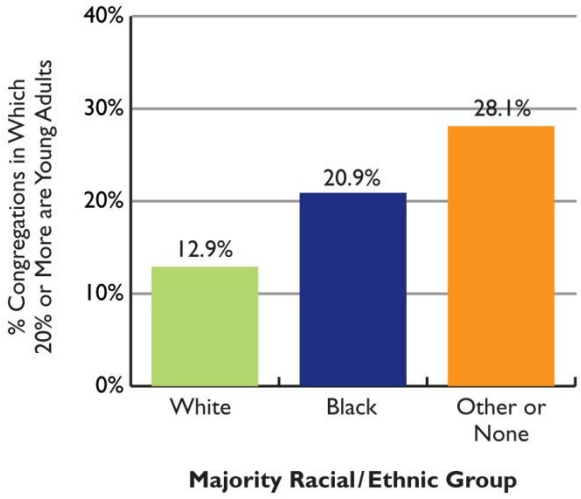
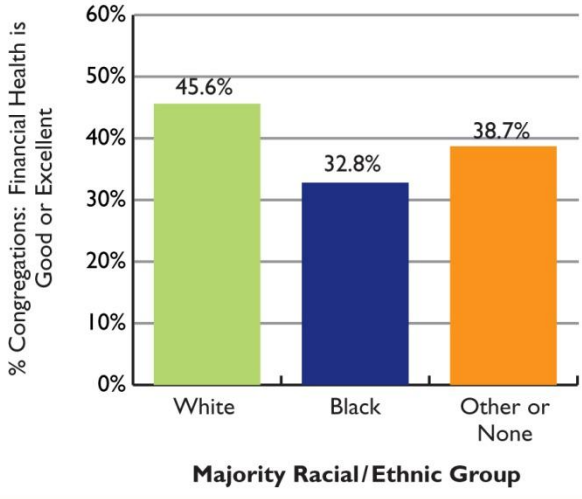


Figure 10: But a Bit Less Financially Healthy



A Congregation is more than Worship

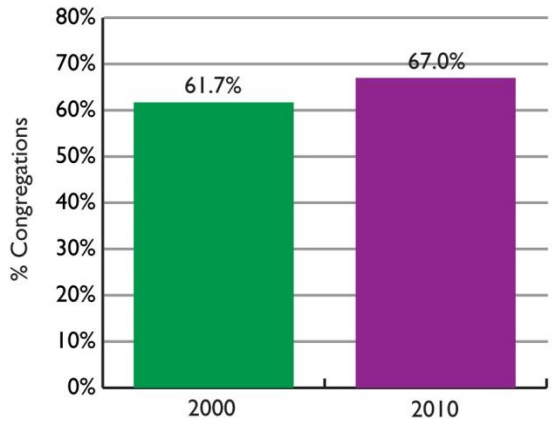
The American congregation's historical melding of house of worship and ethnic society, beginning in the colonial period, resulted in a variety and level of fellowship, support and educational programs that is distinctly American. The gradual but steady shift in congregational self-understanding from supporting mission to doing mission in one's local community, which became dominant in the 1960s, added a second layer to the complexity of American congregations' program structure. Besides the normative expectations for strong member-oriented and strong mission-oriented programing ingrained in American congregational life, many practitioners argue that such programming is also especially adaptive to vitality and growth in our emergent, post-modern world. Broad and dynamic member-oriented programing, so the argument goes, provides multiple and diverse points of entry and attachment for "consumers" accustomed to following their highly individualized preferences in a niche-oriented marketplace. Broad and dynamic, local oriented mission programming provides both name recognition in the community and feedback loops about the needs and interests of potential recruits.

The FACT^{2010} survey provides empirical support for this wisdom. It finds that breadth of member-oriented and breadth of mission-oriented programming is related to spiritual vitality and worship attendance growth -- vitality a bit more strongly than growth. The survey also supports the common (and common-sense) wisdom that larger congregations naturally have more resources – human, organizational and financial -- for offering a more extensive range of programs. But most importantly for present purposes the survey shows that the programmatic connection to vitality and growth holds at all size points – the more program the more vitality and growth regardless of size; and this is true not only overall, but also within Oldline and Evangelical Protestantism.

Having said this, and given the overall erosion in congregational vitality and size over the decade that we document in the concluding section, one might expect a decline in congregational programming. The slight growth in programming over the decade shown in Figures 11 and 12, therefore, comes as a surprise. The 2000 and 2010 FACT surveys each contained questions about seven, member-oriented programs such as prayer groups, scripture and theology study, parenting and marriage enrichment classes, choirs and music programs, youth and young adult activities. Minimally, the surveys were able to ascertain whether or not a congregation offered anything in each program area. Combining these answers creates a scale that measures the "breadth" of a congregation's member-oriented programming. The surveys also contained common questions about nine local mission-oriented programs such as soup kitchens, day care programs, employment counseling, health clinics and voter education which were used to create a similar scale for breadth of mission-oriented programming.

The decadal trend in the individual member-oriented program items aggregated in the scale pretty much follows the overall scale trend – flat to slightly increasing. The major exception was a significant increase in the percentage of congregations offering special programs for young adults. The slight decadal increase in the overall scale also held across denominational families.

Figure 11: Breadth Widens Slightly for Member-Oriented Programs



Congregations With Member-Oriented Programs in Five or More of Seven Key Areas

The overall decadal trend in mission-oriented programs, however, masks considerably more subterranean churning. Most importantly, the net gain is the result of a significant increase for Evangelical Protestant congregations (from 29% in 2000 to 36% in 2010) and an actual decrease for Oldline Protestant congregations (from 33% to 26%) – such that the common wisdom that "liberal" Protestantism was more involved in local social service work than Evangelical Protestantism has now been reversed. The surveys also found a significant decrease in food related support and a significant increase in health, employment and voter related programming. The trend data also suggest that the increases were less due to those who were already involved doing more, and more due to those who were marginally active

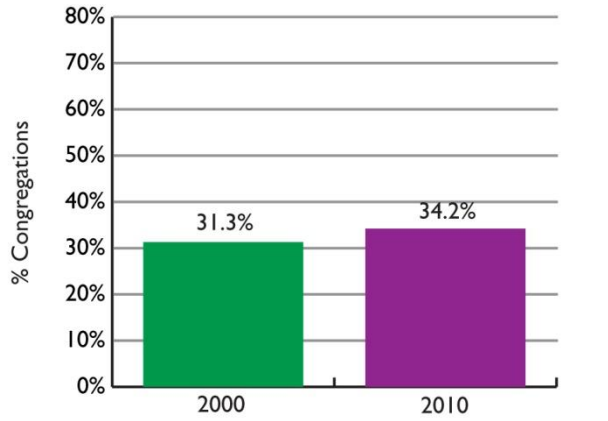
becoming more widely active.

The prominence and pervasive electronic visibility of well-organized and large scale ministries beginning with the televangelists in the late 1960s and merging with today's mega-churches belies the fact that, especially outside of Roman Catholicism, the majority of American congregations average about 100 persons in attendance on a typical weekend and a paid staff of seldom more than one professional and a few part-time support staff. The clergy leader, by necessity, needs to be a general practitioner and the notion of specialty, niche programming is a distant reality. In fact, the FACT2010 survey shows that over half of all congregations (54.7%) do not consider any of their member-oriented programing to be particularly special or distinctive, and another 20% only point to having one such program. Unfortunately, and consistent with the increasingly specialization of America's niche oriented consumer culture, having "flagship" programs is strongly related to congregational vitality (see Figure 13), and is one of the reasons that large, resource rich congregations have a decided vitality and growth edge today.

A Steep Drop in Financial Health

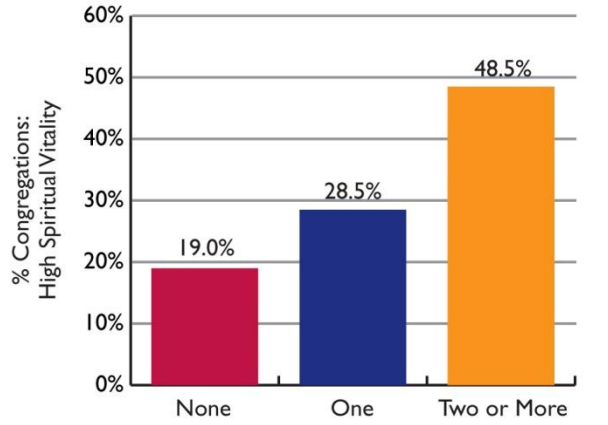
American congregations were doing a lot of the right things during the last decade. But they were fighting against strong headwinds. One of the most stark and challenging was the accelerating decline in financial health shown in Figure 14. The drop from 31% in

Figure 12: Breadth also Widens for Mission-Oriented Programs Provided Directly by a Congregation, but Only by a Whisker



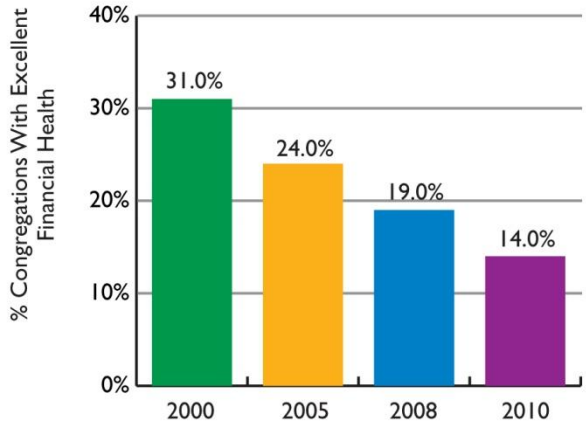
Congregations With Mission-Oriented Programs in Three or More of Nine Key Areas

Figure 13: Flagship Programs and High Spiritual Vitality Go Hand-in-hand

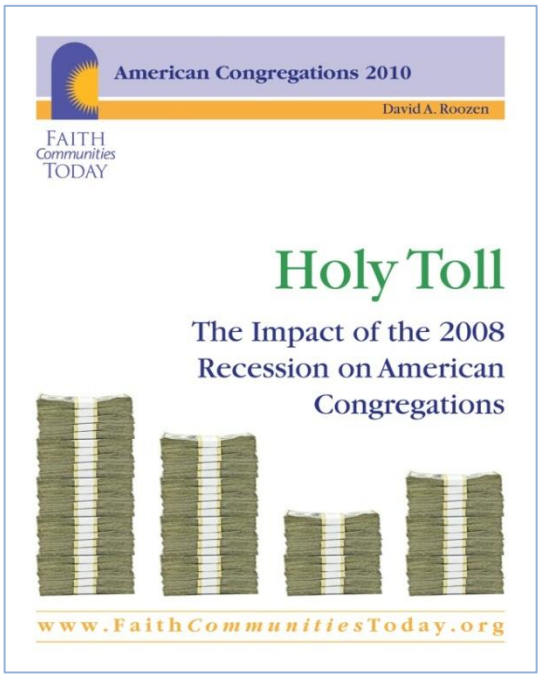


Number of Member-Oriented Programs a Congregation Considers a Specialty of the Congregation

Figure 14: An Accelerating Decline in Financial Health



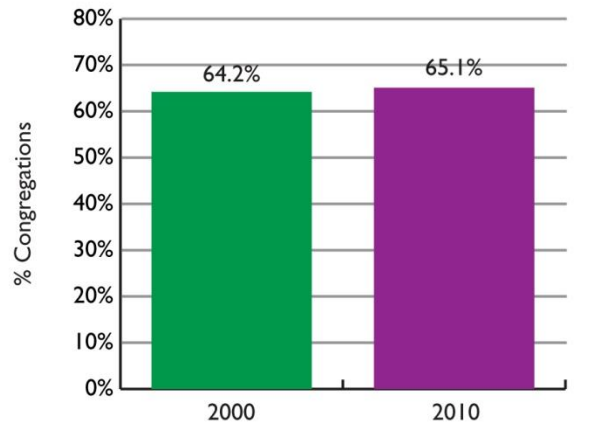
2000 to 24% in 2005 is a decline of almost 25% or 4% per year. The drop from 19% in 2008 to 14% in 2010 is a decline of 26% or nearly 9% a year, twice the rate of decline as found between 2000 and 2005. Certainly a significant part of the reason for the accelerated rate of decline late in the decade was the recession of 2008 and 2009. A full 80% of American congregations reported in the FACT [2010] survey that their finances had been negatively impacted by the recession. It affected nearly every kind of congregation equally – large and small; north, south, east and west; financially healthy or struggling before the recession. One bit of good news was that one in ten congregations reported that by the time of the survey they had already begun to recover. Our special report on the impact of the recession on American congregations expands upon these findings and we refer the reader to it. It is available online at [www.Faith*Communities*Today.org](http://www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org).



Continuing High Levels of Conflict

One of the disturbing surprises in the FACT[2000] survey was the dramatically high level of conflict found in American congregations. As shown in Figure 15, it continues. Almost two of every three congregations in 2010 had experienced conflict in at least one of four key areas in the past five years. In a third of the congregations the conflict was serious enough that members left or withheld contributions, or a leader left. Financial stress is a major cause of conflict (although far from the only one), and the negative impact of the recession late in the decade certainly contributed to the continuing high incidence of conflict.

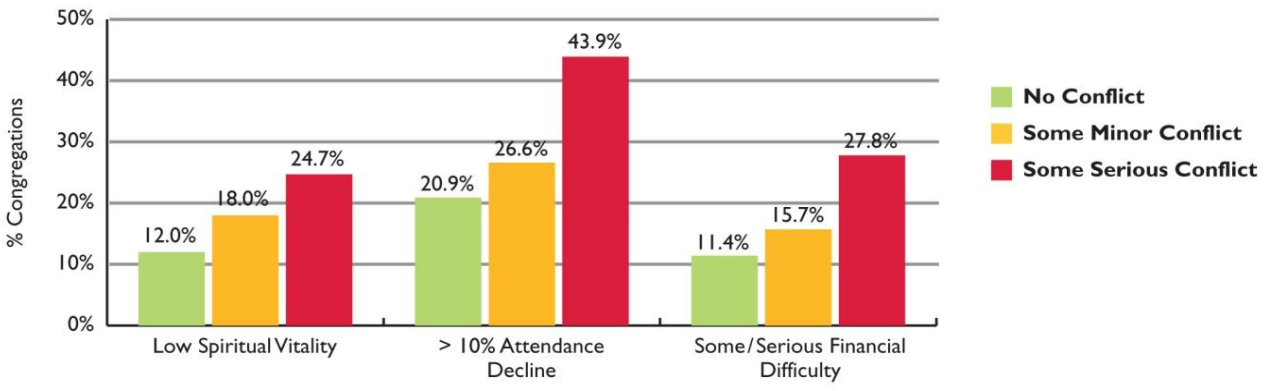
Figure 15: Continuing High Levels of Conflict



Congregations With Conflict in One or More of Four Key Areas in Past Five Years (Worship, Finances, Leadership, Priorities)

But the incidence of conflict is only one part of the story. More important is the corrosive effect of conflict on the overall vitality of congregational life as seen in Figure 16 -- a doubling of the percent of congregations

Figure 16: The Corrosive Effect of Conflict



with low spiritual vitality as one moves from no conflict to serious conflict; and more than a doubling of the percent of congregations experiencing rapid worship attendance decline and financial stress.

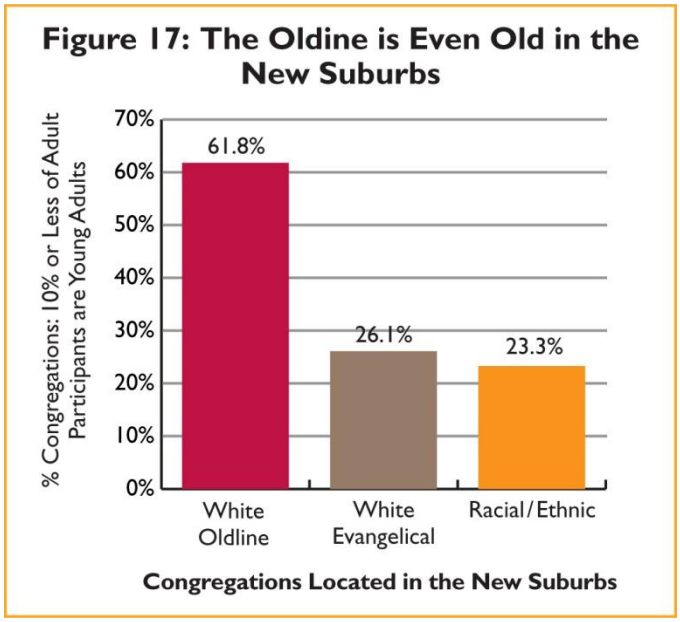
Aging Memberships and other Demographic Details

You hate to do it. But sometimes, as a researcher, you just have to revise a question in a projected series of surveys, even if it disrupts the trend. Such was the case for the FACT series with regard to the age profile of a congregation's participants So we can't say with as much certainty as we would like that the average age of a person in the pew increased over the last decade. But we can say that from 2000 to 2005 the average percentage of participants over 60 years old increased and that over the same time period the average percentage of participants 18 -34 decreased. We can also say that from 2008 to 2010 the average percentage of participants over 65 increased slightly, and the average percentage of 18-34 year olds continued to decline. And given that the U.S. census shows that the median age of the American population increased from 35.3 in 2000 to 37.2 in 2010, and that the proportion of older Americans increased because of the aging of the baby boom, it feels relatively safe to say that the age of a typical congregation's memberships similarly aged.

But a few more grey hairs is not the major point about the changing age profile of American congregations. Four related points are much more significant. One was already noted in the prior discussion of the increasing proportion of racial/ethnic congregations. Specifically, Figure 9 showed that racial/ethnic congregations have significantly higher proportions of young adults among their participants than do white congregations. This, coupled with the likely continued surge in immigration, assures they will become an ever increasing piece of the American congregational story throughout the foreseeable future.

A second critical point is that among historically white denominations the membership of the typical Oldline Protestant congregation is much, much older than that of white, Evangelical Protestant congregations. Indeed, a third or more of the membership in over half (52.7%) of Oldline Protestant congregations consists of seniors (65 years old or older). Less than a quarter (22.9%) of white, Evangelical congregations have such a senior skew to their membership profile.

The figures for the flip side of the age spectrum are even more stark. Seventy-five percent of Oldline Protestant congregations said that less than 10% of their regular participants were young adults (18-34 years old). The figure drops to 45% for white, Evangelical congregations, which is nearly identical for racial/ethnic congregations. Public opinion polls tell us that young adult involvement in just about any type of organized religion has trended downward over the past decade or so. The situation appears to have reached critical dimensions for Oldline Protestantism. Even in the new suburbs more than 60% of Oldline Protestant congregations report having fewer than 10% young adults among their regular participants (see Figure 17).



The fourth significant point related to the senior-skewed age profile of American congregations is that aging congregations lose some of their capacity for change. A not so implicit theme in the preceding sections of this report is that congregational vitality is closely connected with innovation and change – which makes sense in a world changing as rapidly as

ours. As one might expect, openness to change is closely tied to being adaptively innovative. Unfortunately, as shown in Figure 18, congregations with older memberships significantly lag younger congregations in their openness to change. And, indeed, the FACT2010 survey shows that congregations with older memberships lag younger congregations in spiritual vitality, growth in worship attendance, financial health, ability to find volunteers and breadth of programming – to name just a few. The gap is especially great for growth. Less than a quarter of congregations reporting that a third or more of their members are seniors report rapid attendance growth. That percentage jumps to nearly 50% for congregations without such a senior skew.

Figures 19 and 20 serve as reminders of two other demographic – in this case, locational – realities of American congregational life as we move deeper into the new century. Each region has a slightly different denominational flavor. The Northeast is disproportionately Oldline Protestant, Roman Catholic and non-Christian, with a slightly above average skew of Black and other racial/ethnic and new immigrant groups. The South is predominantly Black Protestant and White Evangelical. The West skews Evangelical Protestant and non-Black racial/ethnic and new immigrant. The North Central skews white Protestant, although its major urban areas are richly diverse.

Figure 20 charts out the location of congregations started in the last decade. To connect to the above regional discussion it should be noted that the new suburbs are disproportionately in the South and West. Also by way of background and to give specificity to what most readers are aware it should be noted that the decadal population growth in the new suburbs was more than twice that of big cities and older suburbs, and more than four times that of our small city, town and country locations. They are also disproportionately white. It is not surprising, then, that the new suburbs were the location of choice for the bulk of congregations started in the last decade; that the vast majority of such congregations were White Evangelical; and that the bulk of the congregations started in big cities and older suburbs were racial ethnic.

Figure 18: Settled Age, Settled Ways

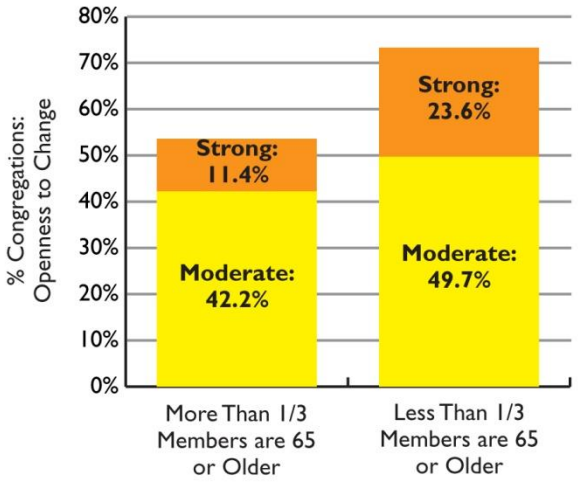


Figure 19: The Ebb and Flow of Racial/Ethnic Diversity

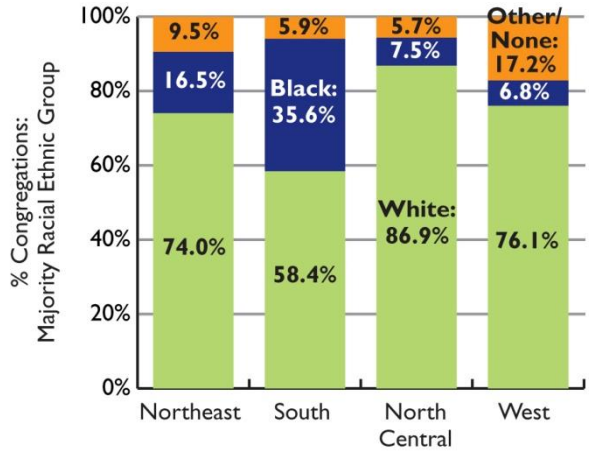
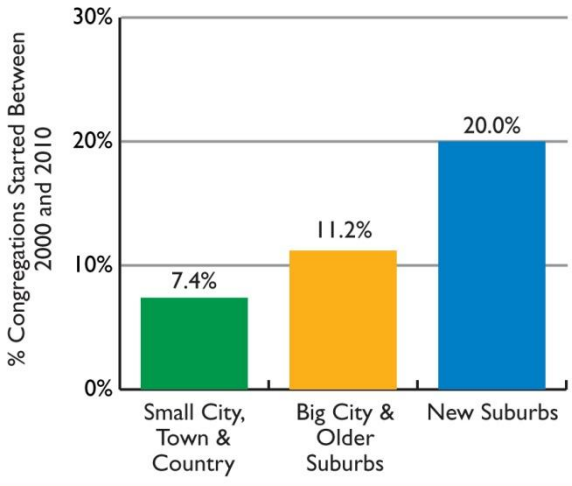


Figure 20: Location, Location, Location for New Congregation Development



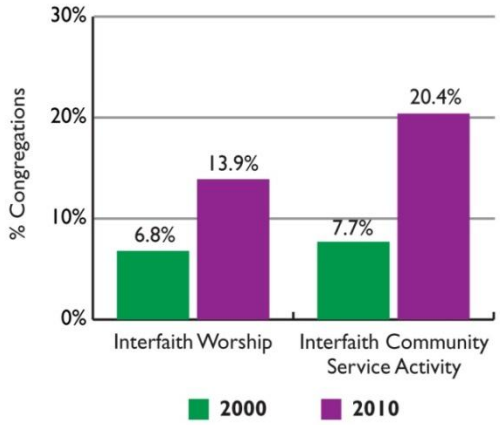
Connecting Across Faith Traditions

One legacy of the infamous attacks of September 11, 2001 was a hopeful leap in American congregations' interfaith involvement. From 2000 to 2010 their participation in interfaith worship doubled and involvement in interfaith community service efforts nearly tripled (Figure 21). Worship across faith traditions, nevertheless, remains low. A little more than one in ten (13.9%) congregations surveyed in 2010 indicated they had shared worship across faith traditions in the past year, up from a near negligible 6.8% in 2000. Participation in interfaith community service efforts rose to a more noticeable 20.4% of congregations in 2010. But this still represents less than a third of congregations cooperatively engaged in community service.

Denominational family is important to a congregation's inclination toward interfaith involvement. But as shown in Figure 22, theology is more important. The most liberal congregations of any family are the most engaged, the most conservative congregations the least engaged, and the biggest jump is found between "somewhat" and "very" liberal. Congregations with a strong predisposition toward civic participation also were especially likely to connect across faith traditions.

A special report on congregations' reach across faith traditions, released in commemoration of Sept 11, expands upon these findings. It is available online at [www.Faith*Communities*Today.org](http://www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org).

Figure 21: One Legacy of September 11, 2001 — An Increasing Connection Across Faith Traditions



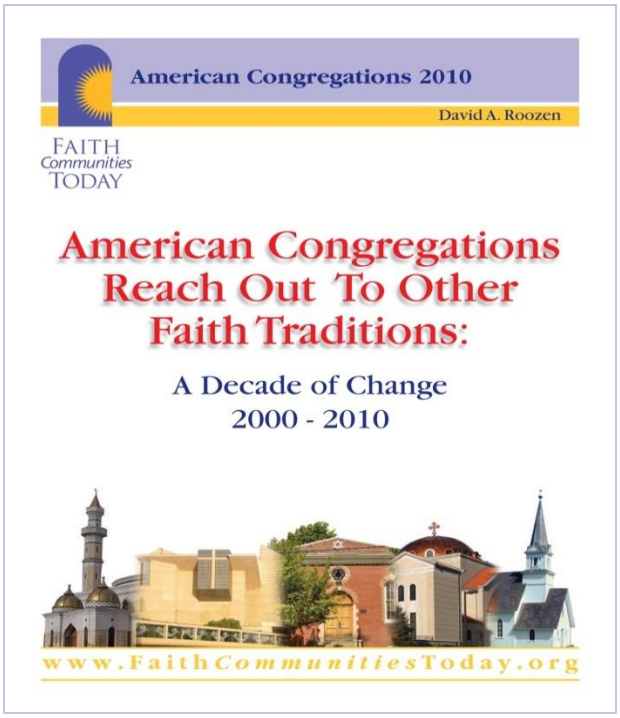
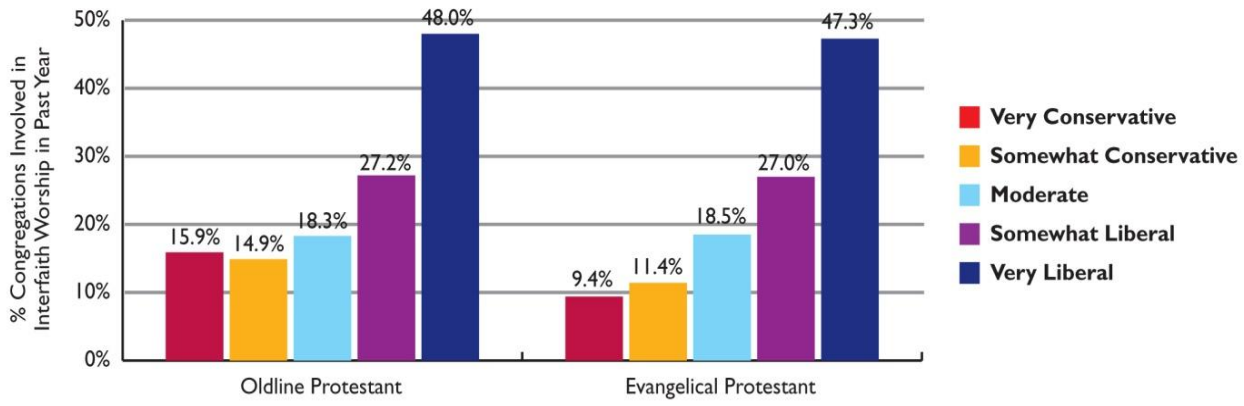


Figure 22: Theology More Important than Denominational Family for Reaching Across Faiths



Supporting the Electoral Process

September 11 is not the only seismic social and cultural event in the post-World War Two era whose continued reverberations are evident in the trends provided by the FACT surveys. One also sees a clear legacy of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Most people's remembrance of this period in American history vacillates between iconic memories of non-violent protest and flashes of civil unrest, and the longing to overcome and prophetic leading of a new dream. Considerably less visible was the Black Church's strong turn to the use of the electoral process through voter education and registration efforts. It is a hallmark of the Black Church that clearly lives on today as can be seen in Figure 23.

Those with a religious sensitivity that either lived through or have studied the movement also know that then "Mainline," now Oldline, Protestantism provided a strong and visible base of support for the movement, and the idea of "social action" quickly became a dominant thread in Oldline Protestantism's theological understanding of mission.

There is irony in American history! With the Moral Majority's founding in the late 1970s, it was America's "religious right" that became identified with political action and indeed it did seem to have an extraordinary ability to turn out the vote. Figure 24 shows that even by 2000, non-black Evangelical Protestant congregations were more likely to be involved with voter education or registration programs than were Oldline Protestant congregations. Just as importantly, the figure shows that while such use of the political process declined over the decade in Oldline Protestant congregations (to just over one in ten in 2010), it surged among non-black Evangelical Protestant congregations to 25% in 2010, more than twice that of Oldline Protestant congregations. Black church rates remained relatively unchanged for the decade.

Among larger non-black, Evangelical Protestant congregations' involvement with voter education or registration programs jumps to half (Figure 25). It is the rule rather than the exception for larger congregations to have more extensive programs than smaller congregations, so in many respects the upward movement by size in Figure 25 is not surprising. One finds the same general progression for Oldline

Figure 23: A Legacy of the 1960s Continues — Black Power Through the Electoral Process

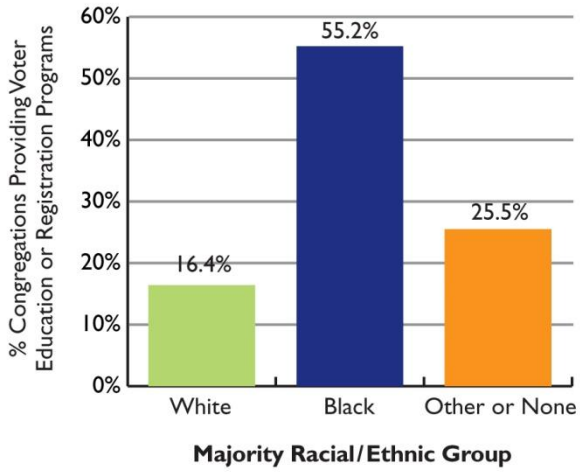


Figure 24: But There has Been a Reversal Between Oldline And Non-Black Evangelical Protestantism over the Decade

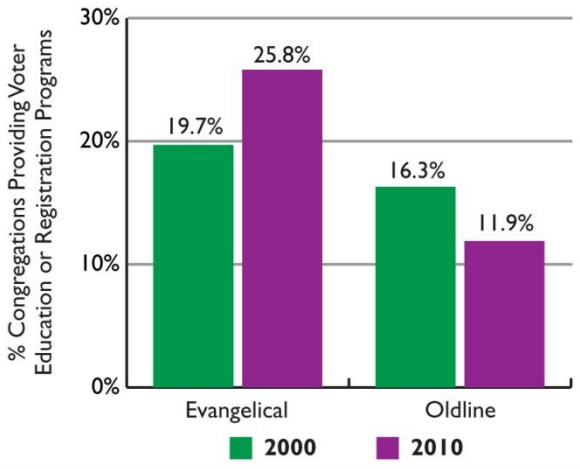
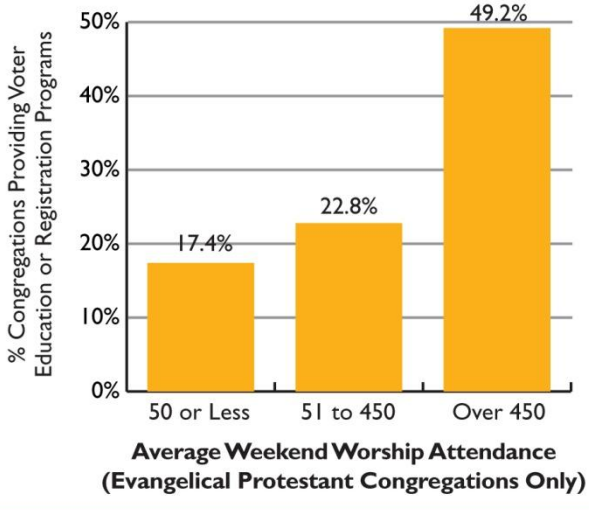


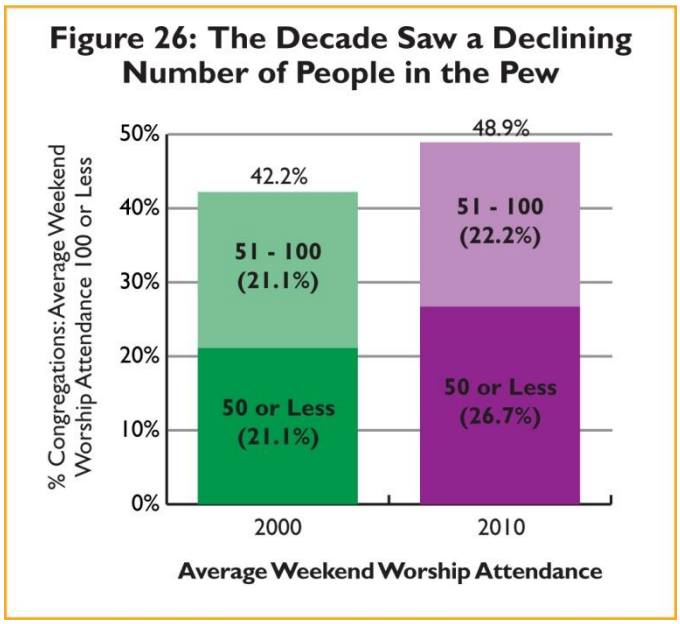
Figure 25: Especially in Larger Evangelical Congregations

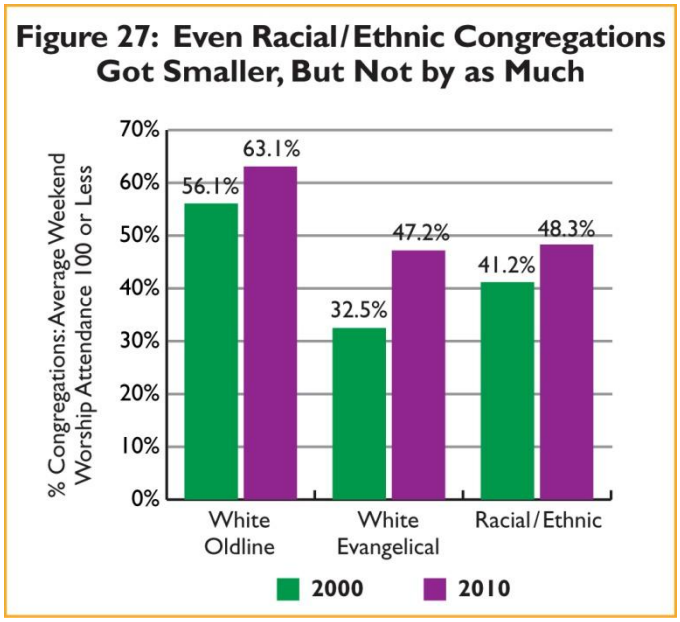


Protestantism, except such use of the political process only reaches 19% for its 450 + size congregations, compared to the 49% for Evangelical congregations. For large Black churches the comparable number is 67%.

Fewer Persons in the Pews

The times, they are a changing! When I grew up "nuns" were women religious. In today's headline news about religion the "nones" are those without any religious preference. Why the shift in popular connotation? Because the nones are the fastest growing religious segment of the American population and number more than any American denomination except Roman Catholic. It is also increasingly the case that scholarly analyses of recent trends in individual religiosity in the United States are concluding that traditional forms of religious belief and practice (including worship attendance) are beginning to erode across the board.





It is not surprising, then, to see in Figure 26 that the average weekend worship attendance of your typical congregation decreased from 2000 to 2010. Indeed, the prominence of mega-church images notwithstanding, more than 1 in 4 American congregations had fewer than 50 in worship in 2010, and just under half had fewer than 100. Overall, median weekend worship attendance of your typical congregation dropped from 130 to 108 during the decade according to the FACT surveys. While it is true that the number of mega-churchs roughly doubled during the decade, they still only constitute about a half of one percent of all congregations in the U.S. And while it appears to be true they are attracting an ever bigger slice of the religious attender pie, it is a bigger slice of a shrinking pie.

What is surprising in the FACT data is that the vanishing presence in the pews is not only true of Oldline Protestant congregations whose numerical decline has been documented for the last fifty years. It is also true for your typical White Evangelical congregation and your typical racial/ethnic congregation (Figure 27) – although one can find hints of impending decline within Evangelicalism in the mid-to-late 1990s, especially related to the retention of young adults. The downward blip for racial/ethnic congregations may be the most surprising of all, especially given the youth, vitality and growth such congregations add to the American religious diversity as previously noted.

The apparent pervasiveness of the observant contraction led us to look at all the typically studied drivers of "church" growth available in the FACT survey series to see if we could find a general kind of category of congregation that was not affected – things like high spiritual vitality, purposefulness, new suburban location, and strongly held beliefs. They all continue to be positively related to growth in 2010, which will be the subject of a forthcoming special report in the FACT survey series. However, we found no single

category or kind of congregation that was exempt from the decadal downsizing of worship attendance. The closest we found were congregations strongly involved in mission-oriented programs, this type of congregation typically being larger in addition to having a stronger inclination toward outreach. But as seen in Figure 28, even the typical congregation of this type had slightly fewer in worship in 2010 than it did in 2000.

Decreasing Spiritual Vitality

To the extent it has been true of every generation of young adults in America since the baby boomers that they tend to gravitate to the spiritual more than the religious, then the sharp downtrend in the self-assessed spiritual vitality of American congregations evident in Figure 29 must be particularly concerning. Equally notable and although the extent of the decline varies somewhat, the downtrend is generally true across the board -- across denominational family, race and ethnic, region, and size differences to mention just a few.

We have noted aspects of congregational life that heighten vitality, several of which have increased over the decade. Their potency continues in 2010. To take just one dramatic example: if one contrasts white conflicted congregations that have traditional forms of worship and no more than one specialty program on the one hand, with non-conflicted racial/ethnic congregations that have innovative, contemporary worship and 2 or more specialty programs on the other hand, the latter is nearly five times as likely to have high levels of spiritual vitality than the former (62% vs 13%).

But we have also noted several trends that are corrosive to vitality -- e.g., decreasing financial health, shrinking worship attendance, aging memberships and continued high levels of conflict. And they appear to have been the dominant, overall influence during the decade.

The FACT survey measure of spiritual vitality is, like the widely known, regularly used and influential consumer confidence index, a subjective evaluation and typically subject to more exaggerated fluctuations than more concrete measures. Fortunately, we also

Figure 28: Least Shrinkage for Mission-Oriented Congregations

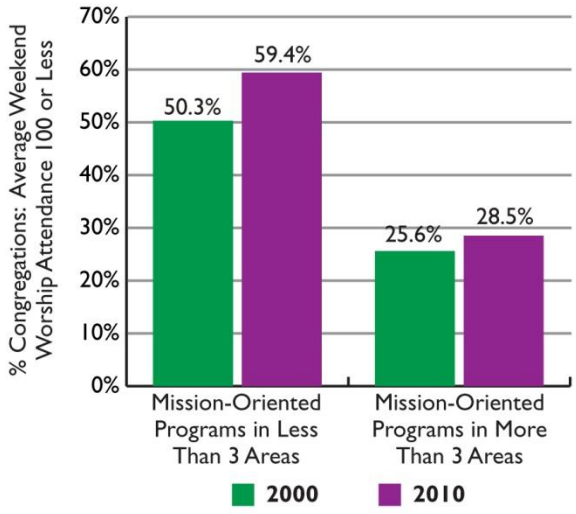


Figure 29: Most Disconcerting! A Sharp Erosion of Spiritual Vitality

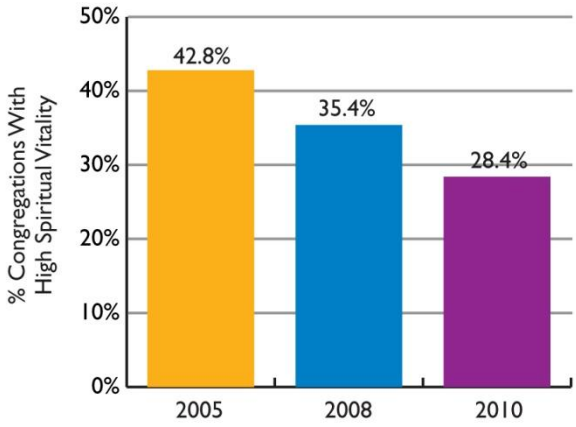
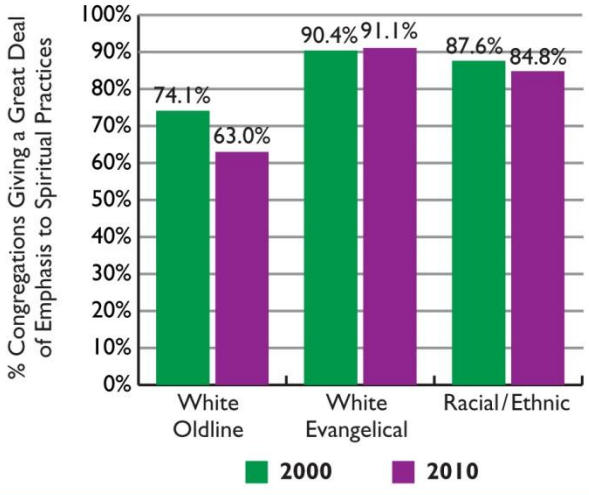
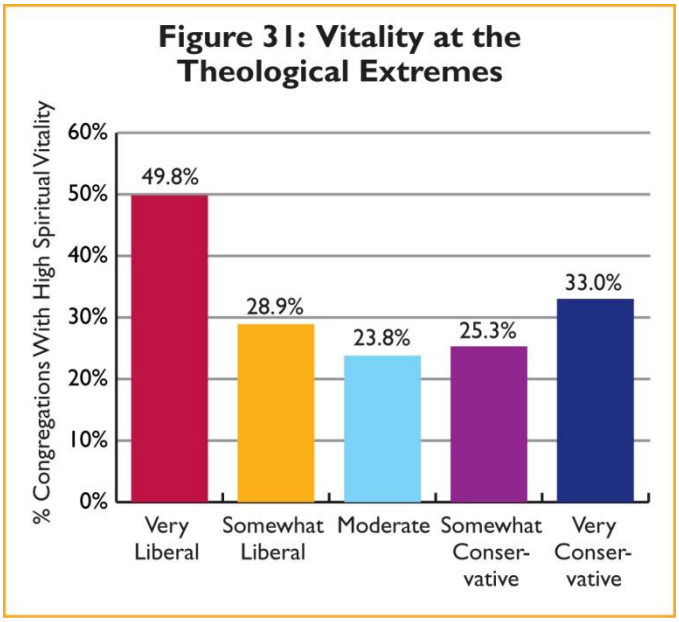


Figure 30: And a Slide in the Emphasis Given to Spiritual Practices



have a more concrete measure that is relatively strongly correlated with it. It is the extent to which a congregation emphasizes personal spiritual practices like prayer and scripture reading. Overall, the percentage of congregations that said they give it "quite or a great deal" of emphasis dropped slightly over the decade from 85% to 82%. Figure 30 shows the trend for White Oldline, White Evangelical and Racial/ethnic congregations. The most notable feature of the figure is the sizable drop for White Oldline congregations. One also notices that White Evangelical congregations bucked the downtrend, with, if anything, a very slight increase. This is clearly the exception rather than the rule, and in fact as we scoured across a wide range of types and categories of congregations the only other exception we found was for extremely large congregations – those with a 1,000 attenders or more. It appears that for the most part, congregations kept trying to do the right things across the decade (like we saw for increased breadth of member-oriented and mission-oriented programming), but they were fighting an uphill battle.



One final note about spiritual vitality, in part because it tends to be counter-intuitive. As one might expect, vitality goes up at both extremes of the liberal – conservative theological continuum as seen in Figure 31. What may be surprising is that it rises considerably higher at the very liberal extreme than it does at the very conservative extreme; and we have found a similar pattern in the two other surveys in which we included a comparable theological question – 2005 and 2008. Most of our other measures of vitality also peak at the theological extremes, but in most of these instances the jumps are not as great and whether the edge goes to the very conservative (e.g., attendance growth, financial health) or to the very liberal (e.g., clarity of vision and securing volunteer leaders) varies.

And so our report comes full circle:

> ***Despite bursts of innovation, pockets of vitality, and interesting forays into greater civic participation, American congregations enter the second decade of the twenty-first century a bit less healthy than at the turn of the century.***

Appendix

FACT2010 Denomination and Faith Group Partner Surveys

Named partner conducted or contracted for survey. For partner contact information and links to partner reports on their respective surveys see: http//faithcommunitiestoday.org/

High Spiritual Vitality [A]	Innovative & Contemporary Worship [B]	Voter Education Or Registration Programs [C]		Consider 2+ Programs Specialties of Congregation [D]	33% or More of Members 65+ Years Old [E]
21%	17%	18%	**American Baptist Churches USA [O,1]**	15%	51%
35	51	27	Assemblies of God [E]	26	13
15	0	3	Baha'is of the United States	6	18
24	17	14	**Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [O]**	27	53
16	25	17	Christian Reformed Church [E]	20	18
34	0	8	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [E]	18	4
19	22	17	Church of the Nazarene [E]	12	23
25	0	9	Churches of Christ [E]	19	29
15	1	8	Conservative Judaism [2]	9	37
28	5	10	Episcopal Church [O]	28	42
15	11	9	**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [O]**	22	43
35	46	67	Historically Black Denominations [E, 3]	46	29
17	9	12	Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod [E]	19	40
16	20	7	Mennonite Church USA [O]	16	21
39	NA	48	Muslim [4]	3	NA
45	34	33	Nondenominational [E, 5]	26	13
28	0	9	Orthodox Christian [6]	16	28
26	9	8	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) [O]	20	62
22	22	15	Reformed Church in America [O]	29	27
19	6	17	Reform Judaism [2]	18	22
21	9	27	Roman Catholic Church [7]	21	34
16	8	11	Seventh-day Adventist Church [E]	17	28
24	23	21	Southern Baptist Convention [E]	17	28
15	3	28	Unitarian Universalist Association [O]	19	32
17	8	14	United Church of Christ [O]	20	55
20	14	13	United Methodist Church [O]	20	50
31	30	33	Non-Partner Denominations/Traditions [E, 8]	29	25

[A] See discussion related to Figure 29.

[B] See discussion related to Figure 2.

[C] See discussion related to Figure 23.

[D] See discussion related to Figure 13.

[E] See discussion related to Figure 17.

Protestant Families: [E] Evangelical; [O] Oldline

[1] Response rate warrants caution.

[2] Conducted by Synagogue 3000. Includes the Conservative and Reform Traditions

[3] Conducted by the Interdenominational Theological Center. Response rate warrants caution.

[4] Conducted by the Islamic Society of America.

[5] Conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Response rate warrants caution.

[6] Conducted by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America. Includes the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Orthodox Church in America.

[7] Conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

[8] Conducted by a sub-contractor of the Cooperative Congregational partnership. Response rate warrants caution.

The Faith Communities Today Surveys.

The *FACT*^{2010} national data set brings together the 26 individual surveys of congregations listed on the previous page. Twenty-four were conducted by or for denominations and faith groups in the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP), representing 32 of the county's largest denominations and traditions. Partners developed a common core questionnaire of just over 150 questions consisting of items from the *FACT*^{2000}, *FACT*^{2005} *and FACT*^{2008} surveys. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/ They should be referred to for the exact wording of items used in this report.

Using the common questionnaire, CCSP partner groups conducted their own, typically mail and online survey of a representative, random national sample of their own congregations. Usually a congregation's leader completed the questionnaire. CCSP also conducted a national survey of nondenominational congregations based on a random sample drawn from several mailing and marketing lists purchased from national vendors. Finally, CCSP contracted with a denominational agency to survey a sample of non-partner denomination congregations, also based on a random sample drawn from several mailing and marketing lists.

For purposes of the overall national analysis, the 26 *FACT*^{2010} sub-surveys were combined in such a way that, through the use of statistical weights, each partner denomination and faith group, and each non-partner cluster of congregations are represented in the national *FACT*^{2010} data proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States. This aggregated dataset includes responses from 11,077 congregations, and over 120 denominations. Return rates were typically good for surveys of this type -- in 40% range. Sub-surveys with lower return rates are noted in the appendix. Sampling error for a survey such as *FACT*^{2010} can only be roughly estimated. We believe a conservative estimate is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.

In a few instances a partner faith group had to make the difficult choice to omit a set of questions in order to maximize return rate. This was a major challenge, for example, for the pioneering *FACT*^{2000} survey of congregations in the Historically Black denominations. Accordingly, in order to make appropriate comparisons between the *FACT*^{2000} and *FACT*^{2010} national samples in this report the responses of congregations from denominations and faith groups missing data in *FACT*^{2000} are also omitted from the *FACT*^{2010} figures.

The ground breaking *FACT*^{2000} survey used the same methodology as *FACT*^{2010}. With responses from 14,301 congregations it remains the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the U.S. CCSP intends to conduct coalition based, mega-surveys such as *FACT*^{2000} and *FACT*^{2010} at the turn of each decade. Additionally, just as the U.S. Census Bureau conducts regular national surveys between its large-scale decadal enumerations, CCSP is committed to conducting more normally sized national surveys of congregations between decades. *FACT*^{2005} was the first of these; *FACT*^{2008} *the* second. The purpose of these interim surveys is to track short-term changes in a limited number of key areas of congregational life and structure, and to plumb the dynamics of selected congregational practices and challenges. Both interim survey samples began with national samples drawn from mailing and marketing lists. The samples' list of CCSP coalition denominations and faith groups was cleaned and supplemented by CCSP partners. Finally, to enhance national representativeness, responses were weighted to population parameters for faith family, region, size of congregation and rural/city/suburban location. *FACT*^{2005} had responses from 884 congregations; *FACT*^{2008} *from* 2,527 congregations.

The Faith Communities Today Project.

The *FACT* series of national surveys of American Congregations is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. CCSP is a multi-faith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. CCSP denominations and religious groups participating in *FACT*^{2010} are listed on the previous page. The primary purposes of *CCSP* are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of the most numerous voluntary organization in the U.S. – our religious congregations. More information about CCSP, its partners, its publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to its monthly newsletter is available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/

The Decade of Change report was written by David A. Roozen, Director, The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Professor of Religion & Society, Hartford Seminary, and Director, CCSP. For a list of publications and contact information visit his web site at: Hartford*Institute*.org/about/roozen.htm

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