Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview
Executive Summary

This report conducted by Faith Communities Today, a multireligious and collaborative research initiative that has been tracking trends in the U.S. religious landscape since 2000, summarizes the findings of the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the U.S. It captures a pre- and early pandemic picture of America’s faith communities and affirms many of the trends evident over the past few decades, while also highlighting some distinct areas of change.

Key findings include:

- Prior to the pandemic, many congregations were small and getting smaller, while the largest ones keep getting more attendees
- Despite continued declines in attendance overall, about a third of congregations are growing and are spiritually vital
- The size of larger congregations offers some distinct advantages, but each size grouping has certain strengths
- Congregations have continued to diversify, particularly in terms of racial composition
- A dramatically increased utilization of technology can be seen over the past two decades, even pre-pandemic
- The fiscal health of congregations has remained mostly steady
- There is a clear and demonstrated path toward vitality with characteristics that are consistent across the two decades of our survey efforts

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The health and vitality of religious communities matter a great deal. This might sound strange after 18 months of pandemic virtual religious gatherings. Or in light of headlines from polling organizations describing the disaffiliation trends in the faith lives of individuals in the US religious landscape. As increasing percentages of individuals choose to identify as “none”, “done”, or “spiritual not religious”, it might seem as if religious congregations no longer matter. However, personal commitments and identities are often insubstantial without a supportive community. An individual’s faith is transitory, subject to changes throughout one’s life, and ultimately lasts only as long as they do.

It is the religious organizations – congregations, denominations, and parachurch groups – that create the bedrock foundation of religious and spiritual life in this country and sustain both faith traditions and individuals’ quests across time and generational variations.

Yet the congregational reality is not often explored by researchers. Few surveys and very little national conversation address the character and vitality of the institutional segment of today’s religious reality. Religious communities play a critical and continuing role in the social and spiritual service of our nation. This tangible segment of society anchors much of the philanthropic, public social support, mental health, and spiritual and moral wellbeing of the country. Understanding the trends and dynamics of America’s faith communities offers a solid contextual reality and complements the variable beliefs of its citizens. The health and vitality of religious congregations matter significantly, as the following pages will describe.

This report is a first glimpse at the largest-ever congregational survey of 15,278 religious communities from 80 different denominations and faith traditions. Conducted in 2020, the research effort named Faith Communities Today 2020 continues 20 years of research, including 6 national surveys and nearly 50,000 congregational key-informant surveys, dedicated to tracking the health and vitality of US churches, mosques, synagogues and other religious communities (See Figure 1). This unique collaborative multi-religious venture by researchers from over 20 different traditions strives to portray an in-depth representative picture of the status of religious communities in the United States. 

See pages 30-31 for more about the history of this research effort and methodology of the project and/or visit www.faithcommunitsestoday.org

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**Figure 1**

*Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research*
This survey is the sixth and latest in the continuing assessment of religious congregations in the 21st century, but it also, thanks to the events of 2020, captures a picture of faith communities at the cusp of the pandemic. This timing is both an asset and a challenge. Over half (58%) of responses were obtained before the COVID-19 lockdown, with the remaining 42% coming shortly after March 15th. Slight alterations in the questionnaire happened at that point in the research; the survey form included an instruction to provide pre-Covid information on the faith community and an additional question was added to capture the congregational response to the pandemic. With the explicit instructions to provide responses reflecting pre-pandemic congregational life, these distinct groups show little variation in attendance, growth figures, or other characteristics between the two phases of the research.

Taken as a whole, this 2020 picture of congregational life can be viewed as a baseline for what was, and a waypoint marker to assess what changes might come to pass post-pandemic. Much that is written about the possible effects of Covid-19 suggests that, if anything, the pandemic will hasten the pre-existing trends and factors rather than completely recreate the social situation. This research, and that of others undertaken during the past 18 months (www.covidreligionresearch.org/resources), indicate that some aspects of congregational life have already changed permanently – for instance, no faith community will deactivate their online giving platform.

However, most changes in congregational dynamics are not likely to be evident in the immediate “return to normalcy” but rather will develop across a longer period of time, over the long haul, as more subtle adaptations to the practices and routines of gathering arise. This Faith Communities Today project in conjunction with Hartford Seminary and Hartford Institute for Religion Research recently received a large grant from Lilly Endowment to study these possible responses and changes over the coming five years that might result from the pandemic experience. You can follow along as these organizations explore such changes and adaptations at www.covidreligionresearch.org.

This report’s pre-pandemic picture of America’s faith communities clearly highlights many of the trends evident over the past few decades. Overall, the portrait shows a majority of congregations are growing older, smaller, and, by many measures, less vital. At the same time, there are hopeful signs of resilience and considerable vitality within a solid percentage of faith communities. The patterns and dynamics of the more robust congregations indicate clear paths toward vibrancy for any faith community poised to take advantage of the new energy and sense of optimism as it begins to re-gather and strategize for a post-pandemic reality. While these trends and some of this pre-pandemic portrait do not offer ideal news for congregations, this challenging picture does not have to be the dominant narrative for faith communities as they contemplate their future in a new reality. A time of challenge and upheaval can also be a moment of opportunity and revitalization.

There are hopeful signs of resilience and considerable vitality within a solid percentage of faith communities.

A Snapshot of the Congregational Landscape

The Faith Communities Today project is intended to accurately represent a profile of the nation’s congregations, weighted to reflect the proportion of religious communities by region, size, and

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2 Faith Communities Today 2020 findings represent a picture that is quite similar to the recognized standard portrait done by the National Congregations Study 2018-19. Check out that project at https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/ for a comparison with ours to get the most complete perspective on congregational life.
denominational distribution. This summary offers only a sketch of the full set of findings from these 15,000+ faith communities. Additional reports targeted on giving, growth and vitality, technology, and other topics will follow in the months ahead. Be sure to follow us on Facebook to stay up to date with research releases.

**Just what does that congregational profile look like based on this 2020 picture?**

Our best estimates are there are between 350,000 and 375,000 congregations of all faith traditions within the nation. The trends around size will be addressed a bit, but the vast majority of the country’s congregations are small. 70% of these faith communities have 100 or fewer weekly attendees. Only 10% of them have more than 250 in weekly services. However, far more people attend these larger congregations – roughly 70% of all attendees – than the many smaller ones. Those smallest communities of 100 or less are home to only 14% of all weekly attendees (Figure 2). This size disparity indicates a significant concentration of the majority of attendees in larger congregations and reflects a dynamic shift that is increasing rapidly over time.

This report further divides the congregations by faith family or broad religious tradition groups. The vast majority of congregations in the study and across the country are Evangelical Protestant (71.3%, including black Protestant churches). This is followed by 20.2% representing the Mainline Protestant Christian tradition, 5.2% of Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities, and 1.4% of other religious traditions (the latter included Baha’i, Jewish, and Muslim congregations in our study and admittedly represents an undercount of the growing diversity of non-Christian religious groups within the country). The 2018/19 National Congregations Study estimates the non-Christian groups account for nearly 6% of congregations.

Regionally, half of all congregations in the US are in the South, although this region contains 38% of the US population. Conversely, the western region has 24% of the population but only 14% of its faith communities. The Northeast has 12% of congregations and 17% of Americans while the North Central states have 24% of faith communities and 21% of the total population. This means that the south and central states have nearly double the churches per million residents as do the northeast and west (Figure 3).
The area location of these congregations is roughly evenly divided between rural (25%), village/small towns (22%), large metropolitan cities (28%), and the suburban areas around large metropolitan cities (25%). This sounds like an ideal distribution until one takes into account that the 2020 Census recently released findings that show only 6% of the population live in rural areas, 8% in small towns and the remaining 86% of the country in metropolitan areas. The upshot is that areas outside the metropolitan large cities likely have too many congregations for the population living there to adequately sustain and this is why most of these are so small.

In part, this situation is due to the dramatic migration of Americans, especially young adults, out of smaller towns and rural areas over the past 70 years. But it is also a result of religious groups having built congregations at a time when these areas were more populated. The median founding date is 1950. On the extremes, 29% of congregations were organized prior to 1900 and only 18% since 1990 -- including a dozen founded less than a year ago but 50 who are over 325 years old. A large percentage of Americans no longer live where they did in the 1950s. Likewise, most religious traditions haven’t continued to plant congregations in locations where the population has moved to.

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3 The median is the midpoint of the distribution so in this case, half of congregations in the study were founded before 1950 and half were established more recently.
A Glimpse at 2020 Congregational Characteristics

**ATTENDANCE**
- **65** Weekly Attendance people (median)
- **200** Seating Capacity (median)
- **25%** Multiracial (20% or more minority)
- **64%** No Conflict or not Serious
- **1950** Median Year Founded

**PARTICIPANTS**
- **56%** Female
- **41%** College Graduates
- **24%** New to Congregation in 5 years
- **13%** Born outside US
- **4%** New Immigrants
- **23%** Children and Youth (under 18)
- **33%** Seniors 65+

**ACTIVITIES**
- **96%** Adult
- **88%** Children
- **70%** Music Program
- **17%** Host other congregations
- **24%** Nonprofits
- **20%** Support Groups

**WORSHIP**
- (describes them well or very well)
  - **24%** Innovative
  - **31%** Contemporary
  - **77%** Thought-provoking
  - **77%** Informal

**LEADERSHIP**
- **57** years, Pastor Age
- **31%** Senior leader plus others
- **13%** Serves more than one
- **10%** Female
- **76%** Full-time
- **15%** Also Chaplain
- **53%** Solitary Clergy
- **7** years, Tenure

**FINANCE**
- **$120,000** Income
- **49%** Good/excellent Finances
- **$108,000** Expenditures
- **44%** Budget for Staff Salaries
- **58%** Any Online Giving
Partly, it is this permanence of congregational structures that is both a blessing and a challenge. These congregations anchor and support a community. 64% of congregations own their building; while for 17% the denomination owns the structure. Just 13% rent and 5% get their meeting space for free or have some other arrangement that implies less permanency. When members and their offspring leave the town, the majority of the congregations and their facilities remain -- mostly empty. As a result, the median seating capacity for these structures is 200 persons, nearly three times the median weekly attendance. Half of all congregations have no more than 38% of their seating capacity occupied during weekend services.

In terms of congregational leadership, the median age of the leader is 57 years old. The vast majority of them are male (90%) and white (85%). Interestingly, 14% of all leaders work without pay. Among all leaders, three-quarters (76%) are full-time and the remaining part-time leaders (24%) work on average 20 hours a week. These leaders have a median tenure in the position of 7 years so far, having begun their position on average in 2013. The fact that just 10% of clergy are female is somewhat deceptive; however this rate varies significantly by religious family. Within Mainline Protestant congregations female clergy account for 32% of leaders compared to just 4% in the Evangelical tradition, none in Catholic and Orthodox, but 10% in other faith traditions. Female leaders are also overrepresented in the smallest congregations and under-represented in those with more than 100 attendees. They are also slightly more likely to be in part-time positions than male leaders. Whatever the gender of the leader, 68% of congregations claim there is a very good relational fit between the senior leader and the membership.

Looking at the regularly participating membership, on average, most congregations are more female (56%) than male and with an age profile that is significantly older than the national average. Most members live within 15 minutes of the congregation they attend (68%), and many grew up in this same religious tradition (46%). The average participant is also more likely to be a college graduate (41%) than the national population (35%). Most participants are American-born (87%, which is nearly identical to the national average of 86%), while 13% are first-generation immigrants, 4% of whom immigrated in the last five years. 5% of regular participants are persons with special needs. Nearly half (44%) of congregational participants volunteer in some fashion.

The vast majority of a typical congregation’s median income of $120,000 a year comes from individual donations, an average of $2000 per person. On average, 85% of income is derived from these contributions, with another 4% each as a result of fundraising and rental income. The remaining 6% of overall income is a mix of school tuition, capital campaigns, investments and other income, and a final 1% coming from endowments. Approximately 30% of faith communities augment direct giving with either fundraising or rental income. Only 15% of congregations have any endowment income. Overall, congregations bring in more than they expend with 56% having a surplus (mostly a small surplus). For 20% of faith communities, their income matched expenses, while 24% operated in a deficit.

Certainly, all these basic characteristics vary dramatically depending on size, race, theological position, region or religious tradition, something our more in-depth subsequent reports will explore. However, the worship service character has perhaps the most variability across the religious spectrum of the study. The rituals, service content, and level of energy in services are vastly different between congregations both within the Christian family (say between Southern Baptist and Episcopal, or Catholic and Assemblies of God) or across religious traditions. Yet, when asked to describe their worship, a large majority of congregations assess their services as reverent (64%) and thought-provoking (77%). A large percentage of faith communities placed significant emphasis on regular worship attendance and most agreed (49%) or strongly agreed (33%) that their worship was “spiritually vital and alive.”
No matter what the tradition, gathered worship, prayer, spiritual practices, religious education, and often music form the heart of most congregations. How these practices are expressed, though, varies considerably as a third said they were very informal and an equal percentage not at all informal, with an identical pattern of those embracing formal rituals or liturgy and those claiming not at all. 60% of congregational services never use an electric guitar and nearly 50% never use an organ. 31% report that “contemporary” describes their worship well or very well, whereas 24% claim to be “innovative” in worship practices. Identification of a congregation’s worship as either “contemporary” or “innovative” is not automatically synonymous with electric guitars and projection screens nor do these labels negate the use of organs or choirs (Figure 4). Clearly, the meaning of these terms is more contextually determined than it is strict adherence to externally defined worship trends.

Bad press notwithstanding, faith communities offer a great benefit to individuals (both inside and external to the congregation) and to society generally. When these 15,000+ communities were asked if they had any of the following programs or activities and what emphasis is given to the activity, they responded as follows (Figure 5). While it is not surprising that many of these programs are religious in nature, quite a few also have a secular component. For both the internal membership and surrounding community, these programmatic efforts amount to considerable investment by faith communities in their local contexts.
In addition to these sponsored activities, nearly all congregations designate a portion of their budgets for external mission, benevolence and charity. The average of 13% external contribution for this group of 15,000+ congregations comes to nearly 275 million dollars in benefit to the larger world, but if extended to roughly 350,000 religious communities the total would be roughly $5.5 billion.

Another way congregations provide value to society is through the public use of their building spaces. The survey found that 58% of congregations provide space for the community services described below that anchor the civic life of a community --- much of it for free. Overall, only 4% of their operating income is generated from building use rental, and between 50–60% of congregations charge nothing to the organizations that use their facilities. Of the 58% of religious communities that host other groups in their buildings, more are likely to provide space for nonprofits or support groups than other types of organizations (Table 1) although the listing of other organizations contained many thousands of groups from Zumba and Yoga to theater and dance groups, to 4–H, VFW, Red Cross, and Weight Watchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of All US Congregations</th>
<th>Type of Hosted Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24%</td>
<td>Nonprofit organization(s), e.g., Boy Scouts, food shelf, credit union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Support group(s), e.g., A.A., Al-Anon, Alzheimer’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Another congregation(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Other organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Daycare or preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Government, e.g., voting, town hall meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>School (K-6, K-12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these physical and tangible ways that congregations function to enrich their communities, they play an obvious religious role of providing spiritual grounding to their members and future generations, as well as providing a moral grounding for society. Certainly, ongoing debates over the pandemic, nationalism and clergy failings detract from this witness but nevertheless, the 350,000 congregations and their millions of members strive to live out their faith commitments to the benefit of the larger world. Therefore, tracking the health and wellness of faith communities is critical.

**Trends That Raise Concerns and Present Challenges for Flourishing**

Having twenty years of trend data allows the Faith Communities Today research to examine the changes congregations are undergoing across time. Unfortunately, this several-decade viewpoint does put some of the beneficial aspects that congregations offer in jeopardy or at least certainly challenges their continued viability. While this historic perspective doesn’t paint a uniformly discouraging picture, the overall aggregate portrayal is not very optimistic.
Increasing Rates of Decline and Growing Numbers of Small Congregations

As mentioned earlier, America’s congregations are predominantly small but it is also true that as a whole a majority are also getting smaller, and rapidly so. In the past twenty years of this survey effort, the median attendance size has decreased by over 50% from 137 to 65 attendees in weekly worship services (Figure 6). This means that at least 175,000 faith communities (half of 350,000) in the country have 65 or fewer people in attendance on any given weekend.

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This declining attendance rate also means that a larger percentage of congregations are small. Before the pandemic, nearly two-thirds (65%) of congregations had weekly worship attendance of less than 100 people. As is evident in Figure 7, the percent of faith communities under 100 changed only incrementally in the first decade of this Century, but there has been a rapid change in the past 10 years. It remains to be seen what the post-pandemic situation will bring, but early indications suggest this trend will likely accelerate over the next decade.
Shrinking attendance figures coupled with an increase in the number and percent of small congregations obviously indicates that a good many congregations are not growing. Indeed, the median rate of change between 2015 and 2020 was a negative 7%, meaning half of all congregations declined in attendance by at least 7%. This is the first time in 20 years of surveys that the median five-year rate of change in attendance was negative. In addition, as Figure 8 indicates, only 34% of faith communities grew by 5% or more between 2015 and 2020 – which means an average of 1% growth per year.

However, not all congregations are experiencing decline. Overall, 34% of religious communities grew by 5% or more and 23% by 25% or more between 2015 and 2020 (Figure 9).
A similar pattern of fewer congregations growing plus rising percentages of those in decline can be seen across the decades of surveys (Figure 10). This pattern is evident for every one of FACT’s five surveys. It is also noteworthy that a decreasing percentage of congregations remain stable or plateaued during this period.

For the 2020 survey, this pattern of change varies in intensity both in terms of median size and rate of change depending on religious family (Table 2). On average, each distinct Christian grouping has a negative rate of change, with Mainline Protestants suffering the greatest decline (12.5%) and having the smallest median size of 50 worship attendees. Evangelical congregations are nearly as small (65) but are showing slightly less decline (5.4%). Not surprisingly, Catholic and Orthodox parishes are substantially larger (400) but have a median rate of 9% decline. As a group, only the congregations of other religious traditions in the survey showed a positive rate of change in five years (25%). This is quite noteworthy and is likely due to a combination of immigration, a more youthful population of attendees, and higher birth rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Family</th>
<th>Median Worship Size in 2020</th>
<th>Median Change Rate Since 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant Christian</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>-12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant Christian</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>-5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic &amp; Orthodox Christian</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>-9.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religious Traditions</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>+25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Portion of All Sizes Are Growing but the Largest Have an Advantage

It isn’t only a congregation’s religious family grouping that influences the rate of change; the size of the congregation also makes a difference. Two-thirds of the congregations in the 50-or-under attendance group experienced a decline of 5% or more. Those communities between 51 and 250 in size had roughly equal percentages of congregations that grew and declined. For those with weekly attendance greater than 250, the percentage of growing faith communities outpaced those that were shrinking. But it was not until worship attendance reached 1500 or larger that a majority (71%) of congregations in that size grouping were growing during the five-year period (Figure 11).

All of these measures of change are based on the current size of congregations in 2020, but looking at the change based on their size in 2015 sheds additional light on the current situation. It turns out that most of the decline seen in 2020 came from medium-sized congregations getting smaller. This picture shows that significant attendee loss came from those congregations sized between 51 and 500 at a median decrease of about 12%. Whereas the very smallest faith communities had no net median change, nor did those in the 500-1500 size range. Only congregations whose attendance was over 1500 in 2015 had a median growth rate, of just over 6%.

A congregation’s worship attendance size is most certainly not the only factor in defining the health of a religious community. Nor do these patterns imply that only the largest or most rapidly growing congregations will thrive. Small congregations of 50 or less attendees can be self-sustaining, vital, and play a significant role in their communities over many generations. Likewise, the rate of change of these and larger congregations might not be totally within their control. The local community’s fate with departing young adults, shuttered places of business, or a rapidly changed environment might be more responsible...
for shrinking membership than the vision and mission or worship practices of a particular congregation. However, these consistent trend lines across the past few decades also suggest the need for considerable serious reflection by religious leaders no matter the cause of the decline.

Whatever the reason, whether shifting community populations, aging memberships, lower birth rates, generations of less affiliated secular persons shunning religion or a combination of these and other contextual variables, the dramatically increasing number of congregations below 65 attendees with a continued rate of decline should be cause for concern among religious communities. Small does not mean ineffectual but it does likely mean a part-time leader, older members, fewer resources, less vibrant worship, and diminished ministry efforts. Generally, the size of a congregation makes a significant difference. The larger it is, the more robust its presence in the community. The increased size also correlates with other critical components of flourishing such as full-time clergy employment, greater financial and physical resources, a greater level of community service, a diversity of ages and races in the membership, and increased self-assessment of spiritual vitality.

However, size and its correlations are not an all-or-nothing reality. There are indications of strength exhibited by congregations no matter what their size (Figure 12). At least a third of all size groupings of faith communities score high on a number of crucial characteristics. As seen previously (Figure 11), 20 to 50% of all sizes of congregations are growing. Additionally, there are qualities that stand out distinctively for each of the different sizes. Looking at the three average worship attendance size groupings of small (1–100), medium (101–250), and large (over 250), each group has assets but also challenges based in part on the size dynamics.
Distinct Advantages and Challenges for Each Congregational Size Level

The smallest 70% of congregations—those with worship attendance of 100 or less—were characterized as having a high level of member commitment. These faith communities had a greater percentage of member participation in weekly worship. Their participants gave more money per person and were more likely to volunteer. These congregations spent less on staffing costs and gave the highest percentage of their budgets in support of missions and charity.

However, they are also the most likely to have part-time, unpaid clergy, or bi-vocational clergy. A third of these congregations have part-time religious leaders. Their sanctuaries were the least full during worship compared to other size groups.

Faith communities of this size have serious organizational stressors including the highest budget expense per capita, the largest percentage of their budget spent on buildings, the largest percentage of members over the age of 65, and the smallest percentage of children, youth, and young adults. Interestingly (and perhaps sadly) they were less likely than other sizes to affirm they were looking for new members. Congregations in this group were also the least likely to have music programs, or use organs, choirs or electric guitars in worship.

Medium-sized (101-250) congregations constitute 21% of the survey and are, in fact, in the middle for most of our measures. They are more likely to have recent founding dates and be located in the Western region, particularly the growing mountain west states. These faith communities predominantly employed a full-time clergyperson, often with additional staff, and had ample physical space. However, this medium group’s most striking characteristic is their openness to inviting other groups of all sorts to use their buildings. These communities were the most likely to offer space to other congregations. They, along with the 251-500 sized congregations, were more likely to open their buildings for use by nonprofits, support groups, daycares, or government entities. These medium sized congregations reported excellent fiscal well-being compared to five years ago; fully 68% of these congregations identified their present financial health as good or excellent, far outshining other size groups.

Congregations of this size do have challenges though. A sizable percent were in decline and, on average, this group declined at a greater percentage than the overall average. Their larger buildings but declining participation meant they had extra building space. Their willingness for other organizations to use this excess physical space did not translate, on average, into these congregations’ strong support of providing community service activities themselves or their active involvement in the local community as compared to larger size groups.

Congregations above 250 attendees account for 10% of congregations but draw roughly 60% of all weekly religious participants. While certain obvious characteristics are linked to increased size such as size and fullness of the sanctuary and greater annual income and expenditures, other traits are also strongly related to larger numbers of participants. Other less overt qualities, such as a desire for greater diversity of the membership, a greater willingness to change, a clearer sense of mission and purpose, and a greater sense of spiritual vitality contribute greatly to the flourishing of the religious community (Figure 13).
Larger congregations are also much more likely to have increased use of technology, greater percentage of participants engaged in recruitment, and a great number and wider variety of programs for their members and for the community at large. A greater percentage of congregations over 250 are actively involved in community service and engaged in both ecumenical and interfaith worship, fellowship and community service activities. They also tend to have a more diverse and representative balance of all races and ages including more young persons and a smaller percentage of older adults.

None of these characteristics should be too surprising given their larger staffs, increased resources and greater number of participants, but it does create a formidable challenge for smaller, less resource-rich congregations in the religious marketplace. These distinct attractional advantages are likely to worsen the size disparities and membership distribution inequities discussed earlier.

However, it is also true that the larger the congregation gets, and the faster it grows, the greater the decline in per capita giving. Growth and large size also correlate to smaller percentages of the congregation willing to volunteer and a lower overall level of participant commitment generally. While larger congregations had lower per capita costs to operate, larger percentages of their budgets went to staff costs and program expenses.

The Aging of Congregational Memberships and Clergy

Another major challenge evident across two decades of Faith Communities Today surveys is the dual issue of aging of both participants and religious leadership, and also the strong correlation of these trends with a decline in vitality and the diminished possibility of congregational change or revitalization. Since 2008, the average percentage of senior participants in congregations has risen 5%. This reflects a similar national aging trend as baby boomers grow older. However, in congregations, on average, 33% of participants are 65 or older whereas in the general population it is half that, just 17% (Figure 14).
The Ages of Congregational Participants Doesn’t Parallel the US Population

For a quarter of religious communities, half or more of their participants are aged 65 or older. Within Mainline Protestant congregations, 42% of their churches had at least half their participants in this age group. These Mainline congregations, while more challenged, are not alone in age disparities compared to the national averages (Figure 15). While the faith traditions other than Christianity have more communities with distributions of younger and older adults near the national averages, relatively few congregations of any tradition match this distribution.
This is not to imply there is anything magical about having more young adults; they are not a silver bullet to fix a declining congregation. Likewise, the seniors within a congregation are absolutely essential and are often the most faithful and committed participants, dedicated volunteers, and strong financial givers as well as the vessels for a community’s spiritual wisdom and history. Rather, the FACT data suggests that it is an appropriate distribution of diverse ages within a religious community that correlates with vitality and flourishing.

As the percentages of young and senior adults approach the national norms, a congregation’s scores on spiritual vitality, having a clear sense of mission and purpose, and willingness to change all rise, as does its likelihood of growth.

The challenge of aging participants is further compounded by the trend of the aging of religious leadership. In the last two decades the median age of the religious leader rose from 50 in 2000 to 57 in 2020 (Figure 16). Although there was a slight dip from the 2015 high of 58, nevertheless the postponement of retirement by many clergy and fewer young adults enrolling in seminaries make this general trend unlikely to reverse anytime soon—although the pandemic could change that.

Again, this analysis is not implying that older clergy are somehow inferior. In fact, they are more likely to have an excellent “fit with their congregation,” to have less conflict, have good financial health, or to be as innovative as younger religious leaders. Rather, it is the fact that older clergy are more likely to lead congregations of predominantly older participants that is the compounding challenge (Figure 17).
Older clergy are more likely to lead congregations of predominantly older participants

Age grouping of congregation’s primary leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Seniors in Congregation</th>
<th>Under 45 years</th>
<th>45-54 years</th>
<th>55-64 years</th>
<th>65 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Nearly two-thirds (61%) of religious leaders 65 years or older have a third or more of members as senior participants, and 33% have half or more of participants as seniors. If a congregation has both a leader 65 or older and a third or more of the participants as seniors, it is also more likely the religious community itself has an older founding date. This trio of age challenges correlates to less willingness to change, diminished spiritually vital, less desire to look for new members, or to have grown in the past five years. These patterns in the past surveys are all reasons to be concerned, but not to despair. Certainly, the fact that fewer participants attend weekly is likely part of the reason for some of this decline, and the diminished “regular attendance” is an issue that any congregation can benefit from addressing. But shrinking size, aging clergy, and aging member profiles are not simply wished away nor ignored. A complex set of factors, including less frequent participation, aging demographics, generational disaffiliation, lower birth rates, and a host of other social and cultural dynamics, require a transformational response. However, these trends are not entirely insurmountable since congregations within this study do exist that buck the trends. Before looking at the commonalities across these congregations, it is necessary to highlight more optimistic trends evident across the past two decades.

**Trends That Offer Hope**

**Congregational Diversity and the Strength of That Diversity**

Over the past 20 years our society has become ever-increasingly more diverse in a broad range of ways. Not surprisingly these changes are reflected in the nation’s congregations as well. The most apparent in this research is the growth of multiracial congregations. By multiracial, we mean a congregation that has 20% or more of participants who are not part of the dominant racial group in that religious community. Our first survey in 2000 found 12% of faith communities were multiracial, and 20 years later this number has climbed to 25% (Figure 18).
Those congregations who said that striving to be a diverse community described them “very well” were indeed more likely to be multiracial. However, this openness to diversity also manifests itself in communities having a greater percentage of immigrants, a larger percentage of individuals with special needs, fewer lifelong members of their particular faith tradition, and a more diverse age, economic, and educational profile among their participants.

Amid a resurgence of Christian Nationalism and the considerable adverse religious reaction to movements asserting racial justice and opposing structural racism, it is essential to point out that the diversity of a religious community actually strengthens it. This diversity correlates to increased growth, spiritual vitality, a clearer sense of mission and purpose, and other attributes of a flourishing community (Figure 19).
The percentage of growing multiracial congregations is greater than those in decline and is only surpassed by the growth rate of congregations in religious traditions outside of Christianity (Figure 20). It is clear that being multiracial and embracing all dimensions of diversity isn’t a panacea to decline. Nevertheless, having a varied faith community that more accurately represents the variety of American society (racially, economically, age-wise, culturally and with persons of all abilities) enhances vitality and flourishing.

Interestingly this increased emphasis on diversity did not enhance interreligious engagement whether it was participation in worship, educational and social activities, or joint community service with groups of other religions. Such activities rose following 9/11/2001, then began dropping, and now seem to have plateaued at 15% of congregations being engaged in this activity (Figure 21). Still, the current level represents a doubling of engagement over the 20 year period. Not surprisingly, congregations of religious traditions other than Christian participate in all these interreligious activities to a greater extent than do Christian congregations.
Growing Use of Technology – Even Pre-pandemic

Another aspect of society that has changed dramatically in the past two decades is our use of technology. Although congregations were mostly slow to adopt internet tools, their use prior to the pandemic was growing significantly. Certainly, this trend has increased in the past 18 months. While having a website grew early and then leveled off, having a Facebook page has come to be nearly universally adopted as the congregational social media platform of choice (Figure 22).

These trends are quite dramatic, but also represent congregations who use the technology at any level. The patterns look a bit different when you focus only on those religious communities that use the technology some or a lot. Thus, while 92% have Facebook, only 50% appear to be active users of the platform. Likewise, streaming of services drops from 53% having the technology to 32% seriously using it. The same is true of those communities having online giving. This essential financial staple of the pandemic congregation increased from 31% having it five years ago to 58% in early 2020. That trend would have been a promising statistic at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, however, only 30% of congregations really emphasized its use. Fortunately, just having online giving, no matter how much it was emphasized, increased the per capita giving of regular participants by $300 per person annually.

Sustained Financial Health

The financial health of congregations in 2020 is less clearly a positive trend, but there is some optimism in this picture. While the overall median budget of religious communities has trended downward in the last two decades (perhaps due largely to a corresponding downward trend in attendance), yet the financial decline is not nearly commensurate with the attendance losses (Figure 23).
The median 2019 congregational income was $120,000 which is $12,000 more than claimed fiscal year median expenditures of $108,000. Nearly all of a congregation’s income was derived from member donations, though a few Christian and many other religious tradition congregations departed considerably from this fund-raising model. The average giving was $1,876 per person based on a calculation of attendance over income. The average expense breakdown shows staff and building costs accounting for 70% of the overall budget, with program and mission and benevolence spending making up another quarter of spending (Table 3).

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

Not surprisingly, budget income corresponds to the size of the congregations (Table 4). 46% of religious communities have annual revenues of $100,000 or less and three quarters have a yearly
income of $250,000 or less. Smaller congregations, especially those under 50 people, expended a larger percentage of their budget on building costs. However, their participants gave more on average than those who attend larger-sized communities. More of these small congregations also indicated that they spent more annually than they brought in. Likewise, these smallest congregations said on average that they were doing worse financially at present than they were 5 years ago.

Conversely, the larger congregations received less income per person. They also spend more on programs and staffing but less on buildings and operations than smaller faith communities.

Roughly half (49%) of congregations indicated they had “good or excellent” financial health pre-pandemic. This marks a slight increase over their self-assessment of five years prior when 43% reported that level of financial health. However, the trends in financial health are slightly down across the 20 years, with about half as many reporting excellent fiscal health as in 2000. But overall, except for a dip following the 2008 recession, this profile of those claiming “good” or “tight but managing” has mostly remained steady (Figure 24).
Rising Vitality and Openness to Change

Finally, two additional trends seem to offer hope as congregations were poised to engage the pandemic challenges. After having watched the percent of congregations with the highest level of vitality decrease throughout the past two decades, there was a six percentage point increase (Figure 25) in 2020. This single measure (a congregation’s self-assessment of how well the phrase “spiritually vital and alive” describes them) has been shown throughout the Faith Communities Today surveys to be a reliable indicator of health and strongly correlated with other attributes of thriving.

One of those other attributes tied to thriving is whether a congregation affirms it is “willing to change to meet new challenges.” This quality could prove to be a key component to successfully handling the pandemic’s uncertainty. Across time, the percentage of congregations agreeing or strongly agreeing with this description had been in decline. The 2020 survey results indicate a shift in this openness to change (Figure 26). Certainly, the past months of adaptation to pandemic protocols have demonstrated that many congregations are in fact able to radically transform themselves in response to new and unprecedented challenges. The question is, will they continue this transformative process into the coming years?

Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 25

A Rise in Congregational Spiritual Vitality

% of Congregations Strongly Agreeing they are Spiritual Vital and Alive
The Possibilities for Revitalization

After nearly two years of experimentation, nontraditional worship, and new routines, congregations are asking, what is the way forward? There is no denying that the overall tone of the 2020 findings are rather dismal. The results portray steady decline, shrinking participation, and aging organizations; however, this does not need to spell despair and hopelessness. Many of these congregational trends indicate the need for change. Following the past months of creativity and adaptation, now is the perfect time for moving beyond the staid routines of the past, which this data shows were not working very successfully anyway. In the midst of all the unsettledness, now is the ideal moment to sustain the efforts toward innovation.

Celebrate coming back together in person as faith communities, but do it with the commitment to come back better than before.

Even in the midst of this challenging portrait, it is important to recall that at least a third of religious communities of all different sizes were growing, often by more than 5% a year, and also thriving in other areas. Likewise, a greater percentage of congregations strongly affirmed being spiritually vital and having a willingness to change than in the past few Faith Communities Today survey efforts.

Those spiritually vital and growing communities of all sizes had distinctive qualities that offer a window into the characteristics of thriving and suggest a way forward for others. Interestingly, these factors that correlate with flourishing religious communities have not changed dramatically across the 20 years of our research. These characteristics associated with flourishing and growth are not mysterious or complex. In short, congregations that are growing and are spiritually vital are also more likely to:

- have strong leadership that fits well with the participants
- have a clear and compelling mission
- be innovative and open to change
- be active in the local community
- have more vibrant worship that is thought-provoking and stimulating
- have a community of participants that represents a diversity of ages, genders, races and other differences
- be good at incorporating new people
- have significant lay involvement, including contributing financially and volunteering
- live out their faith commitments in everyday life and tell others about the congregation
Leadership that Is Innovative and Inspiring

Carl Dudley and David Roozen wrote in the initial report from the 2000 Faith Communities Today study, “Leaders … face the challenge to recover a fresh sense of mission and purpose, to help the congregation ‘to dream again.’” Although written 20 years ago, that injunction is even more critical today. The traditional ways of gathering, leading, and worshipping are less effective than they once were for a large segment of society. Incremental change and minor modifications, while helpful, are likely inadequate for the long run. Innovative approaches must become the norm.

Visionary leadership, clergy and laity alike, must offer new dreams that include new models of being a gathered community, much as they have over the past months. Congregational leaders must find adaptive ways to encourage greater participant involvement and commitment in the midst of a busy and distracting social reality. Creative spiritual gatherings should provide appealing communal alternatives for younger generations of digital individualists, shaped by personally customized experiences, and who often have a penchant for eclectic DIY spirituality. While this creativity can originate from within existing congregations, some of the innovation that is needed to create disruptive change will likely need to come from younger leadership and outside current congregational or denominational constraints.

A Vision that Is Meaningful and Contagious

Innovation for its own sake is insufficient. Creativity is not about doing something different but doing something new with a purpose. The vision of a community that desires revitalization must be clear, purposeful, and faith-filled. An infectious and appealing mission is both meaningful and compelling as well as deeply spiritual and emotionally moving. This sense of purpose 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 the racial, ethnic, economic, and political realities of the times. A congregation’s mission should be at once unifying and also embrace the challenge of heterogeneity. Creativity, intentional change, and a willingness to embrace diversity all produce friction. Some level of conflict is essential for health and growth; however, a powerfully compelling vision and sense of purpose also channels disagreements toward positive outcomes rather than derailing the mission or fracturing a community.

Worship that Is Contextual and Creative

A mission without a strong worshipping community is just a personal cause. This worship, however, must be as relevant and meaningful to the immediate context 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 worship must address daily felt needs and be congruent with the lived reality of participants, whether formal or laid-back. This worship, whatever style or approach, should stimulate an emotive and passionate response in participants. These gatherings, the worship, music, prayers, and interactions, should motivate participants to live out their faith every day in expressive ways that demonstrate their spiritual vitality. 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.

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4 This section of the report relies heavily on an argument I made in a recent Theology Today journal article (Volume 78, Issue 3, October 2021).
Participants that Are Involved and Willing to Change

The active engagement of participants is a critical component 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 share their excitement about the congregation with others. These communities had more active volunteers and were better at incorporating new people. Without this commitment and engagement of the laity, no amount of quality leadership, a strong mission, or passionate worship are sufficient for vitality. Fortunately, these characteristics are strongly correlated with each other and with spiritual vitality. Yet even this combination is insufficient. Since the congregation and the context are ever-changing, it is critical for vital congregations to be willing to change to meet new challenges. Few times in the last 100 years have shown this to be the case like this pandemic period. It remains to be seen if the 2020 uptick in openness to change will spur further innovation in the coming years.

Conclusions

The 2020 Faith Communities Today survey results from over 15,000 respondents identify a challenging set of trends for congregations. This analysis implies that traditional ways of worshipping, ministering to spiritual needs, and organizing the business of congregations are no longer working adequately for many faith communities. Many factors external to the religious community contribute to this reality so the situation cannot entirely be attributed to a lack of congregational imagination and adaptation. However, the research is clear that this moment demands real change if a large percentage of faith communities are to survive the next 20 years with spiritual vibrancy and ministry effectiveness.

This research across two decades suggests considerable shifts to the religious landscape. This data highlighted changing congregational size disparities with significant financial and resource implications. Additionally, it noted trends such as the aging of members and clergy, the dynamics that correlate with this situation, and the decreased involvement of younger generations. Counterbalancing these trends were the rapid expansion of a third of faith communities including mostly larger and more innovative ones, an increasing presence of multiracial churches, technological shifts, and the growth of congregations of other religious traditions all playing a more positive role in this changing religious picture. Much that is written about the possible effects of the pandemic on society suggest an intensification of pre-existing trends. If that will be the case for the congregational reality, then this moment clearly demands institutional change.

Religious leaders must be willing to champion innovative visions and novel ways forward just as they did over the past 18 months. These adaptive leaders will have to sustain this energy and passion 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 requires 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 modalities by which this good news is delivered urgently need reformation. For the congregations who respond to this challenge, the next two decades of the Faith Communities Today study could indeed look bright.

However, the research is clear that this moment demands real change if a large percentage of faith communities are to survive the next 20 years with spiritual vibrancy and ministry effectiveness.
About the Research

The 2020 Faith Communities Today national data set is the result of a collaborative venture of 21 denominations and religious groups in this cooperative partnership. These partners developed a common core questionnaire of 180 questions consisting of items from the previous surveys plus original (first-time) items. Copies of this and all FACT questionnaires and reports are available at www.faithcommunitiestoday.org and should be consulted for the exact wording of items used in this report.

Using the common questionnaire, partner groups conducted an online survey of a representative, random national sample of their own congregations independently or in conjunction with a common contractor hired to support this collaborative effort. Usually this key informant questionnaire was completed by a congregation’s primary leader. A national survey of nondenominational congregations based on a random sample drawn from several mailing and marketing lists was also conducted. Finally, the partnership, assisted by the common contractor, surveyed a sample of congregations from non-partner denominations, also based on a random sample drawn from several mailing and marketing lists. The survey was customized for individual faith groups and was also translated into 5 languages in addition to English – Cantonese, French, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Together, these efforts resulted in responses from 80 religious denominations and traditions. For purposes of the overall national analysis, the 21 sub-surveys were individually weighted by region and size (attendance) for their faith group. Then responses from each partner denomination, faith group, and the random sample were combined into an aggregated dataset. Through the use of statistical weights, 2020 data are proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States as well as adjusted for size and regional distribution using a combination of 2010 US Religion Census and 2018/19 National Congregations Study information.

The aggregated dataset includes responses from 15,278 congregations from 80 denominations/religious groups. This makes it the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the U.S. The estimated response rate for the overall survey was 35%. Sub-survey response rates ranged from 10% to 80%. Sampling error for a survey such as the 2020 FACT effort can be only roughly estimated. We believe a conservative estimate is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.

Across the years of FACT surveys, occasionally a partner faith group made the difficult choice to omit a set of questions in order to maximize return rate. This is a challenge for cross survey comparisons. Additionally, some years not all questions were asked, changes were made in key questions, or certain responses from some denominations and faith groups had missing data therefore caution should be taken in interpreting some of the longitudinal results.
The Faith Communities Today Partnership Project

The Faith Communities Today (FACT) series of national surveys of American congregations is a collaborative project by a multireligious coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

The primary purposes of this partnership are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of the most numerous voluntary organizations in the U.S. – our religious congregations. More information about the partnership, our publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to our newsletter are available at www.faithcommunitiestoday.org.

This venture always welcomes new partners and denominational groups. In the coming decade, in conjunction with the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations research study (www.covidreligionresearch.org), FACT will be annually surveying congregations and will engage in two large national studies in 2023 and 2025. We encourage active participation from any religious group in the U.S. Please contact us at FACT@hartsem.edu if interested in participating in this research.

This report was written by Scott Thumma, Director of Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford Seminary and Co-Chair of Faith Communities Today.

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