



# FACTs on Congregational Programs

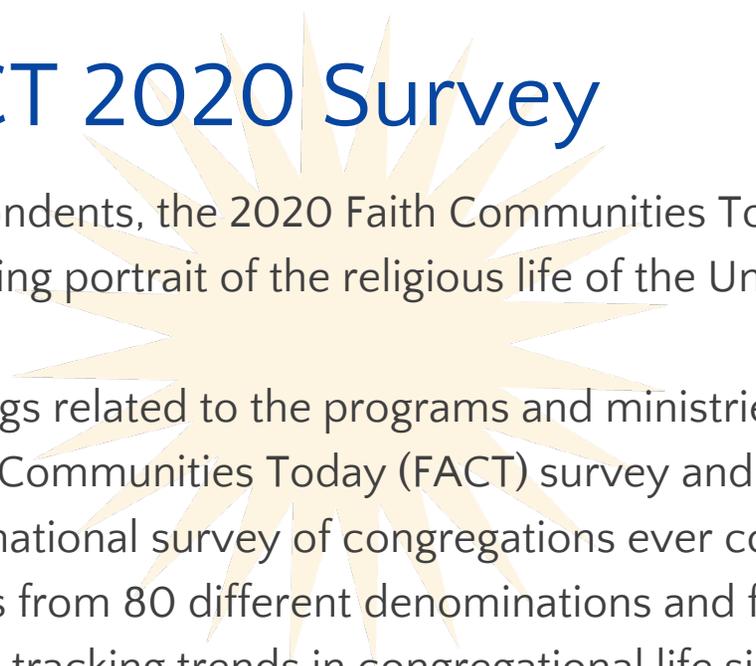
Trends in Congregational Programming from  
2000 to 2020

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Faith  
Communities  
Today

# About the FACT 2020 Survey



With more than 15,000 respondents, the 2020 Faith Communities Today survey of congregations offers a sweeping portrait of the religious life of the United States.

This report summarizes findings related to the programs and ministries of congregations responding to the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey and longer trends. The 2020 survey was the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the US, covering 15,278 congregations from 80 different denominations and faith traditions. Faith Communities Today has been tracking trends in congregational life since 2000.

## Note on How the Covid-19 Pandemic Affected the Survey

The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) national survey of congregations took place as the pandemic arrived in the United States. As such, two-thirds of congregations responded to the survey before restrictions on public worship and other pandemic-related measures were put into effect; one-third responded in full lockdown mode. Consequently, the data here reflects both responses collected immediately before the pandemic and those that emerged during the initial year of it. Those completing the survey after the lockdown were asked to have their answers reflect a pre-pandemic situation.

# Introduction

Congregations offer various types of programs and ministry activities to further their mission. The following report details information about congregational programs from the 2020 FACT survey and traces trends of congregational programming from 2000 to 2020.

Congregational programs highlighted in this report include programs of education, spiritual practices, fellowship, service, advocacy, and operation of schools. Additionally, partnerships in programming with other congregations, as well as outreach are explored.

# Disclaimer

The opinions and analysis expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs, or views of the Faith Communities Today initiative or its membership.

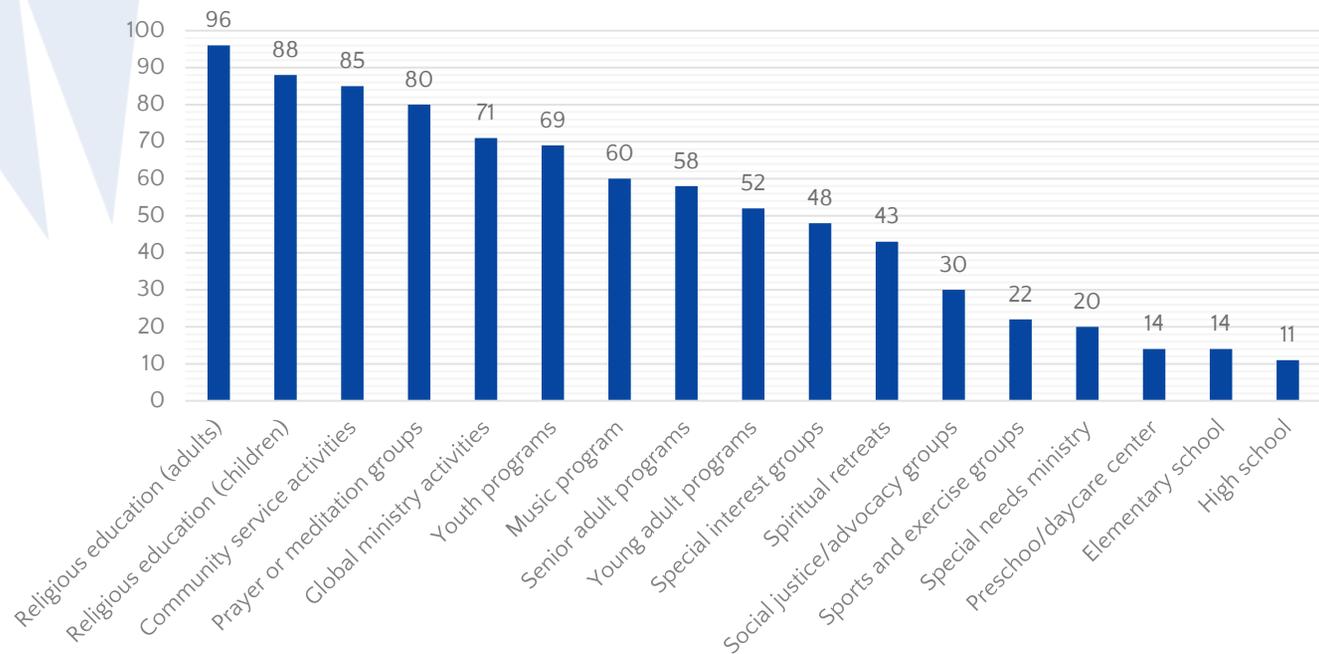
# Overview of Congregational Programs: 2020 FACT Survey

The 2020 FACT survey shows congregations continue to offer a variety of types of programming for participants of the congregation. This graph shows the percentage of congregations who participated in the 2020 FACT survey which engaged a variety of congregational programs. The most emphasized programs were religious education for adults and religious education for children.

Congregations also engaged service ministries within their community more than global ministry activities; however, ministries of social justice and advocacy were offered less frequently than both.

## Congregational Programs 2020 FACT Survey

“Does your congregation have any of the following programs or activities?”



# Congregational Programs by Attendance: At a Glance

The size of a congregation shapes many programs and available resources. The average size of a congregation is now 65 worship attenders. Overall, 70% of congregations have 100 attendees or less. Just 10% of faith communities have 250 or more attenders. The FACT 2020 survey revealed interesting insights into the relationships of congregation size (measured by average weekly attendance) and congregational programmatic emphases. For example:

- Emphasis on **prayer or meditation groups** was consistent across congregations of all sizes and not significantly impacted by size.
- Emphasis on **young adult programs** and **global ministry programs** increased as congregation size increased.
- Congregations with an average weekly attendance of 251–500 emphasized **adult religious education** significantly more than those with attendance over 500. It appears that the “sweet spot” for adult religious education seems to be in the medium–large congregations. This is consistent with these faith communities being seen, historically, as “program” congregations.
- Congregations with 100 attendees or less were significantly less likely to emphasize programs such as **special interest groups**, **music programs**, and **community service**.
- Emphasis of some congregational programs increased with congregation attendance, but only up to a certain congregation size. For example, emphasis of the following programs increased as size increased up to congregations of 250 attendees. After that point, congregation size did not significantly impact the level of emphasis on these programs.

**Spiritual retreats**

**Preschool/daycare**

**High school**

**Youth group**

**Elementary school**

**Special needs ministry**

# Congregational Programs by Religious Tradition

Religious Family or Tradition is divided by Mainline Protestant (more progressive denominations like Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, American Baptist), Evangelical Protestant (more conservative denominations such as Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, nondenominational, African American groups, etc.), Catholic and Orthodox Christian groups, and then the Non-Christian partners (Muslim, Jewish and Baha'i). These religious family differences show distinctions when it comes to programming.

- Catholic & Orthodox congregations were most likely to offer **spiritual retreats**.
- Mainline congregations were most likely to offer **special interest groups** (such as crafts, hobbies, etc.), **music groups**, and **community service activities**.
- Mainline congregations were most likely to offer **social justice/advocacy programs** with Evangelical congregations the least likely.
- Evangelical congregations were most likely to offer **religious education** for adults, while non-Christian congregations were least likely to offer religious education for children and adults.
- Evangelical and Catholic & Orthodox congregations were more likely to offer **youth groups** than Mainline and non-Christian congregations.
- Evangelical congregations were more likely than all others to offer **young adult programs** and Catholic & Orthodox congregations were more likely than Mainline churches.
- Evangelicals were most likely to offer **global ministry programs**, followed by Mainline churches and then Catholic & Orthodox churches, while non-Christian congregations were least likely.
- **Special needs ministries** were most likely to be offered by Evangelical congregations and least likely by non-Christian congregations.
- There were no significant differences among Christian congregations in offering **senior adult programs** and **preschool/daycares**, but Christian congregations were more likely than non-Christian congregations to offer such programming.
- Non-Christian congregations were more likely to offer **prayer and meditation groups** than Christian churches.
- There were no statistically significant differences across all religious families in offering **sports/exercise programs**, **elementary school**, and **high school**.

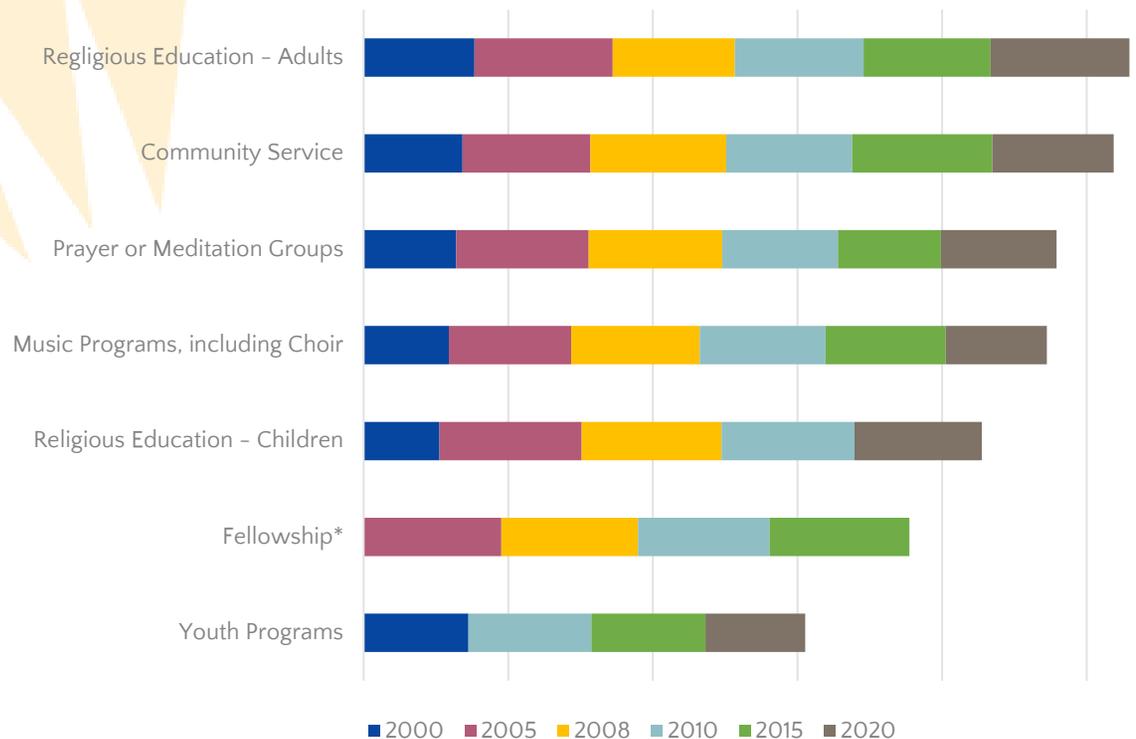
# Stability of Congregational Programs Over 20 Years

The types of programs congregations offer has remained relatively steady from 2000 to 2020. This chart shows the top 5 emphasized congregational programs from each of the FACT surveys over the 20-year span.

The consistency of programs over 20 years suggests the importance of certain programs to the mission and ministry of congregations. Such programs include religious education across ages, fellowship, spiritual practices, music, and service.

\*Fellowship was not included on the 2000 and 2020 survey, but given its prominence in the other survey years it is apparent that fellowship is a key congregational program.

**Congregational Programs in Top Five of FACT Surveys from 2000 to 2020**



# Congregational Programming Emphases, 2000 & 2020

Congregations were asked “How much does your congregation emphasize the following personal and family religious practices?” and scored from “no emphasis” to “a lot of emphasis.”

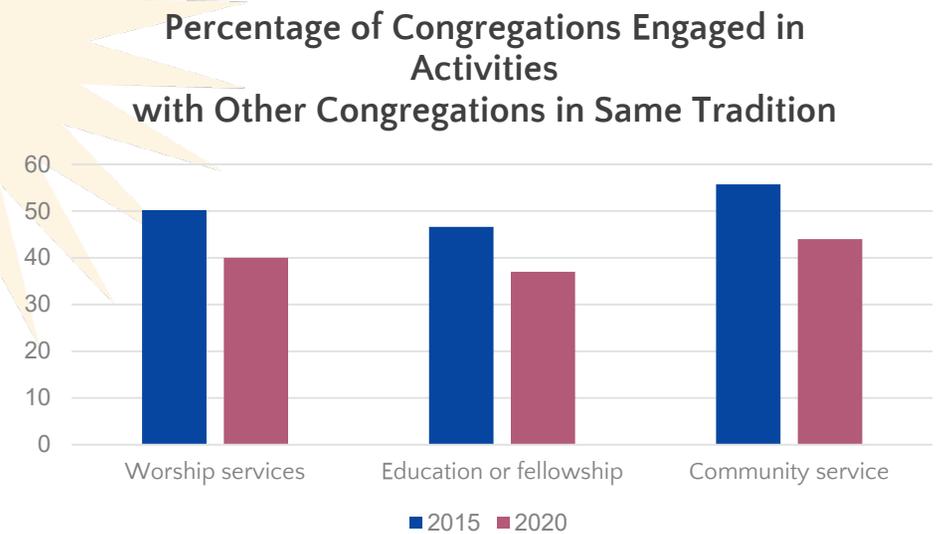
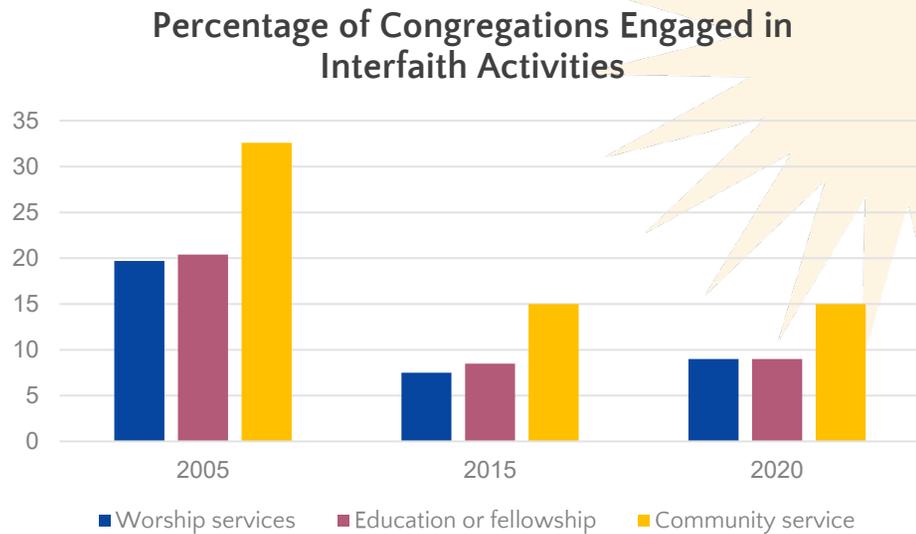
Of the three programmatic emphases asked about in both the 2000 and 2020 surveys, the percentage of congregations whose programs emphasize the following practices at all remained consistent.

	2000	2020
<b>Personal religious practices</b>	99.6	99
<b>Fasting</b>	74.1	73
<b>Observing holy days</b>	85.9	81

The 2020 survey also included other personal practices that a high proportion of congregations emphasized through their programming including:

- Parents talking with their children about their faith – 97%
- Talking about one’s faith with others – 98%
- Living out one’s faith daily – 99%
- Regular worship attendance – 99%

# Engagement with Other Faith Groups

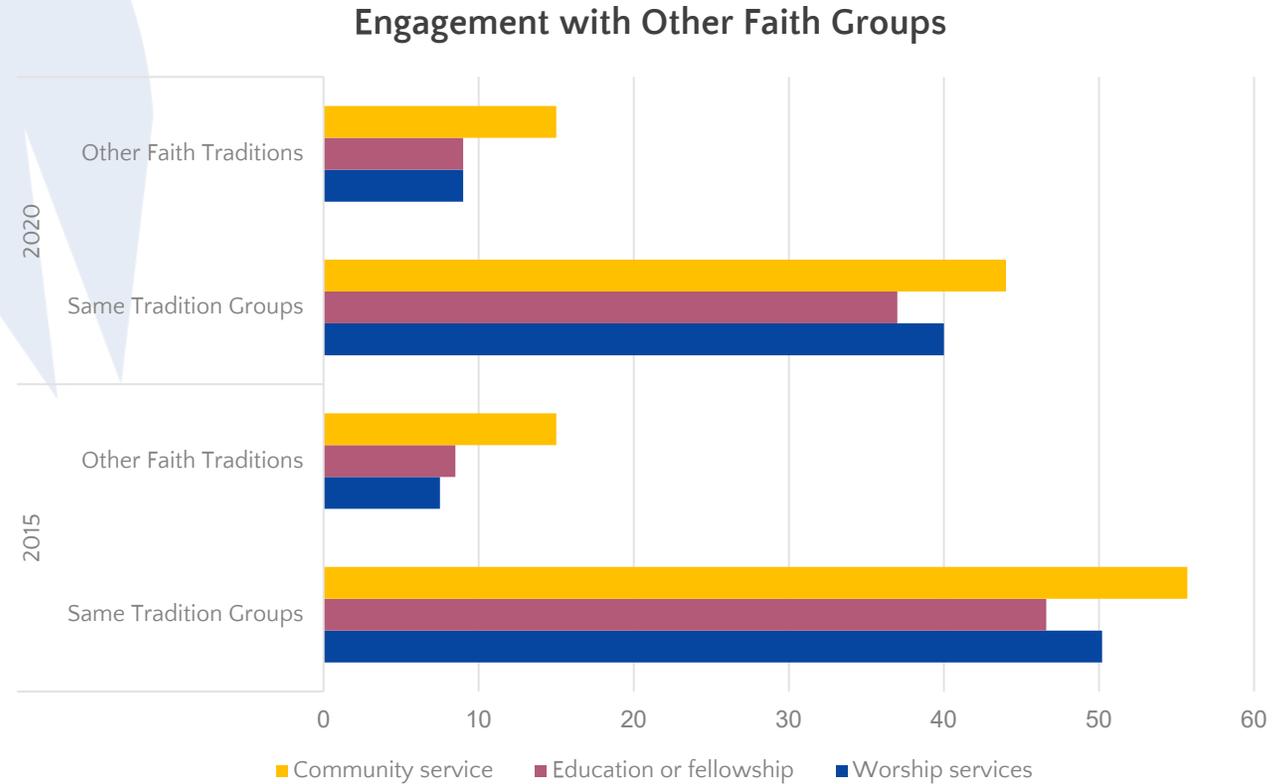


The percentage of congregations who participate in interfaith activities has decreased since 2005, particularly regarding interfaith community service activities.

Similarly, congregations participating in activities with other congregations in their same faith tradition decreased from 2015 to 2020.

# Engagement with Other Faith Groups: 2015 and 2020 Comparison

Although involvement with congregations in the same faith tradition decreased from 2015 to 2020, the level of this ecumenical involvement was still significantly higher than that of involvement with other faith groups.



# Engagement with Other Faith Groups: Congregation Size & Religious Family



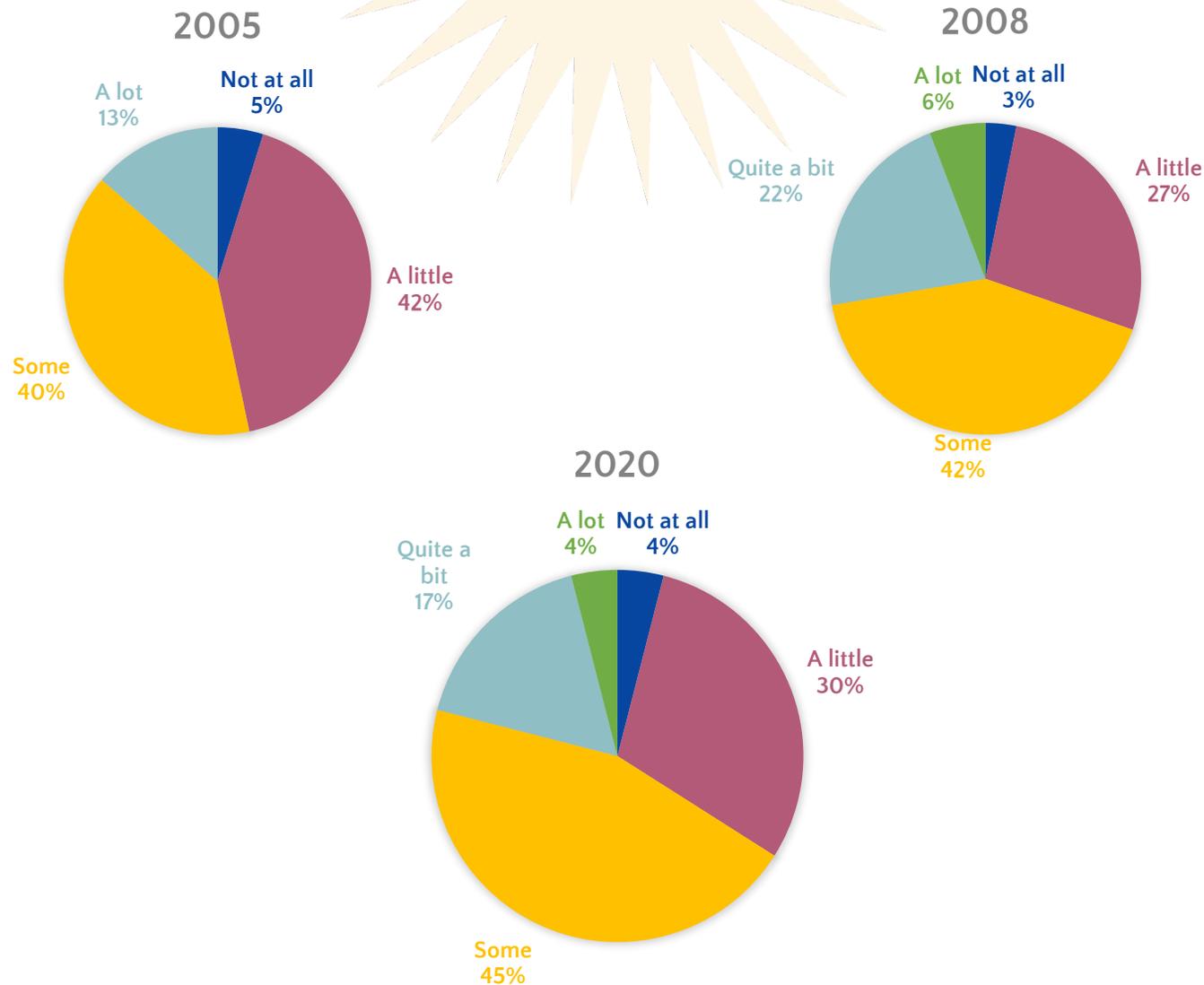
- Congregations with average weekly attendance of 101-500 were significantly less likely than either smaller or larger congregations to engage with other congregations. These mid-sized congregations were less likely to worship, engage in activities, and engage in community service with congregations of the same faith or those of different faiths.
- The religious family of a congregation also significantly impacted the level of engagement with other congregations in the following ways:
  - Evangelical congregations were less likely to engage with other Christian congregations and with congregations of other faiths in worship, activities, and community service.
  - Mainline congregations were most likely to engage in worship and community service with other Christian congregations, while non-Christian congregations were most likely to engage in worship and community service with congregations of other faiths.
  - Non-Christian congregations were more likely to engage in activities with Christian congregations and congregations of other faiths than Catholic and Orthodox churches.

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*Editor's Note: A subsequent report is forthcoming on interfaith engagement findings across twenty years of Faith Communities Today (FACT) surveys. Please keep an eye out for this topical publication in early 2023.*

# Outreach/Recruitment

Congregations were asked in 2005, 2008, and 2020 “to what extent are your congregation’s active participants involved in recruiting new people?” and the results are similar over the past 15 years with the majority of congregational members engaging in some level of recruitment.



# Summary

From 2000 to 2020, congregations have remained steady in the types of congregational programs offered, the emphasis of those programs, and the level of outreach/recruitment. However, congregations' level of engagement with other congregations decreased over two decades. These trends indicate that congregations are consistent in the programs they have offered but are collaborating with other congregations less and less to offer such programming. This trend is particularly striking among mid-sized congregations (101-500) who are most likely to emphasize adult religious education (even more so than larger congregations), but also least likely to engage with other congregations in worship, activities, and community service.

Faith leaders might, then, reflect upon how their congregation's programming has changed, or not, over the past 20 years and what changes were made during the COVID-19 pandemic. A report focusing on a pandemic congregational programming survey can be found at [Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations](#). What programmatic changes might be called for as the social context continues to change over the coming 20 years?

Further, faith leaders might explore possibilities of partnership and collaboration with other congregations in their communities to offer current or new and innovative congregational programming.