Faith Communities Today

INTERFAITH COMPARISONS AND COLLABORATIONS: A REVIEW OF FACT 2020 DATA

By Mike McMullen and Allison Norton

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 compares various faith traditions and summarizes interfaith cooperation of the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey. 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 US religious trends since 2000.

The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) national survey of congregations took place as the pandemic arrived in the United States. As such, 2/3rds of congregations responded to the survey before restrictions on public worship and other pandemic-related measures were put into effect; the other third responded in full lockdown mode but were asked to report pre-pandemic figures. As such, the data here reflects both responses collected immediately before the pandemic and those that emerged during the initial year.

This report compares various faith traditions and summarizes interfaith cooperation of the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey.

INTRODUCTION

This report highlights comparisons across religious families and paints a picture of the broader trends related to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation among congregations. America's religious landscape includes Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups, which have comprised a steady 4-6% of the population since the early 2000s.[1] Not surprisingly, Americans tend to view their own religious group positively, but how do they feel about other religious groups? Although Americans are generally expressing more positive than negative feelings toward their non-Christian neighbors, especially if they have a personal connection with someone from a religious tradition different from their own, a recent Pew Research Center report shows that Americans tend to have a more unfavorable than favorable view toward Muslims, Latter-day Saints, and Atheists.[2] Because congregations serve as key sites where contact and connection across faith groups occurs, this report explores interfaith collaborations and characteristics.

After more than two decades of Faith Communities Today research, non-Christian congregations are consistently the most likely to engage in interfaith cooperation, a trend that continues in 2020. They also report the highest levels of growth and are significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree that their congregations are spiritually vital and alive, have a clear mission and purpose, and are good at incorporating new people. These markers of vitality persist despite lower levels of per capita giving compared to their Christian counterparts.

[1] See both the PRRI "The American Religious Landscape in 2020" report (https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/) and the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study. (https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/).

[2] Pew Research Center, March 2023, "Americans Feel More Positive Than Negative About Jews, Mainline Protestants, Catholics."

RELIGIOUS FAMILY CATEGORIES

In this report, religious families and faith communities are compared. The major categories we use include Mainline Protestant (n=3053), Evangelical (n=10683), Catholic/Orthodox (n=791), and non-Christian (n=213). The non-Christian categories includes responses from Jewish (Reform and Conservative), Muslim, Baha'i Faith and other congregations. The statistics presented here are weighted to represent each group's proportion in the larger American religious landscape.

3,053
MAINLINE PROTESTANT

10,683
EVANGELICAL

791
CATHOLIC/ORTHODOX

213
NON-CHRISTIAN

The statistics presented here are weighted to represent each group's proportion in the larger American religious landscape.

CONGREGATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENTS

As you can see from the following data, different denominational families emphasize different aspects of religious life. When looking at how congregations assess their own strengths, all denominational families scored fairly high. However, compared to the other religious families, non-Christian congregations were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree that their congregations were spiritually vital and alive, had a clear mission and purpose, and were good at incorporating new people. These markers of congregational vitality in non-Christian congregations persist despite receiving lower levels of giving—just over 26% of non-Christian congregations reported $2,000 or more in annual per capita giving by regular participants, compared to 57% of Mainline, 41% of Evangelical, and 26% of Catholic/Orthodox congregations.

CONGREGATION THAT REPORTED $2,000 OR MORE IN ANNUAL PER CAPITA GIVING BY REGULAR PARTICIPANTS

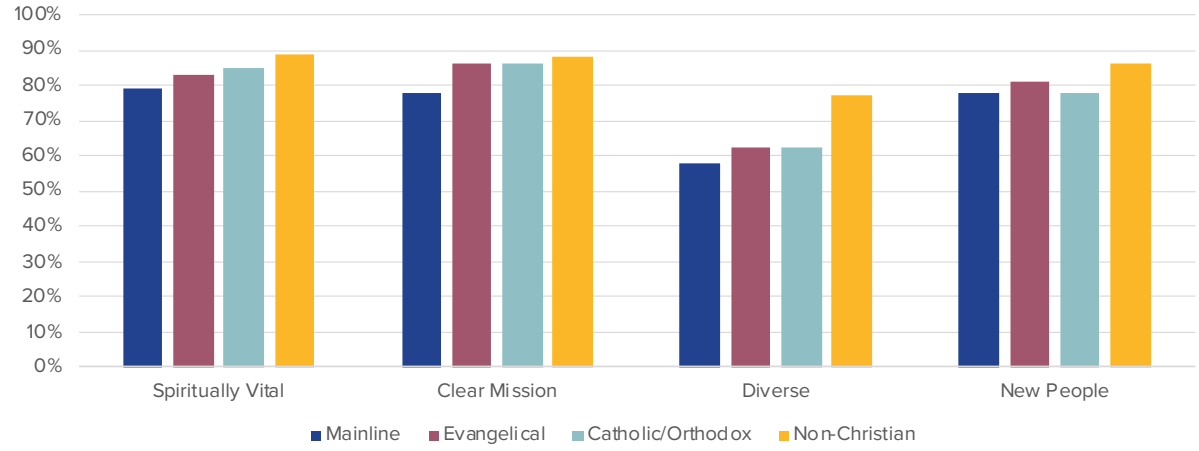
57%
MAINLINE

41%
EVANGELICAL

26%
CATHOLIC/ORTHODOX

26%
NON-CHRISTIAN

FIGURE 1: CONGREGATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENTS BY RELIGIOUS FAMILY: PERCENTAGE OF CONGREGATIONS THAT AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE THEY EXHIBIT THESE TRAITS



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

FACT research over the last 20 years has found that a congregation's assessment of their "spiritual vitality" is a good predictor of growth, member commitment, and social outreach (Bobbitt, 2018).[3] All groups had at least 80% of their congregations "agree" or "strongly agree" that they are "spiritually vital and alive" (see Fig. 1).

In response to the question "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Our congregation has a clear mission and purpose," most groups responded 85% or more with either "agree" or "strongly agree," with mainline churches slightly lower than the others at 78%. When asked "Is your congregation striving to be diverse (racially, ethnically, and/or socioeconomically)?", over 77% of non-Christian congregations indicated agreement or strong agreement, with the Mainline, Evangelical and Catholic/Orthodox churches indicating lower support (see Fig. 1).

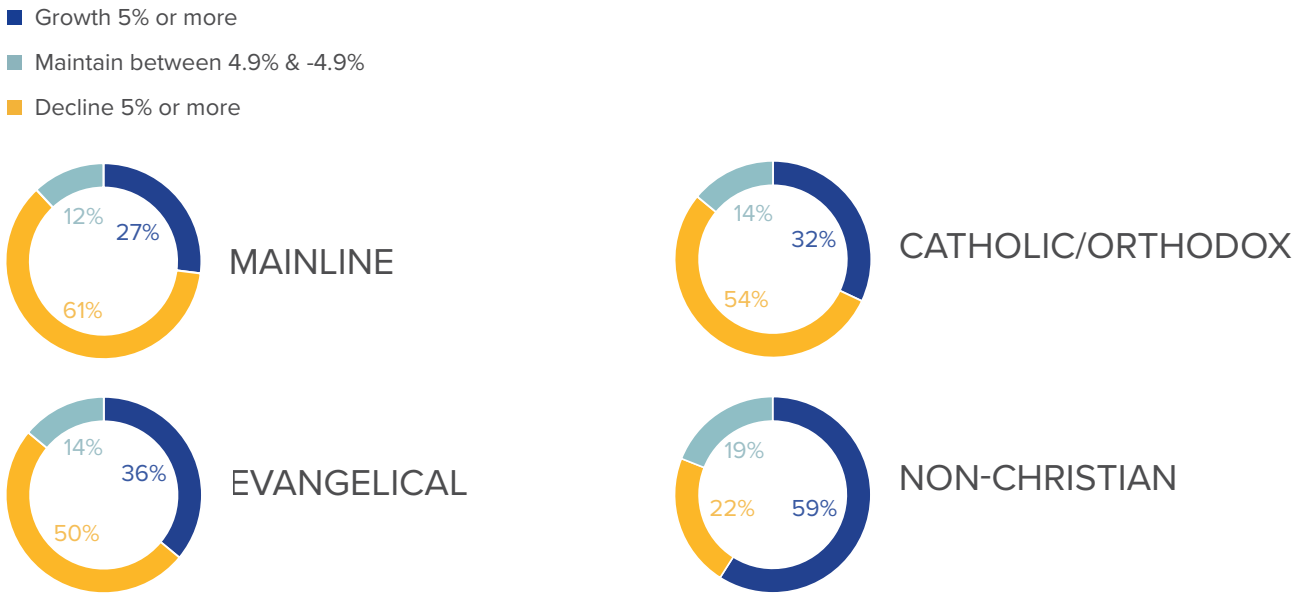
When asked "Is your congregation good at incorporating new people" into the life of the local community, at least 78% of all denominational groups "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with that statement (although non-Christians scored 86% and Evangelicals scored 81% agreeing that they were actively seeking new members—see Fig. 1).

CONGREGATIONAL GROWTH

Strikingly, the percentage of growing non-Christian congregations is far greater than those in decline (59% compared to 22%; see Fig. 2). The 5-year growth rate of non-Christian congregations is also much higher than Christian congregations. In part, this may be due to the relatively young age of non-Christian participants compared to their Christian counterparts. As the percentages of young and senior adults in attendance approaches the national norms, congregations are more likely to grow. Half of all non-Christian congregations reported matching the national average of senior attenders, compared to only 7.5% of Mainline congregations. Similarly, a higher percent of non-Christians congregations reported young adult attenders matching the national average (27%) compared to the Christian respondents—21% of Evangelical and only 7.7% of Mainline congregations are in this category.

[3] Bobbitt, Linda. 2018. "Vital Congregations." Faith Communities Today. https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FACT-Congregational-Vitality-Report-2018.pdf. Accessed 13 October 2021.

FIGURE 2: 5-YEAR GROWTH RATES BY RELIGIOUS FAMILY

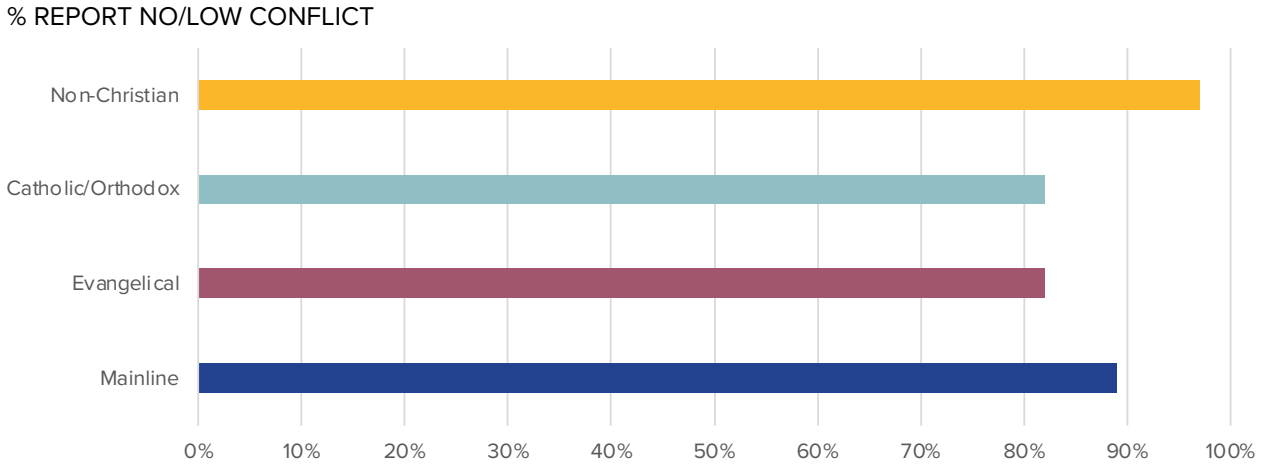


Source: Faith Communities Today 2020, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

The non-Christian congregations report lower levels of general conflict compared to the other religious families. 59% of non-Christian congregations report that they have no conflict and 97% report either “no” or “low “ levels of conflict in the congregation (Fig. 3).

FIGURE 3: LEVELS OF CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT BY RELIGIOUS FAMILY

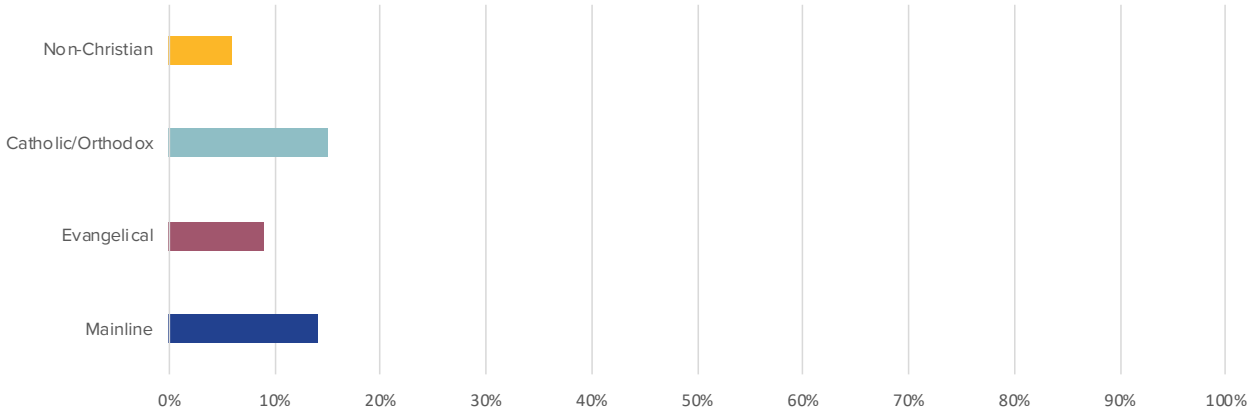


Source: Faith Communities Today 2020, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

When it comes to conflict specifically related to politics, none of the congregations report exceptionally high conflict. In response to the statement “This congregation has experienced recent conflict over political issues,” non-Christian congregations report the lowest levels of conflict related to politics (Fig. 4).

FIGURE 4: LEVELS OF POLITICAL CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT BY RELIGIOUS FAMILY

% AGREE TO RECENT POLITICAL CONFLICT



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

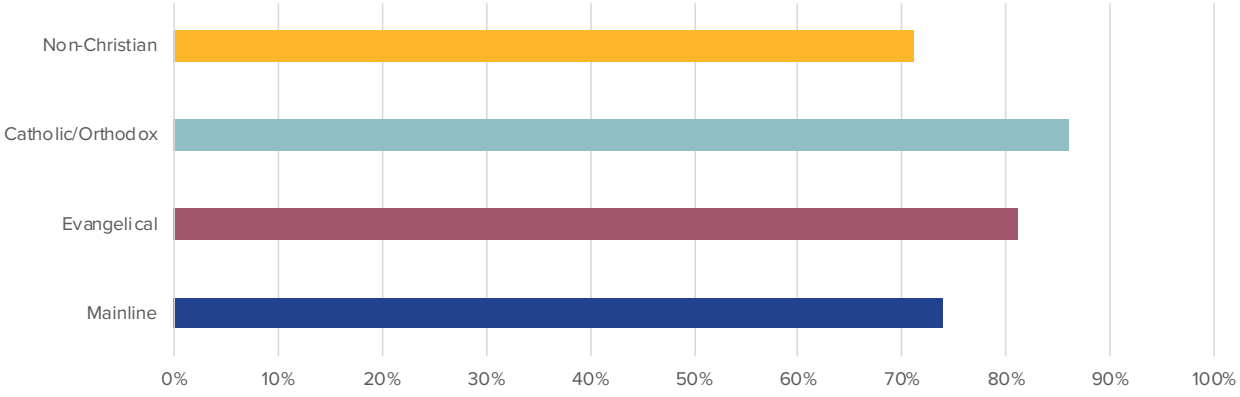
Overall, non-Christian congregations are less likely to report that their congregation is politically active; 78% strongly disagree that their congregation is politically active compared to about 20% of Mainline, Evangelical, and Catholic/Orthodox congregations. However, no religious family reports particularly high levels of political activity: no more than 25% of Mainline, Evangelical, or Catholic/Orthodox.

FAMILY PRACTICES AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Several FACT 2020 questions dealt with spiritual practices and theological education of congregational members. When asked “How much does your congregation emphasize personal and family religious practices such as prayer, meditation, scripture study or devotionals?”, over 85% of Catholic/Orthodox congregations said “quite a bit” or “a lot” (see Fig. 5). Both Mainline and non-Christian congregations scored somewhat less, in the low 70 percentage range.

FIGURE 5: PERSONAL/FAMILY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

% EMPHASIZE PERSON AND FAMILY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES SUCH AS PRAYER, MEDITATION, SCRIPTURE STUDY OR DEVOTIONALS

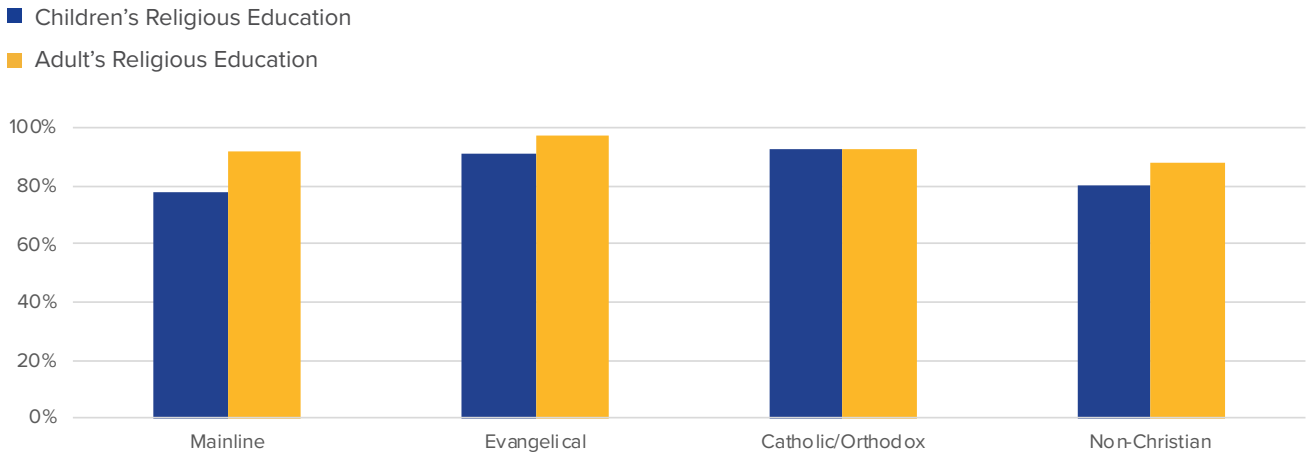


Source: Faith Communities Today 2020, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Both childhood education and adult education were emphasized by all faith traditions (see Fig. 6). Religious education for adults was valued by nearly 90% or more of congregations in each denominational family; Religious education for children was stressed by nearly 80% or more of congregations in each sub-group (surprisingly, slightly less than adult education).

FIGURE 6: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS

PERCENT THAT INDICATE SOME OR A LOT OF EMPHASIS ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS



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

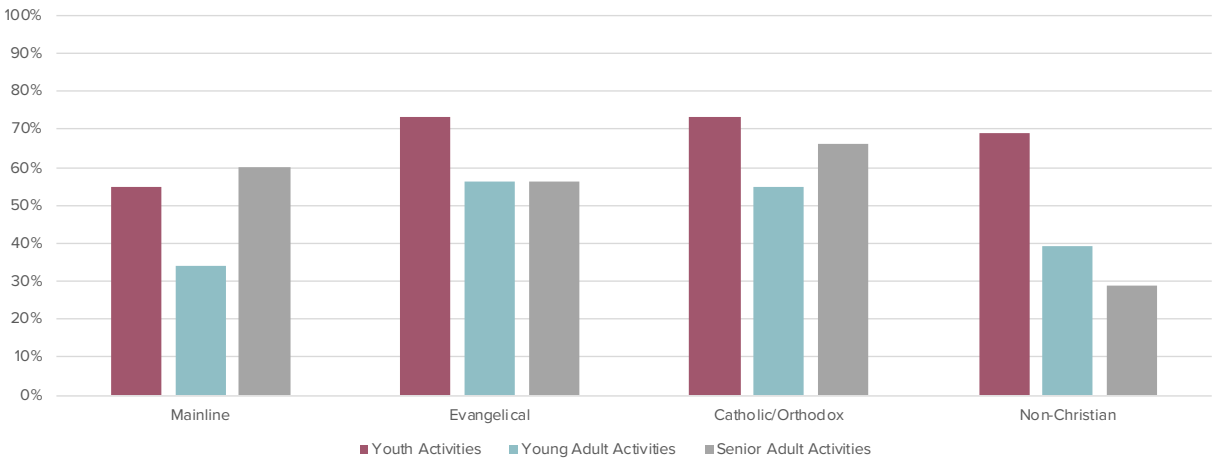
YOUTH AND SENIORS

When asked "Does your congregation have any youth activities or programs (ages 13-17)?", only 55% of Mainline churches gave "some" or "a lot" of emphasis on youth programing (see Fig. 7). This is perhaps explained by the lower percentage of youth and young adults present in Mainline congregations, which include a higher proportion of participants over the age of 65. The other denominational families ranked between 69-73%. There was even less stress placed upon young adult (ages 18-34) activities or programs: Just over one-third of Mainline and non-Christian groups give "some" or "a lot" of emphasis to this membership group, while over half of Evangelicals and Catholic/Orthodox do so. It is likely that non-Christians groups vary considerably across the religious traditions (Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i Faith) on emphasizing activities for young adults. According to data from the 2020 Survey of Reform and Conservative Synagogues report, only 8% of synagogues surveyed

placed “a lot” of emphasis on young adults, perhaps because synagogues are often located in affluent suburbs or historically Jewish neighborhoods with aging populations and thus are not likely to have high levels of young adult residents. In comparison, data from the US Mosque Survey 2020 report shows that mosques report higher levels of young adult attenders compared with Christian congregations and are more likely to place higher emphasis on young adult activities: Twenty-four percent of mosque attenders are ages 18-34 compared to only 11% of attendees in Christian congregations.[4] Finally, with the growing number of baby-boomers aging into senior status (65 years or older), at least half of all denominational groups (except non-Christian congregations at 29%) give “some” or “a lot” of emphasis to programs and activities for seniors. This may be due to the younger average age for the higher proportion of immigrant members of non-Christian traditions.

FIGURE 7: ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS, AND SENIORS

% EMPHASIZE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS, AND SENIOR ADULTS.



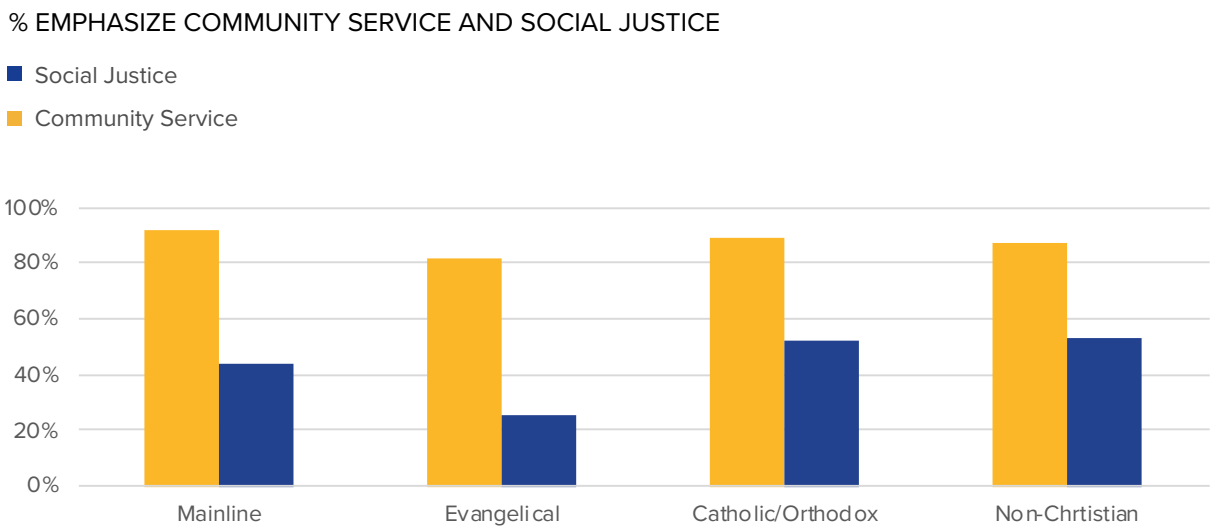
Source: Faith Communities Today 2020, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

COMMUNITY SERVICE

FACT 2020 also asked several questions about community service. All denominational families indicate a high level of engagement in community service (see Fig. 8). When asked “how much emphasis your congregation gives to community service activities,” at least 82% of all groups indicated “some” or “a lot” of emphasis to community service, with Mainline churches indicating 92% level of support. When asked about level of emphasis for social justice/ advocacy groups, non-Christian and Catholic/Orthodox respondents indicated the highest level of support at about 53% saying they gave “some” or “a lot” of emphasis. Evangelical denominations showed the lowest level of support for social justice advocacy at 25%.

[4] See the Synagogue and Mosque reports here: https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/partner-reports-2020/

FIGURE 8: COMMUNITY SERVICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE GROUPS



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

LEVELS OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION

FACT 2020 asked several questions that explicitly asked about ecumenical (relations within a faith tradition; e.g., between denominations within Christianity) and interfaith activities (relations between faith traditions; e.g., between Christians and Muslims) with other denominations or religious faith traditions. We asked about worship with other groups, educational or social activities with other groups, and finally jointly conducted community service projects. This report looks explicitly at interfaith cooperation among FACT 2020 participating congregations. This means that churches, temples, synagogues and mosques engaged in shared worship, educational, social and service activities with houses of worship outside their faith tradition. FACT 2020 participating congregations displayed an increased emphasis on diversity, and analysis shows a positive statistical association between a congregation's embrace of diversity and greater interreligious engagement.

FACT 2020 asked respondents "During the past 12 months, has your congregation been involved in any worship services with other faith traditions?" As seen below in Fig. 9, about 1 in 5 houses of worship in our sample worshiped across faith tradition boundaries in the past year. However, there was considerable differences between denominational families: Evangelical churches are the least likely to worship with other faith traditions (just over 14%), while over half (54%) of non-Christian respondents indicated that they had been engaged in interfaith worship.

The approximately 20% of all congregations that engaged in interfaith worship in 2020 was down slightly from 22% of congregations that indicated this kind of interfaith cooperation in the FACT 2005 survey (as the first survey taken after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US), but still up from the 7% recorded in the initial FACT 2000 survey.

FIGURE 9: WORSHIP WITH OTHER FAITHS

INVOLVED IN INTERRELIGIOUS WORSHIP SERVICES

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

Next, respondents were asked “During the past 12 months, has your congregation been involved in educational or social activities with other faith traditions?” Similar to interfaith worship, the overall likelihood of congregations engaging in interfaith education or social activities is 1 in 5 (the same probability of engaging in interfaith worship). As seen in Fig. 10, again, non-Christian houses of worship are most likely to engage in educational or social activities outside of their tradition—nearly 71% indicated this type of interfaith cooperation in the past year. Also again at the other end of the spectrum are Evangelical churches which engage in interfaith activities at only about 15%. Almost 1 in 3 Mainline churches are engaged in interfaith education or social activities, while over 4 in 10 of Catholic and Orthodox churches do so.

FIGURE 10: EDUCATIONAL / SOCIAL ACTIVITIES WITH OTHER FAITHS

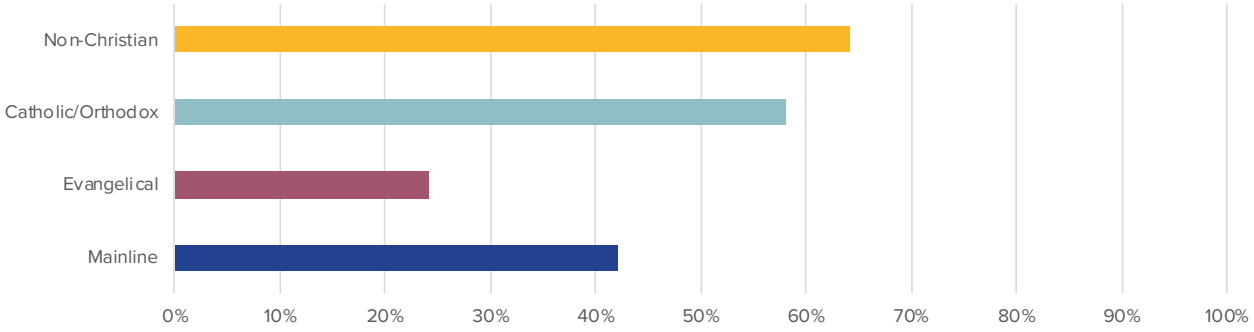
INVOLVED IN INTERRELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL OR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

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

Finally, the FACT 2020 survey asked respondents "During the past 12 months, has your congregation been involved with community service activities with other faith traditions?" Looking at Fig. 11 below, we see a significantly higher level of interfaith cooperation when it comes to community service compared to interfaith worship or education/social activities. Nearly 30% of American religious congregations participate with houses of worship outside their faith tradition in community service activities (which can include clothing drives, food pantries, or immigrant services, for example). More than double this percentage (nearly 64%) of non-Christian houses of worship engage in this type of interfaith cooperation, while nearly 60% of Catholic and Orthodox churches do, 42% of Mainline churches, and nearly 1 in 4 Evangelical churches do so.

FIGURE 11: COMMUNITY SERVICE WITH OTHER FAITHS

INVOLVED IN INTERRELIGIOUS COMMUNITY SERVICE

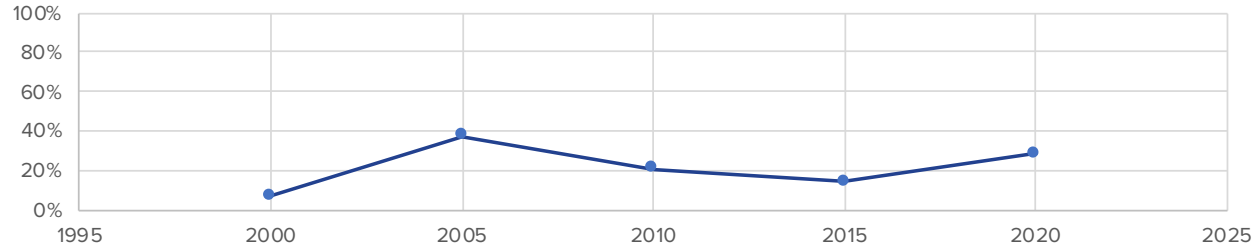


Source: Faith Communities Today 2020, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

The almost 30% of congregations that engaged in interfaith community service in the last year as of 2020 was down somewhat from 38% of congregations that indicated this kind of interfaith cooperation in the FACT 2005 survey (as the first survey taken after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US), but still up from the 8% recorded in the initial FACT 2000 survey (Fig. 12).

FIGURE 12: COMMUNITY SERVICE WITH OTHER FAITHS OVER TIME

% OF CONGREGATIONS WITH INTERFAITH COMMUNITY SERVICE



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

A striking pattern the FACT 2020 data discussed above show is that non-Christian congregations are the ones that are most likely to engage in interfaith cooperation. This may be because non-Christian traditions are relatively small and less numerous in the US religious landscape, and thus when seeking community partners, non-Christians of necessity must look beyond their faith tradition boundaries. Mainline and Catholic/Orthodox churches also show robust levels of interfaith collaboration, but not nearly at the levels seen by non-Christians. Consistently at the lowest level of interfaith partnerships among the FACT denominational families were Evangelical churches. This trend is mirrored in the FACT 2000 and FACT 2010 surveys as well.

CONCLUSION

One highlight of this research is the increased overall interfaith cooperation found in the analysis of FACT data from 2000 to 2020. Interfaith worship increased from 7% to 20% among houses of worship, and interfaith community service increased from 8% to 30%. In other words, that means that 1 in 5 churches/temples/synagogues/mosques have members who worshiped with those of another faith tradition in the last year; and nearly 1 in 3 houses of worship have members who worked side-by-side with members of other faith traditions to support community service in neighborhoods throughout the nation. This is not surprising since the US has become more racially and ethnically diverse in the last 60 years prompted by changes in immigration laws in 1965.[5] There has not only been an increase in the number of Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, Sikhs and Hindus in the US; but it has also diversified Christianity to include Korean Presbyterians, Vietnamese and Filipino and Honduran Catholics, and Nigerian or Central American Pentecostals.

But as the pluralistic American landscape has fostered more interfaith cooperation, there also has been an ugly backlash. Some segments of American society have become less tolerant of this interfaith reality. A recent Pew Research Center study showed that between 2007 and 2020, there was a 64% increase in the Muslim population in the US (and FACT data show a 129% increase in the number of mosques), but this was coupled by a 9% increase, to nearly half, of American Muslims who report encountering discrimination (so-called "islamophobia") because of their religion.[6] In addition, the Anti-Defamation League reported that in 2022, there was the highest reported number of antisemitic incidences in the US (defined as harassment, vandalism, and assault) since the ADL began tracking antisemitic activity in 1979. Incidences were reported in all 50 states, and is a 36% increase over 2021. This is the third time in the past 5 years that the year-end total (3697 in 2022) has been the highest number ever recoded.[7]

Despite these setbacks, the tripling or more of interfaith cooperation found in FACT longitudinal research is significant. The non-Christian diversity in the American religious landscape continues to grow. And non-Christian faith traditions display the highest (or near highest) levels of various indicators of dynamic congregations: spiritual vitality, incorporation of new believers and promoting diversity, diversity growth rates, religious education and youth activities, lack of conflict, emphasis on community service and social justice, and participation in interfaith worship and educational/social activities. This indicates they are more and more fully participating in the congregational model of American religion in civil society.[8]

For previous interfaith reports produced from the FACT surveys in 2010 and 2000, see these links:
https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-reports-2010/
https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-reports-2000/

[5] See Stephen L. Klineberg and Amy Hertz. 2020. Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America. New York: Avid Reader Press.
[6] Pew Research Center, September 2021, "Muslims Are a Growing Presence in US, But Still Face Negative Views From the Public."
[7] Anti-Defamation League, March 2023, "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2022."
[8] See Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell. 2010. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

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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 International University'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 engaged in two large national studies. We encourage active participation from any religious group in the U.S. Please contact us at FACT@hartfordinternational.edu if interested in participating in this research.

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