

Jim's Tool Box

A Decade of Change in American Congregations

In this column two months ago, I shared membership and attendance statistics for congregations in Capitol Area South District for the decade of 2000-2010. Click [HERE](#) to read that article.

Last month I saw a news release about a recently released study from Faith Communities Today. This organization conducts congregational surveys on faith communities in the United States. It is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. The Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research hosts this partnership. Click [HERE](#) to check out the project's website.

The study is "A Decade of Change in American Congregations," and it represents a ten-year longitudinal study of trends in American congregations. I encourage you to download a copy of the study and read through it. It develops several themes about life in American congregations during the first decade of the twenty-first century. (Click [HERE](#) to download a copy of the study.)

Here is a summary of the main findings from the first page of the report:

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

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

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

It also gave witness to:

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

But the decade also saw:

- ✓ *A steep drop in financial health*

- ✓ *Continuing high levels of conflict*
- ✓ *Aging memberships*

The net, overall result:

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

Here are some questions that arise for me when I look at these trends:

- ✓ With which of these trends do you identify with your congregation?
- ✓ As you think back over the last decade (if you have been in your church that long) what has changed most in your church since the year 2000?
- ✓ Is your congregation in a better place:
 - Spiritually?
 - Financially?
 - In terms of the church's mission?
 - In the use of technology?

The author of this study refers to mainline congregations in his report as “oldline” congregations. Is that an appropriate word to describe your congregation? Here are four points that the author of the study made concerning findings about the aging of American congregations:

1. Racial/ethnic congregations have significantly higher proportions of young adults among their participants than do white congregations. This, coupled with the likely continued surge in immigration, assures they will become an ever increasing piece of the American congregational story throughout the foreseeable future.
2. Among historically white denominations the membership of the typical Oldline Protestant congregation is much, much older than that of white, Evangelical Protestant congregations. Indeed, a third or more of the membership in over half (52.7%) of Oldline Protestant congregations consists of seniors (65 years old or older). Less than a quarter (22.9%) of white, Evangelical congregations have such a senior skew to their membership profile.
3. Seventy-five percent of Oldline Protestant congregations said that less than 10% of their regular participants were young adults (18-34 years old). The figure drops to 45% for white, Evangelical congregations, which is nearly identical for racial/ethnic congregations. Public opinion polls tell us that young adult involvement in just about any type of organized religion has trended downward over the past decade or so. The situation appears to have reached critical dimensions for Oldline Protestantism. Even in the new suburbs more than 60% of Oldline Protestant congregations report having fewer than 10% young adults among their regular participants.

4. Aging congregations lose some of their capacity for change. (Previously in the report the author notes) that congregational vitality is closely connected with innovation and change – which makes sense in a world changing as rapidly as ours.

So the challenge remains for many of the congregations in the CAS District, the West Ohio Conference, and the United Methodist Church nationally to offer settings for worship, fellowship, and service opportunities that are inviting to those persons in the 18-34 age range. How is your congregation seeking to adapt to the changing culture in which we find ourselves today? How will you “rethink” church in ways that opens doors to young adults who are seeking to find the way in their own spiritual journey in these days?

As the study notes, the ability to innovate and adapt are significant factors in a congregation’s ability to make the necessary changes in worship, use of technology, and patterns of fellowship and nurture that will invite new generations into a relationship with Jesus Christ.