

# Congregations becoming more diverse

by [David Briggs](#) in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue

America's pews are becoming dramatically more welcoming to gays and lesbians, and they increasingly reflect the nation's racial and ethnic diversity, according to the latest results from a major study of U.S. congregations.

Nearly three in ten U.S. congregations permit gays and lesbians in committed relationships to hold volunteer leadership positions, up from 19 percent of congregations that allowed such opportunities in 2006–2007, the National Congregations Study found.

At the same time, it has become much less likely, even rare, to find a religious community where worshipers can expect to be surrounded by a sea of white faces. The percentage of U.S. congregations with only non-Hispanic whites declined from 20 percent in 1998 to 11 percent in 2012, the study found.

The National Congregations Study, which also was conducted in 1998 and 2006–2007 in 2,740 congregations, gathered information from a nationally representative sample of 1,331 congregations for the 2012 study.

Duke University sociologist Mark Chaves, director of the study, presented some initial findings at the joint meeting November 8–10 of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association in Boston. Additional findings are expected to be released later this year. Chaves holds a joint appointment at Duke Divinity School and in the university's sociology and religion departments.

Religious communities are undergoing significant changes in many areas, the 2012 study shows. These range from the embrace of new technology—40 percent of congregations in the latest study reported having Facebook pages, for example—to the growing acceptance of informal worship. Drums, applause and people jumping, shouting or dancing are becoming more common in services.

There is also an increasingly independent streak: a quarter of congregations in the latest study are not affiliated with a national denomination.

Some of the most significant differences showed up in the rising diversity in religious communities, where conversations about subjects from immigration reform to racial and sexual equality may be tempered and informed by less homogenous memberships.

“Diversity is increasing even in our everyday lives,” Chaves said. “I think it’s good news.”

- **Out front:** Twenty-seven percent of congregations in the 2012 study allowed gays and lesbians in committed relationships to hold volunteer leadership positions, up from 19 percent in the 2006–2007 study.

- **Membership barriers falling:** Nearly half, or 48 percent, of congregations in 2012 reported that gays and lesbians in committed relationships may become full-fledged members; in the 2006–2007 study, 38 percent of congregations allowed such membership privileges.

- **Increased visibility:** Seventeen percent of congregations reported having openly gay and lesbian worshipers. Because those congregations are relatively large ones, 31 percent of people in all congregations are part of communities with gays and lesbians who are open about their orientation.

A perception may persist that religion and gay rights are on opposite sides, but the evidence increasingly suggests a more complex relationship. “It’s not right to think of religion in an organized way . . . as being only on the conservative side of the gay-rights issue,” Chaves said.

Religious communities also appear to be growing more like the nation, where non-Hispanic whites are expected to lose their majority status by the end of the decade, the congregations study found.

In 1998, nearly three-quarters of congregations had memberships where more than 80 percent of participants were non-Hispanic whites. That percentage dropped to 66 percent in 2006–2007 and fell again to 57 percent in 2012. And 44 percent of U.S. congregations have at least some black families, the latest study found.

Some research has indicated that a more diverse membership shows an increased sensitivity to different perspectives and a reduced tendency to be judgmental of racial and ethnic groups outside the social boundaries of the community.

Chaves said he suspects that a pastor thinks twice about what he or she says about race or ethnicity from the pulpit if the congregation is diverse. "I think it changes a lot of things if you have one black family in a congregation," he said. —thearda.com

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