Congregational snapshot: Four church trends

by Mark Chaves in the April 7, 2009 issue

Probably every churchgoer can say how his or her church is changing or has changed. It is much more difficult to know whether the experience of any particular congregation fits into a larger pattern. We need a bird's-eye view to answer such questions.

The National Congregations Study (NCS), which draws on a nationally representative sample of religious congregations from across the religious spectrum, provides that view. The survey, which I direct, was first conducted in 1998, with 1,234 participating congregations, and it was fielded again in 2006-2007, this time with 1,506 congregations taking part. The survey's data offer a way to systematically track changes in American religion.

Perhaps the most surprising discovery from the latest survey is that there was significant change in several areas; eight or nine years is not all that long, especially for religious institutions, which often are thought to be tradition-bound and resistant to change of all sorts. But some things clearly have changed in that time.

Four trends stand out: congregations now use more computer technology, worship is more informal, clergy are older and, perhaps most important, congregations are more ethnically diverse.

More technology: Of everything that we measured in both waves of the NCS, congregations' use of computer technology had changed most. The number of congregations with Web sites increased from 17 percent in 1998 to 44 percent in 2006-2007. The number using e-mail to communicate with members increased from 21 percent to 59 percent. And the number using visual projection equipment in their main worship service increased from 12 percent to 27 percent. These very large increases imply that each year since 1998 another 10,000 congregations created a Web site. Seventy-four percent of attendees are now in congregations having Web sites, 79 percent are in congregations that communicate with members via e-mail,

and 32 percent are in congregations that use visual projection equipment in their worship.

Congregations across the social and religious spectrum are more and more embracing these technologies, but at uneven rates. When it comes to using e-mail and Web sites—but not PowerPoint slides in worship—congregations associated with more liberal Protestant denominations, along with synagogues, lead the way, and black churches lag behind. There is a digital divide within the religious world.

Perhaps it is not surprising that congregations, like everyone else, have embraced these new technologies only if they can afford them. But there is much we do not know about the consequences of all this. Is congregations' increasing cyber visibility changing the way people look for, assess and choose a congregation? How do congregations decide what to emphasize about themselves on their Web sites? Since Web sites make congregations more visible to each other as well as to prospective members, will clergy and lay leaders monitor and influence each other more than before? Will there be even faster and more widespread mimicking of successful congregations?

Creating and maintaining a Web site requires volunteer or staff time, as well as money. How does the rise in the use of technology affect time and money allocations within congregations? Is computer technology increasing the cost of running a congregation? Regarding use of e-mail to communicate with members, one big question is whether congregations can avoid creating a digital divide within their own communities between those who use and those who don't use e-mail.

There is little doubt that congregations will continue to embrace information technology. The important question is whether use of technology will make churches more efficient and effective, and whether such use will impose new costs without providing clear benefits.

More informal worship: Worship services are more informal than they were even a few years ago. That is, more services contain such elements as drum playing; jumping, shouting or dancing; raising hands in praise; calling out Amen; use of visual projection equipment; applause; and testimony by people other than leaders. Fewer services now include choirs or follow a written order of service distributed to congregants. (In the 1998 survey we didn't ask about how the worship leader dressed, but in 2006-2007 that person wore a robe or other special garments in only

one-third of American congregations.)

This trend toward informality is not occurring at the same pace and in the same way within every religious group. Most of the increasing informality in worship is to be found among Protestants. Catholic churches show increased informality only in their use of visual projection equipment and drums. The increase in jumping, shouting and dancing is concentrated among black churches.

The changes are not dramatic, but the trend is real. How far will American religion move in the direction of informality before leveling off? Will we see a reaction that pushes worship back in a more formal direction? These are open questions.

Why this trend toward informality is happening also is an open question. A likely possibility is that congregations are partaking of a broader trend in American culture. People dress more informally than they used to at work and at social events as well as at worship services. When talking with each other, even with people we do not know well, we are less likely to use titles and more likely to use first names or even nicknames. Perhaps increased informality in worship also reflects a long-term trend in American religion away from an emphasis on belief and doctrine and toward an emphasis on experience and emotion.

Older clergy: Congregational leaders—meaning head clergy in multistaff congregations, sole clergy in single-staff congregations, or the person named as the religious leader in congregations without a clergyperson—are older, on average, than they were in 1998. The median age of head clergy in American congregations was 49 in 1998; today it’s 53. And the percent of people in congregations led by someone 50 or younger declined from 48 percent in 1998 to 39 percent today. This aging factor reflects a large change in only nine years. By way of comparison, the average age of the American public (limiting attention only to the over-25 population) has increased by only one year since 1998, from 47.5 to 48.5.

The aging of clergy is happening across the religious spectrum, though it is coming about faster for Catholic and liberal and mainline Protestant congregations than for others. The average age of head clergy in liberal or mainline congregations increased six years since 1998, from 49 to 55; among clergy in predominantly African-American congregations, the median age increased by only two years. It appears that the increasing number of second-career clergy and the simultaneous decline in the number of people going to seminary immediately after college are

producing a rather rapidly aging American pastorate.

More ethnic diversity: Congregations have become more ethnically and racially diverse since 1998. This does not mean there is a significant increase in what we might call deeply diverse congregations—congregations that have, say, roughly equal numbers of blacks and whites, or a relatively equal mix of black, whites and Asians, or even a sizable proportion of African Americans or Latinos in a predominantly non-Latino, white congregation. But what we do see is a significant increase in the presence of some minorities in predominantly white congregations. Of congregations that are at least 90 percent white, 36 percent of them now have some African-American attendees (up from 27 percent in 1998), 32 percent now have at least some Latinos (up from 24 percent) and 20 percent now have some Asians (up from 17 percent). A majority of those who attend predominantly white congregations now attend churches with at least some African Americans and Hispanics in the pews.

To say this another way, fewer congregations are still 100 percent white and non-Hispanic. In 1998, 20 percent of attendees were in congregations that were completely white and non-Hispanic; in 2006-2007, 14 percent were. This increased diversity is driven partly by recent immigration, but the fact that predominantly white congregations also are more likely to have some African-American members suggests that immigration is not the whole story.

Catholic churches are substantially more likely than Protestant churches to have some minority presence even when they are predominantly white, but the jump in minority presence has occurred in Protestant as well as Catholic churches. Interestingly, there is no corresponding trend within predominantly black churches; those churches are no more likely to have some whites, Latinos or Asians today than they were in 1998.

It certainly is too soon to discard the old saw that 11 a.m. Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. The vast majority of American congregations remain overwhelmingly white, black, Hispanic or Asian—but there has also been noticeable progress. Congregations still are far from being groups in which skin color and nationality are invisible, but there has been some change in a positive direction. The rise in minority presence in predominantly white congregations represents some progress, however small, in a society in which ethnicity and especially race still divide us.

Sociologists and others have paid a lot of attention recently to multicultural churches. Almost all of this attention, however, has focused on deeply diverse congregations—those congregations with more than a smattering of minority presence. There has been no increase since 1998 in this sort of congregation, and perhaps our understandable fascination with these rare congregations has led us to overlook the places where change is happening.

Now that this trend is apparent, we should be asking whether even a few African Americans, Hispanics or Asians in a predominantly white congregation might affect its life in important ways. John Green, a professor at the University of Akron and one of the nation's leading experts on religion and politics, has said that congregations are easier to politicize when they are more homogeneous. Are clergypersons whose congregations include even one black family in the pews likely to talk in quite the same way about race and social issues as they would if that family were not present? Is the congregation with even one Latino family likely to approach immigration reform in quite the same way? How this increasing pluralism might be changing congregations is a subject worthy of additional research and reflection.

These four trends stand out in part because in many respects today's congregations look much like they did in 1998. Some of this continuity may be surprising. Even though the number of mega churches continues to increase—and even though the trend toward an increasing concentration of people in the largest churches continues as well—the median congregation is the same size today that it was in 1998 (75-80 regular participants), and the median person attends a congregation that is the same size today that it was in 1998 (400 regular participants). Even though conflicts within American religion are tearing some denominations apart, the overall conflict level of congregations is about what it was in 1998, with 26 percent of them experiencing a conflict in the past two years that led some people to withdraw their membership. (Interestingly, only 2 percent of congregations re ported a conflict over homosexuality.)

Even though both major political parties continue their efforts to mobilize congregations, in 2006-2007 churches reported the same levels of political involvement that they reported in 1998 (with one exception: participation in voter registration efforts increased). And even after the Bush administration's faith-based initiative, there has been no increase since 1998 in congregations' involvement in social services, receipt of public funds for their social service work, or collaborations with government.