

Report says trends for U.S. churches mostly pointing down

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(RNS) American congregations have grown less healthy in the last decade, with fewer people in the pews and aging memberships, according to a new Hartford Seminary study.

But there are also "pockets of vitality," including an increase in minority congregations and a surge in election-related activities at evangelical congregations.

The findings coming from the new Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey are based on responses from more than 11,000 Christian, Jewish and Muslim congregations in 2010 and more than 14,000 congregations in 2000.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the median worship attendance at a typical congregation decreased, from 130 to 108.

"It means we have a lot more smaller congregations," said David Roozen, author of the report, "A Decade of Change in American Congregations, 2000-2010," and director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

The percentage of congregations with average weekend worship attendance of 100 or fewer inched up from 42 percent to 49 percent over

the decade. More than a quarter of congregations had 50 or fewer people attending in 2010.

Across the board -- among white evangelical, white mainline and racial/ethnic congregations -- there was a decrease in attendance.

While the number of megachurches almost doubled over the decade, congregations with 2,000 or more weekly attendees make up just 0.5 percent of all congregations.

"There are more megachurches but, in fact, they're getting an increasing piece of an overall shrinking pie," Roozen told the Religion Newswriters Association annual conference in Durham, N.C., where he released the findings.

In many cases, congregations are seeing not only fewer people but older ones in their pews. At least one-third of members in more than half of mainline Protestant congregations are 65 or older.

The pews have gotten so gray in mainline Protestant churches, he said, that "oldline" is now probably a better descriptor.

"Half of oldline Protestant congregations could lose a third of their members in 15 years," he said. "And that's about triple the rate for any other religious family."

In the meantime, Roozen said, the racial/ethnic makeup of congregations is reflecting the U.S. Census Bureau's prediction that minorities will constitute the majority of Americans by 2050.

The percentage of congregations with majorities of members from racial/ethnic groups, often including immigrants, grew from 23 percent to 30 percent over the decade. These congregations are disproportionately non-Christian or evangelical Protestant. They also tend to have younger members.

While black congregations' involvement in voter education and registration programs has remained high -- 55 percent in 2010 -- researchers found significant changes in evangelical and mainline Protestant churches.

Evangelical churches involved in voter programs grew from 20 percent to 26 percent, while mainline congregations' participation dropped from 16 percent to 12 percent. Half of non-black, evangelical Protestant congregations with more than 450 weekly attendees are involved in election-related programs.

In other findings:

-- More than 40 percent of congregations now use electric guitars or drums often or always in worship, up from 29 percent in 2000.

-- One in five congregations that started since 2000 began in new suburbs.

-- Eight in 10 congregations said the recent recession had a negative effect on their finances.