

More drums, fewer choirs in worship, national study of congregations shows

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

U.S. religious congregations are marching to their own drums now more than ever.

More congregations have drums in worship—along with hand waving, amen shouting, and dancing in the aisles—according to one of the findings of the latest National Congregations Study.

The study, released in September, draws on interviews with leaders at 1,331 churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples and updates data from 1998 and 2006 studies. Non-Christian congregations were included in the study but are too few for statistical analysis by topics. The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points for most findings.

In 2012, 11 percent of congregations had an all-white membership, down from 20 percent in 1998. Behind the change are factors such as upward mobility among African Americans, increasing rates of interracial marriage, and immigration, said Mark Chaves, the Duke University sociology professor who directed the study.

“On the ground, this means there are more white congregations with a smattering of minorities,” he said. “However, the percent of mainly black churches with some white people is not increasing.”

In an upcoming issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Chaves wrote that 86 percent of U.S. congregations “remain overwhelmingly” made up of one racial or ethnic group.

The NCS also finds that nearly one in four congregations—or 23 percent—described themselves as nondenominational, up from 18 percent in 1998.

Another part of the NCS study showed that congregations that “permit full-fledged membership for openly gay or lesbian couples in a committed relationship” climbed to 48 percent in 2012, up from 37 percent in 2006. The number of congregations allowing gay people in leadership roles also rose, from 18 percent to 26 percent.

Look in the aisles for changes in the way people worship. More people now attend congregations where drums are played during the main service—up to 46 percent in 2012 from 25 percent in 1998.

Eighty percent of people attending black Protestant congregations reported that people jump, shout, or dance during the main service, up from 66 percent in 1998.

Although more people attend services where worshipers raise their hands during the main service (59 percent in 2012, up from 48 percent in 1998), all the increase was among Protestants, conservative or liberal.

Chaves speculates that in such worship there's "more emphasis on generating a kind of religious experience as opposed to teaching religious knowledge or doctrine."

Marcia McFee, a worship consultant and speaker who works with mainline churches on enhancing their services with light, sound, and motion, said, "For some, it doesn't feel like a spiritual pursuit unless they're engaged by dancing or drumming or raising a hand or absorbed in rich visuals," McFee said. The Christian message should be a "deeply rich sensory experience," so people "can embody that which we proclaim."

At the same time, church choirs are on the decline in white Protestant churches, with 40 percent of conservative evangelicals saying they hear a choir at services, down from 63 percent in 1998. At liberal or moderate Protestant congregations, there's a similar slide to 50 percent in 2012, down from 78 percent in 1998.

Sales for the music for choral anthems slid so deeply four years ago that Abingdon Press, the United Methodist Church's publishing arm, stopped buying new anthem music, said Mary Catherine Dean, associate publisher.

However, in black Protestant congregations, 90 percent of regular attendees say there's a choir at the main service. The same is true for three in four Catholic worshipers.

Mary Preus, choir director at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, blames "our culture of performance and expertise. We don't sing anywhere else in our lives the way we once did. I grew up singing at home, in school, and at church every week. Now, people think they are not good enough to sing," she said.

Preus has spent decades working to “revive the joy of singing” at Our Saviour’s. Choir members don’t stand in a special spot or wear special clothes, Preus said. “They just stand up wherever they are in the pews and sing.”

And because traditional choral music can be challenging for even the most talented of singers, she takes time to hunt down more accessible music, often drawing on music from Africa and Latin America.

Don’t count choirs out, said Eileen Guenther, professor of church music at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and former president of the American Guild of Organists.

“There’s a reason choral music is called traditional,” Guenther said. “It’s been around a while. Contemporary music may not have as much staying power.”
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