

Worship and renewal: Surveying congregational life

by [David A. Roozen](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Analysts of industrial nations often are perplexed by the continuing high level of religious activity in the United States. According to historians, this persistent vitality of congregational life is the result of overlapping waves of renewal rather than a steady growth from pioneer strengths. A recent survey, known as Faith Communities Today (FACT), reveals that three causes of this renewal are still evident across America—and that one of these provides good news for the oldline Protestant churches.

Perhaps the most characteristically American source of this renewing energy is immigration. All oldline Protestant denominations (as well as most streams of U.S. Catholicism and Judaism) are immigrant in origin. New waves of immigration bring new ethnic religious groups to our shores.

A second agent of renewal has been the development of characteristically American religious movements—most with Protestant roots. Several have developed into sizable denominations, the largest and best known being what we now call the United Methodist Church. These two sources of renewal are demonstrated dramatically in the FACT research.

The accompanying graph shows the percentage of congregations organized by denominational families during various periods of time. The purple line shows the continual surge of evangelical Protestantism. Hidden within the purple aggregate are data revealing that between 1980 and 2000 the major source of evangelical Protestant growth was the Assemblies of God, a denomination that originated in the U.S. in the early years of the 20th century. Also hidden in the purple aggregate is the fact that during the 1990s the fastest growing segment of the Assemblies was its Latino congregations.

Even more dramatic is the percentage growth from 1990 to 2000 of the indigenous Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the largely immigrant Islamic

community, shown in the green line.

When oldline Protestant churches began experiencing membership losses in the mid-1960s, the primary cause of the decline was their failure to adapt to social and demographic changes. There was, however, no clear agreement on a path or paths to renewal.

Within the past decade it became evident that more contemporary and expressive styles of worship were beginning to creep from west to east and from neo-Pentecostal into oldline Protestant congregations. The FACT data show that new and so-called blended forms of worship have now made it to the east coast and even into some oldline churches.

More important, the data show that this style of worship—measured in the survey by the use of electronic instruments in worship—is correlated with membership growth across all Protestant families, including oldline denominations. The FACT data show that contemporary worship is more strongly associated with membership growth than with what Dean Kelley called “strictness,” or with the outward focus of mission-minded congregations, or even with shifts in population. The relationship between contemporary forms of worship and membership growth is as strong for older congregations that changed their worship patterns as for new congregations that have used contemporary forms from the beginning. Further, participants in congregations using contemporary styles of worship are, on average, notably younger. The FACT data suggest that changing worship style is a path to renewal and membership growth.

Three caveats to this observation. First, introducing contemporary styles of worship is not a panacea. Even among Protestants there are many vital and growing congregations that worship in traditional ways. In our increasingly niche-oriented religious marketplace, it stands to reason that variety should flourish. Creative adaptation that matches heritage and identity with context appears more important than mere application of a worship “solution.”

Second, “contemporary” has different meanings in different faith traditions, and we have yet to analyze fully the new data on how “contemporary” adaptations relate to vitality among Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Third, the FACT data show that congregations that seek to change their style of worship will have to pay the price of conflict. The organizational consultants are

right: change is costly, conflict is one of the significant costs, and the ability to deal with controversy is one of the essential capabilities of adaptive congregations.