

Church growth keys: Multiracial, happy, more males active: Study notes factors in decline or expansion

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Congregations interested in increasing their weekly attendance would do well to make a plan for recruiting new members, become multiracial and make sure that serious conflict doesn't take root.

That's the message of an analysis recently released by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary. The "FACTs on Growth" report, based on data collected in a 2005 survey of nearly 900 congregations, found that congregations reporting growth in worship attendance between 2000 and 2005 tended to exhibit certain common attributes.

Multiracial congregations had a better chance of growing than those predominantly consisting of one racial group. Some 61 percent of multiracial churches said they had experienced growth, while just 31 percent of predominantly Anglo congregations said the same.

But even more important may be whether people in the pews, no matter their race, actually get along with one another.

"Whether or not a congregation finds itself in serious conflict is the number one predictor of congregational decline," writes C. Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church and author of the report, released in December. "This finding points out the need for conflict resolution skills among clergy so minor conflict does not become serious, debilitating conflict."

Conversely, congregations were most likely to grow if they:

- had a clear mission and purpose as a congregation
- conducted "joyful" worship services
- adopted a specific plan for recruiting new members

- had changed worship format at one or more services in the past five years

What's more, congregations were likely to grow if men constituted the majority of active participants, said Hadaway.

Among congregations in which at least three out of five regular participants were men, 59 percent reported growth. But among churches where no more than two in every five regular participants were men, only 21 percent said they had experienced growth.

"As American congregations become increasingly populated by women," the report says, "those congregations that are able to even out the proportions of males and females are those most likely to grow." *-Religion News Service*