

Survey finds changes in U.S. congregations: Demographic shifts

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According to a new study, U.S. congregations have changed significantly since 1998, having become more ethnically diverse, more technologically savvy and more informal in worship.

Predominantly white congregations reported an increase in racial and ethnic diversity between the first and second surveys of U.S. houses of worship by the National Congregations Study.

When the study was first conducted in 1998, 20 percent of churchgoers in Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes reported attending a church that was all white and non-Hispanic. In the second round, conducted in 2006-2007, that figure had dipped to 14 percent.

The study also found that the percentage of congregations with no Asian members decreased in the same period from 59 percent to 50 percent, and the percentage of congregations with no Latino members dropped from 43 percent to 36 percent.

“We’re far from a color-blind society, in religion or anything else, but there is some movement in churches as well as elsewhere,” said Mark Chaves, professor of sociology, religion and divinity at Duke University and lead researcher on the project.

While researchers found that some congregations that were previously all-white now have a couple of minority families as members, Chaves said mostly black churches did not report a comparable change. “If you look at predominantly black churches, we don’t find more whites or Latinos or Asians in them,” he said.

Other findings include:

- The number of churches with Web sites increased from 17 percent in 1998 to 44 percent in 2006-2007, and use of e-mail rose from 21 percent to 59 percent.

- Use of drums in church music rose from 20 percent to 34 percent, while people raising their hands in praise during worship services increased from 45 percent to 57 percent.
- The average age of the senior clergyperson in a church rose from 48 to 53. In 1998, 25 percent of the people in the average congregation were at least 60 years old; in 2006-2007, 30 percent were. (Catholic and liberal mainline churches were more likely to have older pastors than other churches.)

Also, ethnic diversity increased dramatically among Catholic priests leading parishes; in the most recent survey, 13 percent of Catholic churches were led by black or Hispanic priests, compared to only 1 percent in 1998.

The study was based on reports from leaders of 1,506 congregations and did not reflect the observations of independent survey takers. "If there's any overreporting or underreporting, because of its leaders' reports, it ought to be the same in both times," Chaves said. -*Religion News Service*