

2000 Nondenominational Congregations Today

A Report from the Faith Communities Today Project

Introduction

We know very little about nondenominational congregations. No single social scientific research project has focused on these independent, non-affiliated churches as an area of study, until this present effort. For this report, we define a nondenominational congregation as a Protestant Christian congregation which does not have a direct tie to a recognized major denominational body.

It is nearly impossible to know exactly how many nondenominational churches there are in the United States or what their membership might be. The best guess is that there are 35,000 independent and nondenominational congregations currently with approximately 10,000,000 members in the United States, making these congregations a large but relatively anonymous presence in the U.S. religious landscape.

This report is an overview summary of the Faith Communities Today research project material about nondenominational churches. The pastors of a total of 2500 churches were mailed the questionnaire which contained most of the core Faith Communities Today questions plus several additional items. These 2500 churches were randomly chosen from a listing of independent/nondenominational congregations in the United States acquired from the American Church Lists company. A total of 133 questionnaires were returned for 5.3 percent response rate. The survey of nondenominational churches was undertaken by Dr. Scott Thumma and Dr. John Vaughan and funded by the Lilly Endowment and Hartford Seminary. This summary report, compiled and written by Dr. Scott Thumma, primarily focuses on information from these respondents. ▲

It is unfortunate that a larger number of congregations did not respond to the survey since so little is known about independent congregations. Reasons for the low response rate could be that few of those who received the form knew the researchers or the sponsoring organizations. These congregations, after all, are intentionally independent and nondenominationally affiliated.

The conclusion of this report contains additional information on independent congregations from another study, The Organizing Religious work project, as a way of comparing the representativeness of these findings. By no means can this information be seen as accurately descriptive of the perhaps 35,000 nondenominational churches in the United States. This study, however, does offer a systematic glimpse at a few of these elusive religious bodies.

Overview of FACT Project

FACT was a cooperative venture of over 40 religious groups and denominations. Professors Carl Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary coordinated this research project.

The strategy of the project was to recruit social scientists from within different faith traditions to jointly shape and distribute a common core questionnaire to key informants within their

congregations. Using this questionnaire, the project collected parallel information on 14,301 faith communities.

After several years of planning and consultation, this project was completed and the overall findings officially released on March 13th 2001. The project received, and continues to generate, considerable publicity with news reports in over 150 newspapers, as well as radio, and television stations. Research reports of the findings are at the project's website www.faithcommunitiestoday.org

Findings From the Report

Location

Independent congregations can be found everywhere. While almost a third are located in cities between 50,000 and 250,000 in size, 16% are in rural areas, 18% in small towns, 19% in cities between 10-50 thousand, and 18% located in or near a city of 250,000 or more population.

Founding Date

Nondenominational congregations are both an old and new phenomenon. Nearly a third of the nondenominational churches surveyed were founded before 1950, and another 20% between 1950 and 1975. On the other hand, fifteen percent came into existence within the past decade. Two-thirds of the congregations moved into their current locations since 1980.

Facilities

The median seating capacity in the surveyed sanctuaries is 227 persons. A quarter of congregations have sanctuaries that seat more than 350 people, while one in five seat 125 or less. Only seven percent of the congregations share worship space with another congregation.

Worship

All congregations offer an opportunity for worship on Sunday mornings, seven percent also have Friday or Saturday services. The median attendance on Sunday mornings is 115 people. One in five congregations offer two or more services on Sunday morning.

A majority of congregations report that worship always or often includes:

- Sermons (100%)
- Organ and/or piano music (62%)
- Time for people to greet each other (62%)
- Altar call for salvation (60%)
- Prayers for healing (60%)

A minority of congregations report that worship always or usually includes:

- reading/recitation of creeds or statements of faith (9%)

- a time for members to testify about their faith (29%)
- dance or drama (13%)
- the use of visual projection equipment (6%)

The worship and music style in a large number of nondenominational congregations appears to have a contemporary electronic component in the service always or quite often.

- Fifty-six percent use visual projection equipment.
- 40-45 percent of churches use electronic keyboards and guitars, and drums.
- Twenty-eight percent include recorded music in the service.

Only 12% of congregations report that their primary worship service has changed a lot in the last five years, with 22% reporting somewhat of a change. Most report that worship is either basically the same (42%) or has changed only a little (24%).

Preaching

Preaching during the worship service MOST often focuses on:

- Personal spiritual growth
- God's love and care
- Practical advice for daily living
- Personal salvation
- Living a moral life

The sermon LEAST often focuses on:

- Stewardship of time and money
- The End Times or the Second Coming of Jesus
- Social justice or social action

These sermon messages are most often combined with detailed explanations of scripture (78%) and personal stories or first-hand experiences of the pastor (60%) rather than contemporary illustrations (44%) or literary or scholarly references (32%).

Theology

88% of respondents name the Bible as the most important authority for their congregation's worship and teaching, while 4% name the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and 3%, historic creeds, doctrines, and tradition.

In terms of theology of the congregation, the label respondents selected to best fit their membership were as follows:

- Fundamentalist 21%

- Evangelical 31%
- Pentecostal 11%
- Charismatic 19%
- Moderate 6%
- Other, new age, seeker, liberal, etc.12%

Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations accounted for between 25 and 30 percent of the respondents, judging by the chosen theological labels (30%), the often use of speaking in tongues in the service (26%) and the often presence of the prophecy and words of knowledge in the service (27%).

Participants and Members

Counting everyone involved in congregational life, including both members and non-members (however irregular their participation), yields a median estimate of 160 persons per congregation. The median attendance on Sunday mornings is 115 people.

The median estimate of regular adult participants is 80, while the median number of regular participants under the age of 18 is 35.

In other words, almost Sixty percent (58.7%) of all the nondenominational congregations have 100 or fewer regularly participating adults in their worship services.

Demographics of the Regularly Participating Adults

The percentages of congregations which reported that....

	20 percent or less of their members:	Over 60 percent of their members:
are female	4%	11%
have less than a high school diploma	86%	6%
are college graduates	33%	14%
are aged 35 or less	18%	11%
are older than 60 years	58%	6%

are married	4%	53%
have children under 18 years at home	28%	10%
live near the church	40%	18%
live more than 15 minutes drive from the church	40%	14%
live in households with less than \$20,000 annual incomes	70%	3%
live in households with more than \$75,000 annual incomes	42%	4%
are new to the congregation in the last five years	33%	21%
are lifelong members of nondenominational churches	48%	15%

Race of the Regularly Participating Adults

- majority (90% or more) white 68%
- majority (90% or more) black 8%
- Congregations with more than 10% racial minority participants 24%
- Congregations with no dominant racial group (over 50%) 16%

Congregational Programs

Eight out of ten congregations have a weekly Sunday school program.

In addition, other programs were offered during the past 12 months by the following percentages of nondenominational congregations.

- Bible studies 93%
- Prayer groups 87%
- Youth/teen activities 84%

- Men's/women's ministries 63%
- Spiritual Retreats 59%
- Young Adult activities 58%
- Choirs 56%
- Parenting/marriage classes 52%
- Senior Adult activities 40%
- Self-help groups 38%
- Sports/Fitness teams 29%
- National parachurch programs 22%



Outreach to New Members & Visitors

Nearly half of the congregations say their current members are "involved in recruiting new members" at moderate levels (47%) with another 15 percent of churches reporting extensive involvement on the part of their member. A third of congregations (36%) report minimal recruitment with only 2 percent saying they are not at all involved in evangelistic efforts.

Eighty-seven percent of congregations strongly encourage their new members to volunteer in church ministries.

Over half of churches (52%) require new members to take an informational class prior to or after joining.

A quarter of those surveyed assigned a pastor or lay leader "mentor" to help new members fit into the church.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of churches thought that new members were easily incorporated into the life of their church.

76% of churches described their church as like a close-knit family.

74% thought members were excited about the future of their church and that the congregation was spiritually vital and alive.

71% of nondenominational congregations had a clear sense of mission and purpose.

Service to the Community

Almost all congregations (90%) provide some sort of food assistance (either through a food pantry or soup kitchen) to the needy in their communities.

Other service programs that nondenominational congregations said they provided or supported **independently** included: (Support is defined as material or financial contribution, member volunteer time, or space in building. Percent of churches reporting these activities.)

Congregational Social Ministry Programs

- cash or vouchers given to families or individuals 72%
- programs for youth and teens 68%
- counseling services or support groups 54%
- hospitals & nursing homes 40%
- prison ministries 36%
- thrift store or thrift store donations 34%
- temporary or permanent housing/shelter 31%
- senior citizen programs 23%
- substance abuse & 12 step programs 23%

Networks and Interfaith Involvement

Nearly 50 percent (49.6) of the nondenominational congregations said they belonged to a Network, Fellowship or Association. These networks ranged anywhere from 20 members to over a thousand. The median network size was 300 churches.

Independent and Nondenominational congregations were also involved with churches in other ways. Many participated in doing the social ministries listed above, although at a considerably lower percentage than by themselves.

They also participated in activities with other nondenominational churches and with congregations from other Christian bodies. Only one in twenty congregations reported any kind of interfaith activity with non-Christian groups. Roughly forty percent of congregations participated in joint worship services or programs, some form of social outreach program, or ministerial associations.

The **Internet** was another way these congregations were present within the larger Christian community. Nearly 90 percent had access to either the church's or a members' computer. Seventy percent of the churches had an email address. In early 2000, over 40 percent of these congregations also had a web site.

Finances

A third of respondents describe the current financial health of their congregation as excellent, and another third as good.

The average (median) total annual income for 1999 was 150,000 dollars.

The average (median) expenditure in 1999 totaled 123,000 dollars.

Leadership

94 percent of the congregations report having a full time senior or solo pastor. However, nearly 15% of the pastors supplemented their income with outside work, usually in a secular job.

On average the senior pastor is 50 years of age and has been at the congregation almost ten years. 96% of these pastors are male. Eighty-five percent are white, ten percent are African American and five percent were of other racial and ethnic backgrounds including Hispanic, American Indian.

These pastors are generally well educated with 75% having secular college degree or higher.

In terms of ministerial education, 22 percent had no training or a certificate, 35 percent went to Bible college or had some seminary training and 43 percent had a seminary degree or better.

Conclusions

What can we tell from this information? The primary finding from this study is that surveys are not the best way to learn about independent, nondenominational congregations. A secondary learning is that much more research needs to be undertaken on this relatively unknown segment of American religion. If, as many religious commentators suggest, the nondenominational sector of U.S. religion is growing, then it is necessary to continue to explore this group of churches.

This minimal data shows that these congregations don't match the stereotypes many Americans have of independent churches. The survey reports that this sample was, for the most part, solidly middle class in its membership. They are also more diverse racially than most evangelical, moderate and mainline congregations.

Some independent churches have been around a very long time and others, roughly 15%, are less than ten years old. Nondenominational congregations are located everywhere in the United States. They are primarily evangelical and Pentecostal in their theology, but some fall within in a liberal and new age spirituality model. Clearly there are several types, or forms, of independent congregations although this data is insufficient to allow for detailed analysis of these unique groupings.

These congregations are not isolationist in their involvement with the world's needs. The congregations are active in many social ministry areas, more likely through their own efforts and their church's programs than in conjunction with others. But they are also involved with other churches to some degree. Nearly 50 percent are affiliated with some informal, loose Network or Association of churches, and a majority have a presence on the web.

Comparison of Nondenominational Congregations from the ORW and FACT Studies

Attendance

	ORW	FACT

1-100	47.6%	46.3%
101-200	20.7	29.7
201-500	14.2	13.3
over 500	17.5	10.7

Age

	ORW over 65	FACT over 60
None or few	50.8%	57.7%
all or most	3.3	5.7

Clergy religious education

	ORW	FACT
None or Certificate	18.6%	22.4%
Bible College	34.9	34.5
MDiv	25.6	25.0
Graduate Work	18.6	18.1

Drive to Church

	ORW 11-30 minutes	FACT more than 15 minutes
None or hardly any	14.8%	18.7%
All, most, many	16.4	19.5

Founding of the Church

	ORW	FACT
Prior to 1950	15%	30%
1950 - 1974	22	19

1975 - 1990	42	36
After 1990	20	15

Networked

	ORW	FACT
Yes	50%	43%