

A Report on the 2020 Faith Communities Today Study of U.S. Nondenominational and Independent Churches

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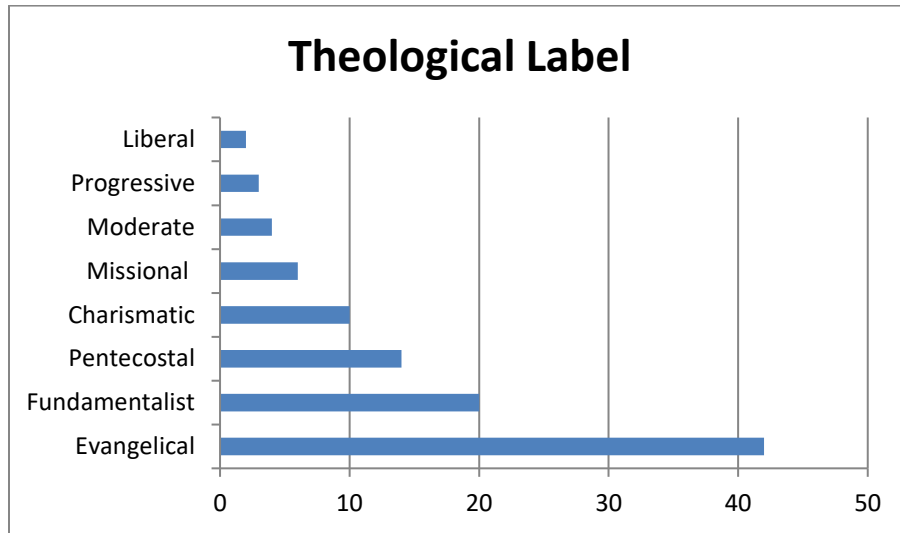
Bruce Cockburn, the Canadian singer-songwriter, had not attended church regularly in more than 40 years when he walked into the Lighthouse Church in San Francisco three years ago. He'd come at the request of his wife, M.J., whose spiritual quest, impelled by the death of a friend, led her to the church. Even then, "I told her, 'I'm not going,'" he said. "I said I was past that. I wasn't a churchgoing person." But M.J. persevered. One Sunday, Cockburn relented and was "completely blown away." "I didn't know any of these people, and they didn't know me, but love filled the room," he said of the small non-denominational congregation. "It felt like the church I was waiting for." October 11, 2021 John Longhurst RNS

There is no doubt that the nondenominational church phenomenon is significant in the American religious context. Mark Chaves and the National Congregations Study in 2018/19 and the previous waves, put the estimate at 20% of all congregations are not affiliated with a denomination. In 2010, I attempted to locate all the nondenominational churches and confirmed 35,000. My recent 2019-2020 effort to undertake a second census of independent and nondenominational churches in the U.S. generated a listing (still being finalized) of over 60,000 such churches representing at least 12 million adherents. Nondenominational churches, if counted as a single group would constitute the third largest group of religious adherents in the country, behind the Catholic and Southern Baptist. While this database is certainly not comprehensive or 100% accurate, to date it is the best listing that exists.

To further explore the phenomenon in greater depth, I drew a random sample of 5000 churches from this newer database and the 2010 one and surveyed them with a key informant questionnaire. This questionnaire was identical to the 2020 national Faith Communities Today questionnaire, except that a few questions were added, and some were deleted. The questionnaire was sent as an email with an online version link. The survey effort yielded responses from a total of **533** churches, with a response rate of 10.9 percent. The survey was also sent to 5000 megachurches and large churches with attendance of over 500 many of which were also nondenominational churches. In total, data was collected on 2307 nondenominational churches. The results of the survey sample were then weighted by region and size to parallel the overall national listing.

Even weighted, this survey is likely not truly representative of the entire nondenominational/independent phenomenon, nevertheless it, like the overall database, is the best picture of these churches that exists currently. Let me also say that the "definition" of independent or nondenominational congregation is somewhat suspect at best. What exactly defines a denominational versus nondenominational church, given the reality of loose networks, overlapping affiliations, fluid categories, and dynamic switching?

The picture of nondenominational churches that emerges from this research is quite similar to the 2010 nondenominational picture and also congregations within the conservative Protestant Evangelical denominations. While there is some definite theological labeling diversity among independent congregations, the dominant theological perspective is evangelical Christian. This was the clear message from the response of these church leaders completing the survey to the question of what label most closely described the theological outlook of the majority of their regularly participating adults



However, while the vast majority of nondenominational churches would and should be categorized as evangelical, when looked at in comparison with the findings from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) evangelical denominational churches several major differences are apparent.

A significant portion of nondenominational churches are recently founded (with a median founding of 1970 versus 1958 for Evang.) especially during the 70's and 80's – in the period of late 80's to 2000 the influx of nondenominational was mostly driven by existing denominational churches leaving their denominations and becoming independent. If these churches had moved from their founding location, fewer of the nondenominational ones did so (36% to 50%), and it was more recent (a median of 1993 compared to 1985). The phenomenon has grown significantly since the 1970's when it was estimated to only be 5-7% of congregations.

Founding Date	Nondenominational	Evangelical
Before 1945	27%	39%
1945 – 1965	18%	17%
1966 - 1985	34%	18%

1986 - 2000	2%	11%
2001 - 2020	19%	15%

88% of these churches said they were founded as nondenominational – so 12% had left a denomination, with over 80% of these having done so since 1980. Many of these (75%) were connected to several loose networks, fellowships or associations such as Willow Creek Assoc, Catalyst, Acts 29, and others.

In some ways, as a group, the nondenominational churches are similar - roughly of a similar size (median of 60 compared to 70 in Evangelical) with similar distribution around the country, though even a greater concentration of nondenominational in the South. And slightly more evangelical in small towns and villages, while more nondenominational churches in older suburban parts of large urban areas. Interestingly, a somewhat larger percentage of nondenominational churches are quite small 1-50 in attendance than are the evangelical churches (49% - 42%). Overall however, nondenominational sanctuaries are slightly larger than evangelical churches in terms of seating capacity (250 vs. 200). These churches are led predominantly by male clergy, even more so than evangelical churches, however, evangelical clergy are slightly older on average, and far more of them are full-time 19% compared to 32%. These clergy have less education (Only 30% had an MDiv compared to 47% among evangelical clergy) but a slightly higher percentage of the nondenominational congregation has college degrees than in the evangelical sample. Interestingly, nondenominational clergy are rated as having a better fit with their congregation than evangelical clergy (81% vs 67%). Stark and Finke would say this isn't a coincidence.

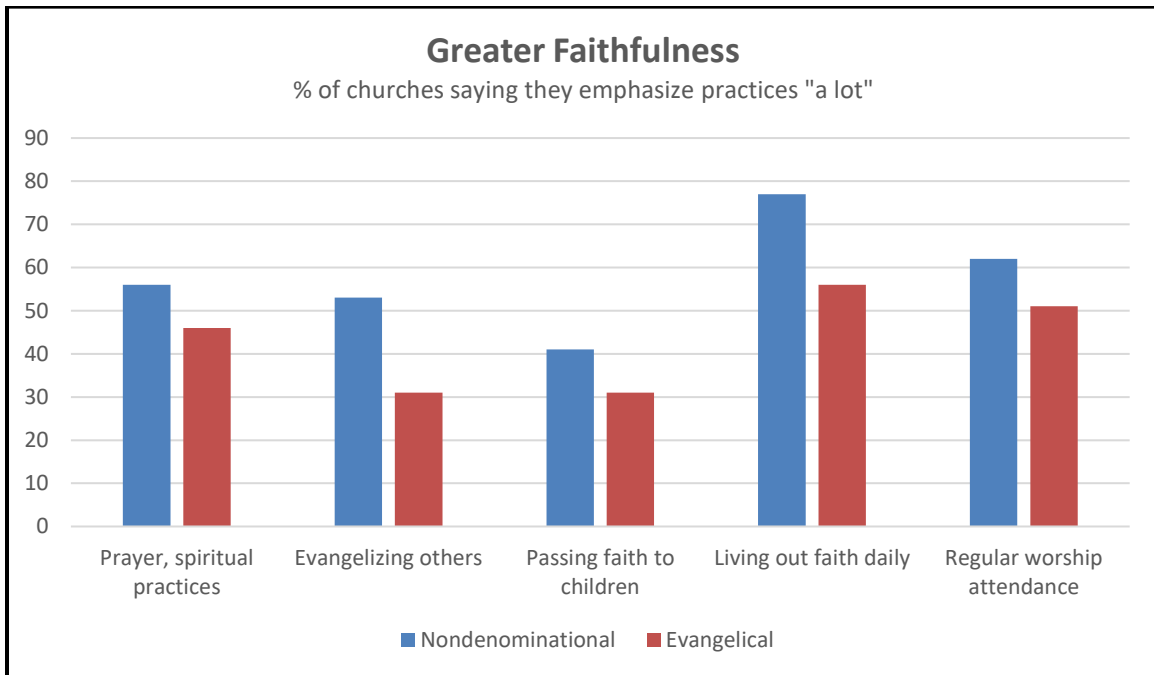
The membership of nondenominational churches is slight younger than in evangelical churches, mostly from having a slightly higher percent of young adults and significantly fewer senior adults

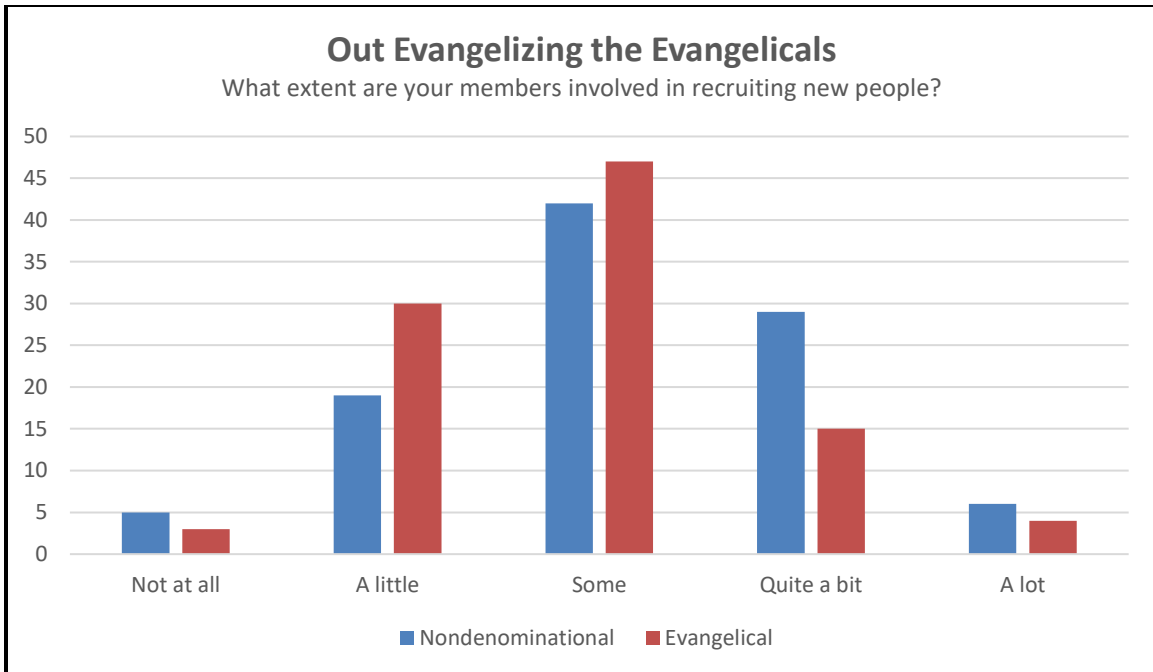
NonDenom	Evangelical	Age Grouping
25 %	31%	Senior adults, age 65 or older
35 %	33%	Adults, age 35-64
19 %	14%	Younger adults, age 18-34
8 %	10%	Youth, age 13-17
14 %	15%	Children, age 0-12

Additionally, nondenominational congregations are much more likely to be multiracial. 37% of these churches were at the 20% or more racial diversity (compared to 25% for evangelical churches). And 6% of these churches had no racial majority at all. Although 63% of nondenominational churches did not have this 20% level racial diversity, almost all of these had some level of race diversity *with just 17% claiming to be 100% of one race*. This multiracial reality is an intentional commitment for many of the nondenominational churches. When asked

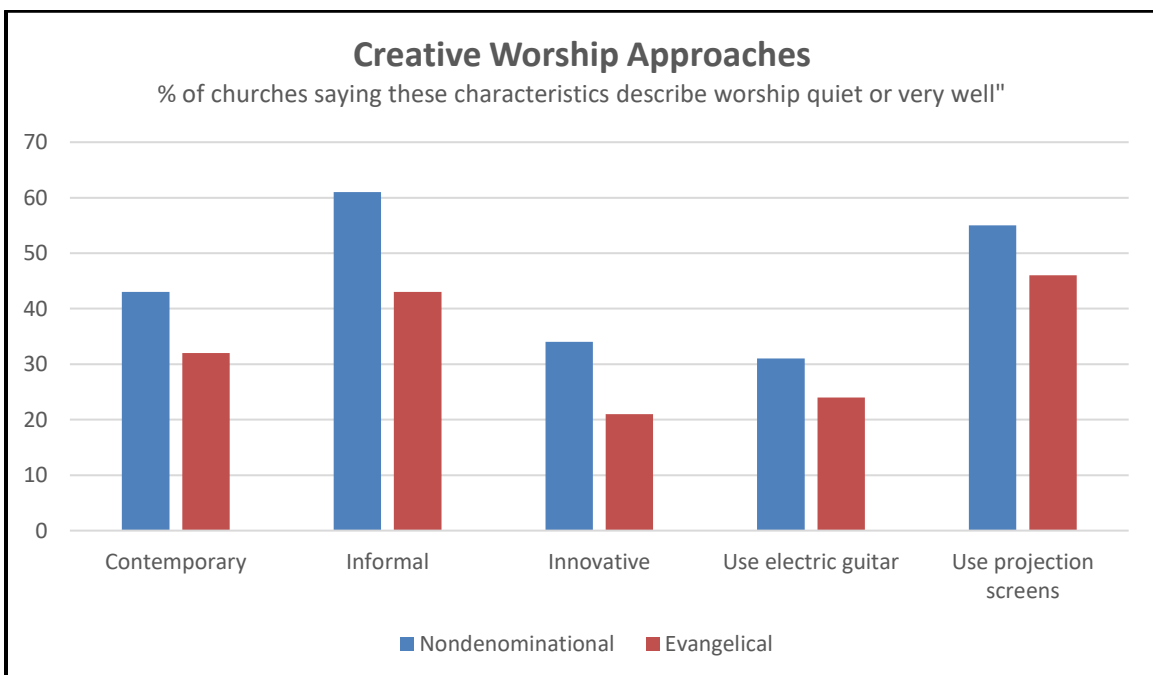
whether they were intentionally striving to be diverse racially, ethnically, and socially, nearly fifty percent (48%) strongly agreed compared to just 21% of evangelical churches.

Another dramatic difference between the nondenominational and evangelical groups could be seen in the religious practices. This might in part be due to the significant portion of nondenominational churches that claim the label of Fundamentalist. However, it is also true that as a result of not relying on a denominational identification these churches have to emphasize evangelistic efforts to a greater extent, and this shows in the survey findings. Their members are significantly more engaged in outreach to others.



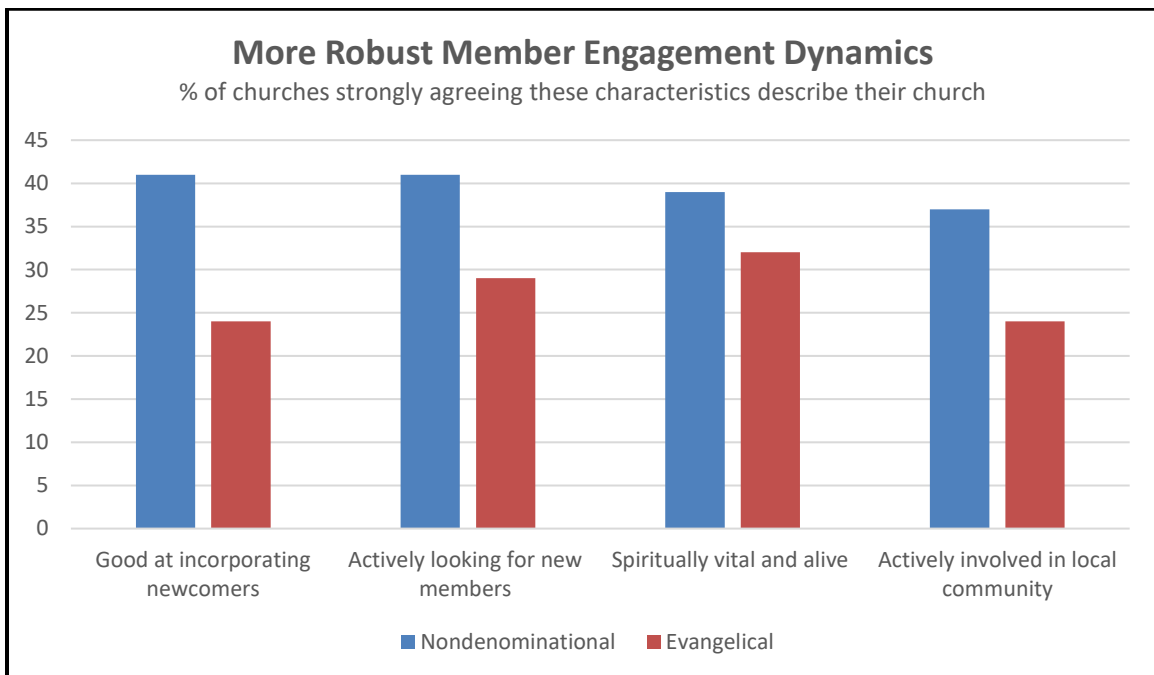


Another substantial difference between the groups was apparent in the reported worship service characteristics. Clearly, more nondenominational churches have embraced a contemporary worship style, but they also are more likely to describe this worship as innovative. This likely results from not relying on denominational traditions and practices but having to invent worship practices. Likewise, the vast majority of nondenominational publishers and worship suppliers embrace a contemporary rather than traditional approach.



In a previous survey these congregations were more likely to characterize themselves as being considerably different from other churches in the community. This continues to be evident in the 2020 findings – almost 20% more nondenominational churches strongly agreed they had a “clear mission and purpose” than evangelical ones (52% - 37%).

The final way these nondenominational churches stood out from those from evangelical denominations was in the dynamics around member involvement and participation. These congregations were more likely to strongly agree they were good at incorporating new people and actively looking for new members than churches identified with evangelical denominations. They described their churches as more spiritually vital and alive. They had a greater percentage of new people over the past five years and were more likely to grow rather than decline. These churches also brought in nearly twice as much income (median of \$200,000 vs \$100,000), had larger per capita giving amounts (\$2000 vs \$1733), a greater percent of the membership involved in volunteering (45% compared to 40%) and claimed to be more actively involved in the community than the churches from evangelical denominations.



In all the newness of this movement, combined with its relative youthfulness, intentional diversity, contemporary worship, more fervent religious practices and effective member engagement, one has to wonder if indeed that the nondenominational phenomenon isn't the next wave that supercedes the current more denominationally based evangelicalism. This is especially true since Evangelical denominations has become associated with Trump, anti-vaxers, and Christian Nationalism --- while much of the culture is moving in the opposite direction.

- It is no wonder that more nondenominational churches in the survey had grown by 5% or more than those associated with Evangelical denominations, and many of them by

25% or more over the past 5 years.

- Nor is it any wonder that the number of Americans claiming to attend nondenominational churches has continued to rise.
- Nor is it surprising that Denominational Churches change their name, drop the Denominational label, use nondenominational materials, programs, and literature, and adopt practices associated with nondenominational churches.

