

RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

Congregations and Change: Preliminary Findings

Over the past two years, the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0 has examined how congregations have adapted to the dramatic social and economic changes of the past two decades. We observed almost fifty congregations, interviewed pastors and lay leadership, and discussed the findings-in-progress with a clergy advisory committee. We also witnessed change in action when the pandemic struck. From this research six themes initially emerged—three internal to congregations and three in which congregations have responded to external influences. These themes, among others, will shape the life of these organizations in 2022 and beyond.

Congregational Cultures in Flux

Digital Transformation

Digital technology has brought deep, sustained change to most Americans' lives and congregations have adapted to this change in diverse ways. During the original RUC project (1.0), which ended in 2002, many congregations did not have dedicated email addresses. Now, nearly all congregations communicate with their members via email, text, or social media. Beyond this, large congregations usually have sophisticated

communications strategies where they measure “touch” or “engagement” with members as businesses do for marketing purposes.

The initial stages of the pandemic in spring of 2020 pushed congregations to embrace digital communication much faster. They switched to streaming their services online; some made the shift in a week. The Center for Congregations aided this remarkable change with 2700 emergency grants to help Hoosier congregations get the necessary equipment and technical help. The strategy enabled most congregations to begin streaming services quickly, with two unexpected consequences. They discovered more people than expected joining their services, with new attendees often coming from places far removed from Indianapolis, and, equally important, weekly giving remained stable, at least in the short run.

But a digital divide soon became apparent. Larger, richer congregations, usually evangelical Protestant, improved their audio-visual expertise while smaller ones streamed via Facebook or stopped streaming altogether. At first, the problem appeared to be technical or financial, so the question became “How can congregations that lack these resources gain them?” Gradually it became clear that tech and money were not the only factors—not even the primary factors—widening the divide. Some congregations see their face-to-face community as a direct response to the impersonal, individualized world of contemporary capitalism, consumerism, and bureaucracy. Sacramental traditions such as Catholics or Christian Orthodox felt that virtual participation undercut their worship experience, especially the eucharist. Immigrant congregations lost the sense of mutual support that came with in-person worship. Nearly all those communities stopped streaming and returned to in-person services once authorities allowed it.





Worship attendance has remained below normal despite the removal of all restrictions.

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Implication: Money is an important factor in the digital divide, but the underlying difference is a theological and ecclesiological issue, not a technical or financial one. Streaming and digital engagement seems to work well for Protestants who have a more individual focus with considerable emphasis on self-actualization. For others, these digital strategies are not merely difficult, they undermine the essence of their communal worship experience. To the degree religious communities provide a buffer against contemporary society's depersonalization, better digital capability will not fix this. More money or more expertise alone will not bridge this gap.

Pastoral Leadership

Pre-pandemic, most pastors already faced multiple hard truths. Members are aging. Attendance is falling, especially in-person attendance. Numerous congregations do not have sufficient resources to pay a full-time pastor, much less a staff. Maintenance and upkeep for a building takes an increasingly large share of annual giving. Young people are less interested in institutional religion. Beyond this, increased immigration and lower native birth rates require adjustments that many congregations find difficult to make. The list of challenges faced by pastors is extensive—and growing.

There are many models for reshaping pastoral leadership: Some congregations, especially rural ones, share pastors as in the days of Circuit Riders. Even more congregations have separate pastors but share a building. The two Disciples of Christ churches at 46th and Illinois, one primarily black and one primarily white, followed this model until both ceased

operations. (Common Ground eventually purchased the building.) Most clergy are jacks-of-all-trades for their communities. Pastors in large congregations function as CEOs, overseeing many staff with specific responsibilities. A few congregations have enough resources to hire executive pastors who serve as chief operating officers. This is true in large evangelical churches such as Greenwood Christian, but it is also true in large mainline churches such as Second Presbyterian or St Luke's UMC.

Clergy training has struggled to keep pace with the changing shape of ministry. Many traditional seminaries have closed or moved to non-traditional spaces and delivery formats, including all-virtual, offered by faculty who have other-than-teaching roles. In the largest congregations, especially many independent Christian mega-churches, pastoral training is often done in-house through an extended apprenticeship program in which junior pastors graduate to senior leaders of their own planted or adopted congregations.

Funding is at the heart of the change. No matter how much education or support systems adapt, many congregations or denominations are not able to pay clergy as full-time professionals. Bi-vocational clergy are much more common than in recent decades, with many pastors viewing their clerical vocation as something they do alongside other paid jobs. Artists have functioned this way for decades. Those at the top make a good living, but many actors, musicians, and dancers are part-time professionals, who must supplement their vocational choice with other income.

Implication: Considerable sorting remains as the pastorate becomes “right-sized.” Congregations lag on this because most people are reluctant to give up the idea of their own preaching pastor who serves as their spiritual shepherd within their own house of worship. But economic realities have intervened, and we are still measuring the outcome. The pandemic did not cause this change, but it surely sped up the demise of full-time clergy for smaller congregations.

Multi-Site

Pastors have shared with the project their belief that the model of megachurches with satellite venues is fading. Perhaps, but the concept of multiple sites is still strong. The instances of this form are especially prominent among large churches that continue to house a disproportionately large share of attendees. Half of all attendees at worship are in 10% of the congregations. The other half attend the remaining 90%.

Although the RUC project uses the term “congregation” very intentionally to be inclusive across faith traditions, multi-site models are properties of Protestant churches exclusively. Our research revealed no congregations from other traditions participating in the multi-site phenomenon.

There are different models for multi-site ministry. The traditional form is a large mother church and satellites in multiple locations. At Traders Point Christian Church, for example, the senior pastor preaches at all sites simultaneously via video at the satellites, a practice that requires a tightly run worship schedule. Even if a guest pastor is in the pulpit, he is preaching from the main campus in Zionsville (or even preaching a pre-recorded sermon set in the appropriate time slot).



Multi-site ministry model shows a large mother church with satellites at multiple locations.

But there are other approaches throughout Indianapolis. At Cornerstone Lutheran (Missouri Synod), the main campus in Carmel has traditional and contemporary worship services. Their Fishers campus has its own services with its own pastor. The staff take turns preaching at the East 10th Street campus—a building donated to Cornerstone by a previous Lutheran church that ceased operations. Interestingly, Cornerstone considers its virtual congregation a separate group. It is not an add-on to any existing service, but the online attendees exist as a stand-alone congregation.

St Luke’s UMC does something similar, even though it shares little in common either theologically or ecclesiastically with Cornerstone. It has contemporary and traditional services at the main campus (north Indianapolis) and a separate virtual worship. And soon it will add a satellite campus in Broad Ripple because the congregation formerly housed there had become too small to maintain operations.

Another model comes from Mount Pleasant Christian (independent) in Greenwood. Its large campus houses an Impact Center from which the church organizes community-based ministries. But over the past few years Mount Pleasant has purchased or received three other churches where the congregation was failing. It has attempted to keep these congregations going under a single brand, Mount Pleasant Impact. Rather than move their operations to new start-up sites, they have adopted congregations but given them a common identity and brand.

Implication: Since the pandemic, informed observers have talked frequently about “new ways of doing church,” suggesting innovative ideas about the role of place and the role of digital technology. But this raises the question: What does it mean to be a congregation? In decades past, the answer seemed simple: a body of believers who gathered communally at regular times in a common location. With multisite ministries, this traditional model does not fit. Multi-site churches are in fact multiple congregations with shared leadership and shared goals. Cornerstone refers to itself very intentionally as “five congregations, one budget, one mission.” Given that clergy training, children and youth activities, and other things fall under one umbrella, the definition of congregation will need be elastic enough to account for these new differences.



The George Floyd murder in 2020 and the protests that followed made race an even more pressing issue for many congregations.

Congregational Responses to Social Issues

Race

The confluence of the pandemic, George Floyd murder, and the 2020 presidential election created tensions over race and racism unlike any seen in the U.S. since the 1960s. Although the pandemic heightened the tensions, the social and economic inequities of American society were becoming matters of increasing concern throughout the previous decade. The Black Lives Matter movement began 7 years earlier, in 2013, after Trayvon Martin's killing. It came to prominence another year later, 2014, during the protests in Ferguson, MO. Year after year, police action shootings of unarmed Black citizens kept the issue as headline news.

Some congregations turned their attention toward social justice, with a special focus on systemic or systematic racism. Others looked for ways to bridge experiential gaps by trying to intentionally integrate events with congregations of other races. Some congregations tried to integrate internally, but this was not the usual response, nor was it often successful.

Congregations in the US have become more integrated over the past two decades. The Baylor Study (2021) found the number of congregations in which members of other races were at least 20% of the membership tripled from 1998-2019. The National Congregations Study from Duke found similar change. But in Indianapolis, few congregations look as diverse as the city's population.

It is important to note that integration within any congregation need not be the only, or even the most important, measure of attitudes about racism or racial injustice. It is not even necessarily the appropriate ideal. There are good reasons for congregation members to share racial and ethnic characteristics linked to cultural assumptions and even worship styles. Ethnic parishes have long maintained separate cultural identities. Much more important is a congregation's outlook toward others.

The national dialogue about race has shifted over the past 20 years—20 years which included a Black president. There is now much more talk about racial justice: critical race theory, systemic racism, redlining, and even reparations. Based on our observations, congregations have found this change difficult to navigate.

Implication: Congregations find it much easier to address problems at the individual, moral level, much harder at the systemic, political level. We have not observed a single congregation in which members would not say their calling is to treat everyone the same. Every one of them would call out personal racism as a sin. But addressing racism, or indeed any social problem, on a societal level is much harder because it moves the conversation into the political realm. This distinction between character development and social action exists in other social issues too. Every congregation has emergency response to poverty, and some have very large, highly organized, responses including food, clothing, and health or legal assistance, but few talk about economic inequality as a systemic justice issue involving public spending or taxation. The same is true for race.

LGBTQ

There can be no doubt discussion of LGBTQ issues comes up less in congregations than it did 20 years ago. In some congregations, there is no longer any reason to talk about it because the issue is no longer debated. This is how the pastor at Central Christian described the matter. Her congregation turned to other issues such as racial and economic justice because it had settled the question of sexual orientation and choice.

For others, LGBTQ issues are still an important topic. But most people have accepted same-sex attraction in some fashion. Surveys clearly reveal a change in the larger culture, and in the laws, which has gradually trickled down to the pews. Once again, however, there is a difference between acceptance of individual LGBTQ persons on a personal level and acceptance of broad systemic change that recognizes them as an equally protected group. Observers frequently characterize white evangelicals as leading opponents of LGBTQ reforms, but in fact, resistance in African American, Hispanic, and other immigrant groups can be strong. In every one of those groups, emphasis on strong, traditional family bonds shape the core of the congregation, with gay and lesbian lifestyles viewed as a threat to those values. In at least one faith tradition with deep Indiana roots, United Methodists, a new split in the denomination over this issue is currently underway.

The important distinction between individual and social is as strong here as anywhere. LGBTQ justice activists and activists for racial or ethnic justice are usually on the same political side—that is, they usually vote for Democratic candidates. But at the



Some local congregations, such as St. Luke's UMC, shown here, marched in the Indianapolis Pride Parade to reflect their open and affirming stance.

level of congregational life, these groups are far from homogeneous. A progressive political group is likely to treat race and gender identity as much the same. A progressive religious group is much less likely to do so.

Implication: Within liberal religion there is pressure to make racial and economic justice the dominant theme for congregations. This is difficult for congregations to navigate for two separate-but-related reasons. First, congregations have a much easier time dealing with social issues as matters of individual morality. They are more comfortable dealing with character formation than with systemic change. One could argue this is exactly what they should be doing, though one could certainly argue the other side of that too. Second, groups arguing for social justice do not integrate or overlap very easily. Many African American or immigrant congregations do not wish to discuss LGBTQ issues, nor are they especially interested in in the racial or ethnic concerns of others.

Polarization

The culture wars are always shifting but very much ongoing. The current battlegrounds are widely known: abortion, gun ownership, LGBTQ issues (especially rights for transgender people), critical race theory, and immigration, among the most prominent examples.

As noted above, congregations are much more secure dealing with personal character than complex, systemic issues. First, congregations are voluntary organizations. While some analysts talk about members switching congregations, this is not always as easy as it sounds. Conservative Jews or Antiochian Orthodox Christians in Indianapolis cannot simply pick a different congregation. There is just one in the metro area. But they can stop attending or stop giving. In other traditions, switching is relatively easy. In those cases, congregations sort themselves. People who share ideas and values tend to wind up with others who think like them, especially over a long enough time. Congregations may frame issues in terms of who might stay or leave. But this cannot be true for every single issue or each person would become their own congregation, which is a contradiction in terms (See “Sheilaism” in *Habits of the Heart*).

Second, congregations are character-building, family-nurturing organizations. It is worth considering whether congregations should be more focused on building better people, trusting that those people will then work in economics, education, and politics to make a better world. Perhaps congregations should



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focus on immediate poverty alleviation rather than changes in national social policy. Without a clear definition of the role congregations play in society, and an equally clear acknowledgement of their faith commitment and theological stance, it is difficult to say what they should do. But a criticism that they are “only” about individual character rather than systemic change is based on assumptions not everyone shares.

Third, congregations are oriented toward an ideal, toward the divine. Like all organizations, they have internal logics, values, and goals. But congregations are not like families, schools, businesses, or government—congregations are oriented explicitly toward God’s kingdom. While earthly social justice can certainly be part of this kingdom over the longer term, the two are not the same.

Implication: It is simply not possible for congregations to thread every needle, to align every value, every mission goal, and every political goal. Political and cultural polarization exerts tremendous force on congregations. They have the challenging task of holding together members who have common theological goals but sometimes vastly different political or economic views. Significant sorting is inevitable. The question then becomes: Will congregations be one more puzzle piece that fits the prevailing cultural and political model or will they maintain distinct theological visions that separate them from other kinds of organizations? Or, put another way, how can they be in the world but not too much of it?

Conclusion

Congregations and their leaders are under considerable pressure. They are creating communities of belonging and meaning, grounded in universal values and tradition, in a society that often works against those ideals. The cultural environment in which they operate is changing rapidly, and declining membership and limited funding constrain the strategies they adopt to respond to those changes. .

One important question is whether congregations are primarily driving social changes or responding to changes that originate elsewhere. Religion writ large has led enormous change in American society, as witnessed by institutions such as hospitals, professions such as social work, or social justice reforms like alleviation of poverty. Most of those institutions became more secular and government-sponsored over time. Today, congregations are primarily reactive. How could they not be? In a world driven by global capitalism, bureaucracy, and rapid change, they are communities of care embedded in traditions of text and worship that are thousands of years old. Congregations adapt to changing circumstances, but they must always manage to serve members whose needs may be significantly different from the communities they seek to serve.

Today congregations are adapting very quickly to changes that are cultural, political, and economic. They play a unique social role that often flies under the radar of internet headlines. The congregational landscape will look quite different 20 years hence—for one thing, there will be many fewer—but their commitment to meaning-making and community-building around shared texts and values will persist.

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