

# RESEARCH NOTES

## *Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

### Twenty Years of Change: Do Indianapolis Congregations Reflect National Trends?

Faith Communities Today (FACT) recently unveiled their 2020 [survey](#), *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview*. It follows decennial surveys in 2000 and 2010, plus a couple of smaller interim surveys. FACT is not a random-sample survey. It is, instead, a joint effort by many different denominations that use survey research in their planning. FACT members agree to ask questions in common and to share results. While this method means some groups are not included (by their own choice), it also means the survey is large. With more than 15,000 responding congregations from over 80 religious denominations and traditions, it is the largest congregational sample taken in the U.S.

#### THE 2020 FACT SURVEY LISTS SEVEN KEY FINDINGS.

1. Prior to the pandemic, many congregations were small and getting smaller, while the largest ones keep getting more attendees.
2. Despite continued declines in attendance overall, about a third of congregations are growing and are spiritually vital
3. The size of larger congregations offers some distinct advantages, but each size group has certain strengths
4. Congregations have continued to diversify, particularly in terms of racial composition
5. A dramatically increased utilization of technology can be seen over the past two decades, even pre-pandemic
6. The fiscal health of congregations has remained mostly steady
7. There is a clear and demonstrated path towards vitality with characteristics consistent across the two decades of our survey efforts.

How do these results compare with what we are observing in Indianapolis? At least in this instance, an understanding of religious culture in Indianapolis can bring survey data into sharper relief and better clarify the experiences of American congregational life in the early twenty-first century.

*1) Prior to the pandemic, many congregations were small and getting smaller, while the largest ones keep getting more attendees.*

In our census of 500 Indianapolis congregations from 1996-2002, we found that congregations averaged 400 members, but the median was 125 members, which means that half of the congregations in our study had fewer members (see [What Do You Mean by Average?](#)). FACT finds that the median is smaller still now, with the same decline reflected in attendance figures, which average 65 nationally. For mainline congregations, median attendance is closer to 50. A lot of conversation about American congregations focuses on the largest among them, but it is important to remember that the average group is small—both in Indianapolis and across the country.

But there is another way to think about these numbers, at least among Protestant denominations, where there may in fact be two membership and attendance pools—mainline and evangelical. In both, the largest congregations are increasing market share, but for different reasons. Among the Protestant mainline, large congregations have the resources to create opportunities for engagement that appeal to a geographically diverse constituency. As a result, they draw members from their own traditions who seek the sort of worship experience they offer. Evangelical congregations are more likely to plant new congregations and expand into new geographic areas rather than draw from a larger area.



In Indianapolis, Traders Point Christian Church provides a noteworthy example of this latter phenomena. What was once a small, country church has become not just a megachurch that rivals the largest congregations in the metropolitan area, but a multisite congregation that reaches throughout much of Central Indiana. It also helped launch Common Ground Church, which has itself seeded two other Common Ground congregations and has helped other fledgling congregations, including Trinity and Christ Church Anglican. None of these satellite congregations are large and it still is unclear whether they attract new congregants (e.g., the “nones”) or whether parishioners from other congregations are choosing to attend these new plantings. Several of these congregations have sprung up in areas where Mainline Protestant churches have either closed or are in decline. Other examples include Redeemer Presbyterian and New Circle Church, both of which have brought new life to old houses of worship.

*2) Despite continued declines in attendance overall, about a third of congregations are growing and are spiritually vital.*

Spiritual vitality is difficult to define and to measure. It likely has different characteristics for different faith traditions. For some congregations, it may denote a more meaningful worship experience or involvement in the life of the congregation. For other congregations, it may mean engagement in the broader community as evidenced by investments of time, energy, and money.

We are not sure how to measure meaningful worship, but vitality defined as engagement beyond the congregation is easier to identify. One local example is the IMPACT sites that have allowed Mount Pleasant Christian Church to grow and connect with communities across race and class. This initiative also has helped existing members, largely white, to actively participate with more people of color. As one of the pastors told us, “People come from different counties around Marion County. They come down to help us here [in their south side campus].”

Another example is Common Ground church. A predominantly white congregation, Common Ground started as part of the ministry of Traders Point before becoming an independent congregation. An initiative that keeps their members engaged is learning and talking about race and racism with each other and with members of other congregations. Common Ground now works closely with New Era to talk about racial reconciliation through the *Shades of Hope* podcast organized by the Center for Congregations. Members of the church also are actively involved with the MLK Center, as well as Boulevard Food Pantry, Heritage Place, and School 43. But this process has not been smooth. A key informant told us, “When we first started talking about race, we had some people leave. Like 20 percent or so. But people who wanted to stay, they stayed... and our giving has remained pretty constant.”

*3) The size of larger congregations offers some distinct advantages, but each size group has certain strengths.*

Some smaller congregations reflect ethnic or racial bonds, creating a defined community that serves broader social and political ends. Black churches have been essential cultural and social institutions for African Americans. Other congregations play similar roles for ethnic and immigrant groups. For these groups, congregations are a community space where people come together through common cultural practices and rituals. There are ethnic congregations like mosques and gurudwaras that also serve such specific cultural needs.

In Indianapolis, these congregations are visible among the growing Spanish-speaking population. For instance, Iglesia Hermandad has a growing Spanish-language population that is central to the congregation’s identity and mission. A long-time active member reported

that, when the congregation moved, “we lost a few families because they wanted a church that is close to their home. We even lost the pastor. But that was then, now we have a new pastor, and we are growing.” Iglesia Hermandad moved into a predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhood, which allowed it to connect with many more new members. In other instances, a congregation stayed in its neighborhood but changed its membership profile because the demographics around it had shifted. St. Patrick Catholic Church is one such example. It is now, in effect, a Latino parish.



Aside from congregations being ethnic or racial spaces, we also see congregations growing when people have a collective identity shaped by the church’s stance on a social issue, for instance, around LGBTQ rights. Central Christian is one such example. Its identity stems from a focus on sexuality and race (and racism), not as a cause du jour but rather as an expression of a spiritual commitment to social justice that is reflected in its openly gay pastor and a Spanish-speaking associate pastor. Although such congregations may be relatively small, they fill specific cultural niches that are community-strengthening.

#### *4) Congregations have continued to diversify, particularly in terms of racial composition.*

Taken as a whole field of organizations, congregations are more diverse than they were twenty years ago. And they were more diverse than they were 20 years prior. Still, specific examples of congregations seeking diversity as a mission goal are relatively rare. St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, for instance, has diversified its leadership and has adapted its worship to include services to appeal to other cultural traditions. Other congregations are wrestling openly with questions about how to become more inclusive, as well as how to combat racism and racial inequalities.

Here, progress is slow and incremental, and the results to date reflect mixed success. We have visited several Catholic parishes—St. Monica, St. Mary, St. Patrick—where there are very large Latino and Euro congregations. However, in most cases the two groups still meet separately because of language differences and differences in worship style. Worship style can be negotiated, but language barriers are more difficult to overcome.

The FACT study uses 20 percent as the threshold for diversity—at least 20 percent of congregational members are from racial backgrounds different from whatever the majority is in the congregation. By this measure, Indianapolis has relative few diverse congregations, but it has more than it did two decades ago. This work, it seems, continues to be very difficult to do.

#### *5) A dramatically increased utilization of technology can be seen over the past two decades, even pre-pandemic*

There has been a dramatic increase in the use of technology since we conducted our first project on religion and urban culture twenty years ago. Changes spurred by technology were already underway, but there can be no doubt that the pandemic accelerated them rapidly. Much of the shift was done on the fly by congregations because they had no choice. For example, when the COVID-19 shutdown was in place, we conducted several Zoom interviews with pastors. In one such interview, Rev. Ronnie Bell at Cumberland United Methodist showed us how he started using a computer (see below) to do the sermons and stream it at the same time.







As our *Research Notes* and *Responsive Congregations* have shown, however, a growing number of congregations are intentionally moving in the direction of innovation, openness to change, and diversity.

It was common for us to hear pastors and church leaders tell us how they used handheld devices such as a phone to capture sermons. The interviews and observations also made visible some of the everyday challenges to this technological change. For instance, while observing online sermon at a Catholic church in March of 2021, we noted at least four different cameras filming the mass. The transitions among the various cameras was disorienting, which doubtless was not the intent. We observed similar instances involving sound quality and lighting that could be categorized generously as technological change in process. Many congregations participated in online giving even before pandemic, but many others were pushed onboard with the online giving practices including using various apps. Here, the transition was more widespread, perhaps from necessity.

What was most striking is that so much of the technological shift was spurred by the pandemic. We found little reason to believe that congregations as a whole—and especially midsized and smaller congregations—had moved into a digital world to any great degree prior to March 2020. To be sure, most congregations undoubtedly used office software and a sizeable number likely had Facebook pages, but we have not discovered a widespread adoption of technology before the late 2010s except for large congregations that had significant resources.

#### 6) *The fiscal health of congregations has remained mostly steady*

While nearly every congregation worries about its financial health, these concerns were amplified as the pandemic hit. In our interviews, many faith leaders shared that one way they 'survived' was by reaching out to their congregants and asking for additional

support. A faith leader told us that their giving went down when the pandemic began. Asked what they did, the respondent replied, "When the pandemic first started, we put an appeal out to our church that, hey, we want to keep our staff employed, we want to be able to respond to the needs in our neighborhood. And right after that we actually saw an increase in giving... Last year ended well..." Uncertainty about the sustainability of giving into a post-pandemic world remains, but generally observations from our forty congregations confirm the FACT survey.

However, there are still other reasons to be concerned about fiscal health. Congregational building projects have dropped to nearly zero across the country. The smallest congregations are the most likely to be in financial distress and the most likely not to show up in FACT survey numbers or in our observations. We know of at least three congregations among our forty who are directly subsidizing smaller congregations. Significantly, these in-need congregations are not their mission plants, but small groups who appealed for help. So, there are hints that the fiscal problems are on the low end and these congregations are toughest to identify in studies.

#### 7) *There is a clear and demonstrated path towards vitality with characteristics consistent across the two decades of our survey efforts.*

The FACT survey measures vitality directly by asking key informants, usually pastors, whether they agree that their congregations are vital and alive. A relatively small percentage "agree strongly."

FACT says these are the things that make congregations vital:

- have strong leadership that fits well with the participants
- have a clear and compelling mission
- be innovative and open to change
- be active in the local community
- have more vibrant worship that is thought-provoking and stimulating
- have a community of participants that represents a diversity of ages, genders, races, and other differences
- be good at incorporating new people
- have significant lay involvement, including contributing financially and volunteering
- live out their faith commitments in everyday life and tell others about the congregation



Our observations do not dispute any of these factors, but they do muddy the waters somewhat. For instance, no one could disagree that strong leadership that fits well with participants is important. But this “fitting” is a process and sometimes the membership changes to meet the leadership. We are studying a number of congregations who are in the midst of difficult leadership changes—some self-started, some imposed from outside. The “fit” is a moving target.

All congregations seek to have a clear and compelling mission, but as we noted in our earlier project (1996-2002), mission orientation can be very inwardly or outwardly focused, and most often there is a difficult mix. They may wish to be open to change, active in the local community, and good at incorporating new people, but all of these are easier to say than to do.

As mentioned above, diversity in age, gender, race, and other differences is a worthy goal but, again, difficult to achieve. While it is true that congregations that manage to sustain this diversity have great vitality by almost any measure, simply being “open” to diversity is not enough.

As our *Research Notes* and *Responsive Congregations* have shown, however, a growing number of congregations are intentionally moving in the direction of innovation, openness to change, and diversity. They are talking about racial justice and reconciliation. They are discussing how to understand and respond to issues related to sexualities and gender, to substance abuse, to inequalities of all stripes. We see renewed efforts to look outside the congregation into the wider community.

In these ways and more, a significant number of Indianapolis congregations are alert to their changing environments and seeking to fit their mission and programs to meet internal and external needs. What is unclear is how widespread these efforts are, whether they involve all faith traditions, and, most importantly, what are the results for the congregations and the communities they serve.

---

*Written by Solly Chacko, Jason Lantzer, and Art Farnsley*