

EPISCOPAL STATISTICAL TRENDS MIRROR NATIONAL PATTERNS

Research shows median congregation has fewer than 70 worshippers at Sunday services

By Mary Frances Schjonberg, March 16, 2009

[Episcopal News Service] While the median size of Episcopal Church congregations and overall membership has declined in recent years, that pattern matches trends in most mainline Protestant denominations and points to larger patterns in U.S. culture, according to analyses of recent data.

The median Episcopal Church congregation in 2007 had 168 active members and 69 people in Sunday worship, according to Episcopal Church reports. That compares to the median congregation in 2003, which had 182 active members and 77 on average in Sunday worship. Meanwhile in 2007, parishes with 351 or more people in worship constitute 3.5 percent of all the church's congregations.

There were 37,823 fewer active members of Episcopal Church congregations in 2007 than in 2006, a two-percent decline. Over the past ten years, the church has experienced a 10-percent decline in active membership, the statistical reports show. Slightly more than 167,000 people left the Episcopal Church between 2003 and 2007, reducing the church's active baptized members from 2,284,233 to 2,116,749.

The number of congregations during the 2003-2007 period declined from 7,220 to 7,055. In 2007, 43 percent of congregations experienced membership declines of 10 percent or more over the past five years, more while 26 percent increased their size by 10 percent or more.

The statistical view of the Episcopal Church comes from two reports by Kirk Hadaway, program officer for congregational research in the Episcopal Church's Evangelism and Congregational Life Center. One is a summary of 2007 [Parochial Report data](#) and the other is a six-page [report](#) about information gathered through the Episcopal Church's participation in the 2008 version of the on-going [Faith Communities Today Survey](#) (FACTS) run by Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. The full results of the multi-denomination survey are due to be released in April, according to the project's [website](#).

Parochial report data is gathered from the canonically required ([Canon 6.1.1](#)) information filed annually with diocesan bishops by each congregation. The reports are due to be filed by March 1 of the following year. An example of the sort of information gathered in the report is available [here](#).

Membership decline and small congregations are not unique to the Episcopal Church. The most recent nationwide [data](#) shows the median non-Roman Catholic congregation has 75 regular participants at worship on Sundays. The recent U.S. [Religious Landscape Survey](#) found that "the proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly."

Researchers of the latest [American Religious Identification Survey](#), released March 9 by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, also noted the trend, finding that while one in 10 Americans claimed no religious identity in 1990, today that ratio is one in five.

The researchers said that their latest findings confirm earlier findings that "Americans are slowly becoming less Christian and that in recent decades the challenge to Christianity in American society does not come from other world religions or new religious movements but rather from a rejection of all organized religions." They added that "the historic mainline churches and denominations have experienced the steepest declines while the non-denominational Christian identity has been trending upward, particularly since 2001."

Hadaway told ENS in an interview that the picture of Episcopal Church congregations includes both hope and challenges.

"We have a large number of vital churches that have a great sense of being filled with a sense of God's presence. They're very concerned about reaching out to their communities, but on the other hand we have some significant issues in the sense that a lot of our churches aren't terribly involved in evangelism or recruitment," he said. "We have relatively few youth involved in our churches, which poses some issues for what happens in the next 20-30 years. We have a lot of congregations that are stretched financially."

In the face of that analysis, Hadaway said, "one of the things to focus on is that those churches that are clear about why they are there -- have a clear mission and purpose -- are more likely to grow and that goes for both liberal and conservative ones."

The Rev. Suzanne Watson, director of the Episcopal Church's [Center for Evangelism and Congregational Life](#) in New York, agreed. "I definitely see that the Episcopalians we have now are growing deeper in their faith and are very committed," she said.

"Also, across the entire church what I am seeing is a renewed interest in evangelism," she said.

Watson also agreed that "that purpose question" Hadaway noted is a strong indicator of a congregation's health. "A congregation that is clear about its purpose is a vital congregation," she said.

Both Hadaway and Watson said that Episcopal Church congregations must also be willing to look for new ways of defining that purpose and to be nimble about acting on what they discern. "Society is changing at a very rapid rate right now, so our rapidly changing social context requires us to be nimble to continue to proclaim the Gospel in ways that are relevant," Watson said. "Sometimes I worry that our structures or [a vision of the past that we have] doesn't allow us the nimbleness to change enough to meet the changing demands for ministry."

They both singled out worship and congregational leadership models.

Watson said that the traditional model of "one seminary-trained priest serving at one altar" is less-than-nimble, and is in fact changing already. Just 34 percent of congregations with an average attendance of 70 or fewer have a full-time paid clergy leader, the FACT study found.

In terms of worship, Watson suggested that "we need to be willing to think about worship outside of Sunday mornings," and Hadaway said newcomers can tell when worship is being done by rote "and we've done this a million times, and we're just doing it once more for our own benefit."

There's an even-more basic concern about newcomers, Hadaway added. "All churches think that they are friendly but a large number are friendly primarily to one another," he said. "It's difficult to accept newcomers. It's difficult for somebody who has been a member of a church for 20 years to understand what it's like to be a newcomer."

For the purposes of the Episcopal Church analyses, it is important to note that the data do not include losses due the departure of members of the dioceses of Fort Worth, Quincy, Pittsburgh and San Joaquin, all dioceses in which the leadership decided to leave the Episcopal Church during late 2007 and 2008. Hadaway said, however, that the recent findings show that when Episcopalians were asked to place their congregations on a theological scale between conservative and liberal, "the middle [of the spectrum] has grown and the 'somewhat-more-liberal' has grown, and the 'somewhat-more-conservative' has declined."

"It's not just that we have probably lost some of our more conservative constituency ... but also churches perhaps have a clearer identity now than they did five years ago," Hadaway said, adding that during that

period of time congregations have had to confront theological issues in ways that did not allow them to simply assume they knew where they stood.

Hadaway's report on the Episcopal Church's portion of the FACTS project also showed:

* 87 percent of congregations are at least 60 percent white/European American and another five percent are predominantly African American or black.

* 62 percent of parishes and mission report that more than half of their members are 50 years or older (27 percent of Episcopal members are older than 65 compared with 13 percent of the entire U.S. population).

* 11 percent of congregations reported that one or more of their weekend services changed a lot in terms of format or style in the last five years.

* 60 percent of members in the median congregation are women.

* 90 percent of congregations reported having conflict or disagreements in the last five years, up from 86 percent in 2000 but down slightly from 93 percent in 2005.

* 47 percent reported serious conflict in the last five years over the issue of the ordination of gay priests and bishops, the largest source of conflict.

* 33 percent say their congregations are in excellent or good financial health, while the percent reporting some or serious financial difficulty went from 13 percent in 2003 to 25 percent in 2007.

* 28 percent have committed to contributed 0.7 percent of their annual budget in support of the Millennium Development Goals.

* 66 percent of parishes have a solo clergy leader, the median age of the rector or vicar is 58, and 30 percent of rectors and vicars are female.

* 21 percent of congregations say that their members are heavily involved in recruiting new members.

* 71 percent do not offer activities for young single adults and 70 percent do not offer parenting or marriage-enrichment programs, while 62 percent have a Sunday school program and 51 percent have an organized youth group.

-- *The Rev. Mary Frances Schjonberg is national correspondent for the Episcopal News Service.*