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New study examines factors that spur growth of US congregations

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Feb. 8, 2012

WASHINGTON -- A new study of U.S. congregations found that some factors are more prevalent than others in spurring the growth of a congregation, among them the age of a congregation's members, family activities and a commitment to recruiting new members.

But the study's author noted that only a minority of congregations of all denominations are actually growing.

"There were about 30-35 percent that were experiencing the highest level of growth," said C. Kirk Hadaway, congregational research officer for the Episcopal Church and chair of the research task force for the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, the study's sponsors.

"There's as many congregations that are plateaued and declining (as) are experiencing rapid growth," Hadaway said during a Jan. 31 webinar on the study, "Facts on Growth."

"A relatively small percentage of congregations are sort of driving the growth to the extent that is occurring in U.S. society. It's not really clear to what extent growth is occurring," he added.

Hadaway said that of the congregations surveyed, only 6.4 percent were either Catholic or Orthodox, but that the numbers were weighted to reflect their proportion in the U.S. population.

"Facts on Growth" is the fourth in a series of national congregational surveys that began in 2000. The sample for this latest study included 11,077 congregations.

Faiths represented included the Catholic Church, United Methodist Church, Southern Baptist Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Church of the Nazarene, Baha'i faith, Episcopal Church, Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, Muslim, Orthodox and Jewish congregations, and nondenominational and black churches.

One category where a majority of churches are growing are new congregations, those founded since 1993; 54 percent reported growth. They "work harder at trying to grow," Hadaway said. "Unfortunately, there are not that many newer congregations."

Also, half of the congregations surveyed reported growth when church membership was younger, where members ages 50 and up made up less than 20 percent of overall membership.

The younger the congregation, "the more likely you are to grow," Hadaway said.

Among congregations that participated in "innovative" worship styles, 56 percent reported growth. "An evangelical church is more likely to be on the higher end," Hadaway added.

Sixty-three percent of congregations that said recruiting new members was a priority reported growth.

"It doesn't necessarily mean organized evangelism," Hadaway said, "but it means reaching out and inviting them when they begin to attend."

When it comes to following up, the more tools a congregation uses to reach people, the more likely that congregation is to grow. Of those using just one or two tools, 31 percent grow; of those using five or six tools 57 percent grow. Tools include websites, social media, emails and mailings.

"Nearly all churches and congregations have websites," Hadaway said. "That isn't really related to growth at all, but contact is important."

Similarly, of congregations that said parenting activities and marriage enrichment were a specialty for their community, 64 percent reported growth. And among those churches saying that their leader spent "a great deal" of time involved in evangelization, 51 percent reported growth.

"Denomination matters," Hadaway said. "Facts on Growth" showed that 29 percent of Catholic and Orthodox congregations were growing compared to: 19 percent of mainline Protestant congregations; 43 percent of conservative Protestants; 35 percent of "other Christians," including Mormons and the historical peace churches; and 33 percent of non-Christian congregations, including Jews, Muslims and the Baha'i faith.

One surprise in the findings is that the greatest rate of growth -- geographically speaking -- occurred for downtown and center-city congregations, with 46 percent reporting growth. Next were congregations in the outer suburbs, with 40 percent.

"What's happening in cities is that the long-held pattern of decline has reversed itself," Hadaway said, a benefit to churches that stayed put over decades of depopulation. "The implosion of population in downtown areas has changed. Downtowns, they're not as threatening or scary for people to go to. There are more people living in these areas. It marks a change in the overall growth and decline by community. The character of the community in downtown areas has changed dramatically in the last 10 years."

Mark Gray of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University said CARA has done no research on the factors influencing parish growth.

"All that's out there is pretty much anecdote," Gray said, adding many variables would have to be taken into account to determine whether one factor or a combination of factors could be judged to be effective.

"There's no recipe for creating a vibrant, growing parish," Gray said. "I don't think there is any one recipe."

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