

**Changing American Congregations:  
Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study\***

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ABSTRACT

The third wave of the National Congregations Study (NCS-III) was conducted in 2012. The 2012 General Social Survey asked respondents who attend religious services to name their religious congregation, producing a nationally representative cross-section of congregations from across the religious spectrum. Data about these congregations was collected via a 50-minute interview with one key informant from 1,331 congregations. Information was gathered about multiple aspects of congregations' social composition, structure, activities, and programming. Approximately two-thirds of the NCS-III questionnaire replicates items from 1998 or 2006-07 NCS waves. Each congregation was geocoded, and selected data from the 2010 United States census or American Community Survey have been appended. We describe NCS-III methodology and use the cumulative NCS dataset (containing 4,071 cases) to describe five trends: more ethnic diversity, greater acceptance of gays and lesbians, increasingly informal worship styles, declining size (but not from the perspective of the average attendee), and declining denominational affiliation.

## **Changing American Congregations:**

### **Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study**

Congregations remain the most significant collective expression of American religion, and they rightly have been the subject of an enormous amount of social scientific attention at least since H. Paul Douglass's early twentieth century landmark studies (Douglass 1926, for example). A comprehensive literature review is neither necessary nor desirable here, but even a cursory look at recent literature makes clear that congregations continue to be studied from many perspectives, to learn about many subjects. Looking just at work published since 2010, research on congregations has focused on race and ethnicity (Marti 2010; Edwards et al. 2013), small groups (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011), civic and political participation (Schwadel 2012), leadership (Edwards 2014; Stewart-Thomas 2010), openness to gays and lesbians (Adler 2012; Whitehead 2013), HIV/AIDS services (Frenk and Trinitapoli 2011; Derosé et al. 2011; Fulton 2011), environmentalism (Djupe and Olson 2010), organizational identity (Reimer 2011), organizational networks (Smith et al. 2012), worship styles (Baker 2010); principal-agent problems (Wollschleger 2013), change over time (Roozen 2011; Chaves 2011), and much more.

The National Congregations Study (NCS) has become an important part of the data infrastructure for the study of congregations. The NCS was conducted for the first time in 1998, and Wave II was conducted in 2006-07. In this article we describe key features of the NCS's third wave, conducted in 2012, and we highlight several trends evident in these data. NCS-III data of course can be used to study more than trends, but since a third wave of the NCS particularly enhances our ability to examine change, it seems appropriate to introduce the NCS-III by emphasizing what it tells us about how congregations have changed even since 1998.

## THE NCS-III

The NCS-III essentially replicated the Wave I and II methodology, with some differences and enhancements. NCS methodology is described in considerable detail in Chaves et al. (1999) and Chaves and Anderson (2008), and additional methodological documentation is available both on the NCS web site ([www.soc.duke.edu/natcong](http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong)) and at the Association for Religion Data Archives ([www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)). Consequently, we describe here only the methodological basics and special features of the NCS-III.

### *The Sample*

The General Social Survey (GSS) is an in-person survey of a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized, English- or Spanish-speaking adults (Smith et al. 2013). We asked respondents to the 2012 GSS who said they attended religious services at least once a year to tell us where they attend. The congregations named by these respondents constitute a new nationally representative sample of religious congregations in the United States.

Two distinctive features of the NCS-III sample should be emphasized. The first is related to the fact that the 2012 GSS contained a panel component. Specifically, the 2012 GSS contained three distinct samples: a new 2012 cross-section of individuals, a re-interview of respondents to the 2010 GSS, and a second re-interview of respondents to the 2008 GSS. All respondents in the 2012 cross-section who said they attended religious services were asked to name their congregation, as were two-thirds of respondents from the 2010 re-interview sample. The remaining GSS respondents from the 2010 panel and all those from the 2008 panel were asked to name their congregation only if they were self-identified Hispanics and attended

religious services. This last part of the process provided the second distinctive feature of the NCS-III sample: an oversample of congregations attended by self-identified Hispanics funded by the Pew Center's Religion and Public Life Project.

All in all, 2,153 GSS respondents said that they attended religious services at least once a year. Of these, 133 backtracked on their attendance report when asked to name their congregation, 285 either did not name a congregation or named one that could not be located, and 41 mentioned a congregation that was closed, out of the country, not really a congregation, or in which neither English nor Spanish was spoken. The remaining 1,694 respondents provided valid congregational nominations, 1,537 of which were unique congregations. Two hundred and six (206) of these congregations declined to participate and data were gathered from 1,331, including the oversample of 77 congregations nominated by self-identified Hispanics.<sup>1</sup>

### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered between April and December, 2012 via a 50-minute interview with one key informant, usually a clergyperson, from each congregation. Seventeen of these interviews were conducted in Spanish. As before, we attempted to conduct these interviews by telephone, but we visited congregations and conducted in-person interviews if necessary. Unlike the first two NCS waves, which used paper-and-pencil questionnaires, the NCS-III used computer-assisted-personal-interviews (CAPI).

The NCS-III returned to the field strategy used in 1998: all NCS cases were allocated immediately to field staff around the country who were relatively close to their assigned congregations. This differed from the strategy used in 2006-07, when data collection began in phone banks in Chicago and Tucson, after which the remaining cases were assigned to field

interviewers. For reasons described in Chaves and Anderson (2008:417), the Wave II strategy produced more in-person interviews in Wave II (22.5 percent) than in Wave I (7.5 percent). Returning to the 1998 field strategy reduced the number of Wave III in-person interviews to 8.5 percent, similar to the 1998 level. Researchers concerned about possible interactions of survey mode and trends should attend to this detail.<sup>2</sup>

### *Coding Open-Ended Responses*

The 2012 questionnaire included several open-ended items. Some of these (for example, the translation used if the Bible was read during a service, or the head clergy person's highest degree) seemed straightforward enough that double coding was not necessary to assure reliability. Responses to other open-ended items were coded independently by two people using the same coding schemes used in previous NCS waves. We achieved inter-coder agreement of at least 87 percent for each item that was double-coded. Disagreements were adjudicated by a third person.

### *Weighting the Data*

The probability that a congregation appears in the NCS-III sample is proportional to its size: larger congregations are more likely to be in the sample than smaller congregations. Retaining or undoing this over-representation of larger congregations corresponds to viewing the data either from the perspective of attendees at the average congregation or from the perspective of the average congregation, without respect to its size. See Chaves and Anderson (2008:418) for further elaboration of this feature of the NCS sample.

Weights provided in the NCS data allow analysts to adjust for this probability-

proportional-to-size feature of the sample, as well as for duplicate nominations, the two-stage sampling design that the GSS began using in 2004, the panel component in the NCS-II, and the NCS-III oversample of congregations nominated by Hispanics. Users should become familiar with the several weights included in the NCS-III data set, though for most purposes analysts will want to weight the data by WT\_ALL3\_CONG\_DUP when examining the data from the average congregation's perspective and by WT\_ALL3\_ATTENDEE when examining the data from the average attendee's perspective. The NCS-III weights are described in detail in the NCS codebook.

### *Response Rate and Nonresponse Bias*

The NCS-III cooperation rate – the percentage of contacted congregations who agreed to participate – was 87 percent. The overall response rate, calculated in line with the RR3 response rate developed by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2008:35), but not taking account of the GSS's own response rate, is between 73 and 78 percent. We report a range because the exact response rate depends on assumptions about the congregations associated with GSS respondents who declined to nominate a congregation after stating that they attended more than once a year. Based on these GSS respondents' answers to the religious service attendance question and also on post-survey debriefing with GSS interviewers, we believe that the vast majority of these non-nominating GSS respondents did not name a congregation simply because they did not really attend often enough or in a meaningful enough way to be able to name a congregation. If these non-nominated congregations are not counted against the NCS-III response rate, the NCS-III response rate is 78 percent. If the non-nominations are indeed valid congregations, the response rate is 73 percent. We can think of these numbers as the maximum

and minimum NCS-III response rates. Incorporating the 2012 GSS's own 71 percent weighted response rate reduces the NCS-III response rate to between 52 and 54 percent.

We care about a response rate only as a proxy for nonresponse bias. We do not think the small amount of non-response bias present in the GSS translates into significant non-response bias in the NCS sample. Direct assessment of nonresponse bias also gives little reason for concern. Because we know the location and denomination of congregations who declined to participate, and we also know the location and denomination of GSS respondents who did not nominate a congregation even though they said that they attend religious services, we can directly assess bias in two characteristics of the sample: region and denomination. For both variables, the distribution in our sample differs only trivially from the distribution we would have obtained with a 100 percent response rate.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, then, the NCS-III sample constitutes a nationally representative sample of American religious congregations in 2012. The NCS provides a rich data set that can be used to study many facets of congregations, but the existence of three NCS waves makes the cumulative dataset, which contains information from 4,071 cases,<sup>4</sup> especially valuable for the study of change in American congregations since 1998. We turn now to such an examination.

## CHANGING AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS<sup>5</sup>

We report five trends: more ethnic diversity, more acceptance of gays and lesbians, increasingly informal worship styles, declining size (but not from the perspective of the average attendee), and declining denominational affiliation. These are not the only trends one can use the NCS to track. We chose these five because they are intrinsically interesting and important, and they illustrate the range of subjects one can examine with NCS data.



## *Ethnic Diversity*

American congregations have become more ethnically diverse since 1998, and the NCS helps us to better understand the exact nature of that increased diversity. A key point is that, although the population of congregations has itself become somewhat more diverse – for example, 7.7 percent of churchgoers attended predominantly Hispanic congregations in 2012 compared to only 1.4 percent in 1998<sup>6</sup> – there also is meaningful change *within* congregations. That is, congregations, especially predominantly white congregations, have become more internally diverse since 1998. Figure 1 tells the main story. The left-most set of bars shows that the percentage of people attending congregations in which no ethnic group constitutes at least 80 percent of the regular attendees increased from 15.3 percent in 1998 to 19.7 percent in 2012. This is a steady and notable increase in the percent of congregations in which no one group has an overwhelming majority of the people.

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

Even more remarkable, however, is the phenomenon documented in the rest of Figure 1: today's predominantly white congregations are less predominantly white than they were in 1998. The right-most three sets of bars show that, among predominantly white congregations, the percent of attendees in congregations with at least some Latinos, Asians, or African Americans has increased steadily since 1998. In 2012, clear majorities of churchgoers in predominantly white congregations were in congregations with at least some blacks (69 percent) or Hispanics (61.7 percent), and almost half (48 percent) were in congregations with at least some Asians. These are all notable increases since 1998. The second-from-the-left set of bars in Figure 1 tell this story in a different way: in 2012, only 11 percent of American churchgoers were in an all-

white congregation. That is approximately half as many as were in all-white congregations as recently as 1998. Interestingly, there is no corresponding increase in ethnic diversity within predominantly black congregations.

We do not want to overstate the significance of this increasing ethnic diversity within American congregations. Eighty-six percent of American congregations (containing 80 percent of religious service attendees) remain overwhelmingly white or black or Hispanic or Asian or whatever. Still, driven by developments such as immigration, increased interracial marriage, and increased educational attainment among African Americans, there is noticeable change in a more diverse direction.

#### *More Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians*

Increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians is of course one of the most well-known public opinion shifts in recent years. This change also seems to be happening at a fast pace within religious congregations. The 2006 and 2012 NCS's asked key informants whether or not an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship would be permitted to be full-fledged members of the congregation, and whether or not such people would be permitted to hold all volunteer leadership positions open to other members. Figure 2 shows the trend. In just six years, the number of congregations whose leaders said that gays and lesbians could be full-fledged members increased from 37.4 percent to 48 percent. The number of congregations whose leaders said that no volunteer leadership positions were closed to gays and lesbians increased from 17.7 percent to 26.4 percent.

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

There are substantial differences in this trend across religious traditions. In contrast to

the aggregate trend, for example, there seems to be less acceptance of gays and lesbians among Catholic churches in 2012 than there was in 2006. The number of Catholic parishes whose leaders said that gays and lesbians could be full-fledged members decreased from 74 percent to 53 percent. The number of Catholic parishes whose leaders said that no volunteer leadership positions were closed to gays and lesbians declined from 39 percent to 26 percent. This decline may reflect a backlash among some Catholic Church leaders against the legalization of gay marriage in some states, a backlash evident in well-publicized instances of long-term teachers in Catholic schools losing their jobs, and long-term members denied communion, after marrying a same-sex partner. This result should not be interpreted as declining acceptance of gay and lesbian members and volunteer leaders among the Catholic rank and file, who, in line with national public opinion trends, have become more accepting of homosexuality.

Although more white conservative Protestant churches expressed acceptance of gay and lesbian members in 2012 than in 2006 (increasing from 16 percent to 24 percent), there was no increase in acceptance of gay or lesbian leaders (only 4 percent in 2012) within white conservative Protestant churches. But the increased acceptance of gays and lesbians among black Protestant churches, white liberal churches, and non-Christian congregations were large enough to offset these patterns and produce an aggregate change that is remarkably large for just a six-year period.<sup>7</sup>

### *More Informal Worship*

Increased informality in worship is another key trend in these data. This was a trend that we identified after the second wave of the NCS (Chaves and Anderson 2008: 422-423), and it also has been observed in the *Faith Communities Today* surveys (Roozen 2011), but it is worth

reporting that congregations continue to move in this direction. Thirteen questions about each congregation's most recent main worship service were repeated in all three NCS waves. For each of these worship practices, if there is consistent change since 1998 it is in the informal direction. Figure 3 shows the pattern. More people attend worship services containing drums, jumping or shouting or dancing, raising hands in praise, visual projection equipment, a time during the service when people greet one another, or speaking in tongues. Fewer people attend services that include choirs, and fewer attend services that use a written program. Some of these changes, such as the increased use of visual projection equipment, have occurred at a remarkably fast pace, but the consistency of the pattern across a wide range of items is what most impresses us. This pattern is evident as well for practices not included in Figure 3 that were included in only 2 of the 3 NCS waves: more guitar use, less organ use, more services during which people join hands at some point, and fewer clergy wearing robes. Overall, there is a fairly general trend at work here, probably reflecting a broader trend in American culture towards informality.

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

### *Size*

The NCS contains several indicators of congregational size. Figure 4 shows the trend in median congregational size for five different measures: the total number of people associated with the congregation's religious life; the number of people, including adults and children, who regularly participate in the congregation's religious life; the number of adults who regularly participate; the number of people who attended the previous week's main worship service; and the total number of people who attended all weekend worship services in the past weekend. This last variable was not measured in 1998.

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

It is worth noting that, after two NCS waves, average congregational size appeared not to have changed between 1998 and 2006 (Chaves and Anderson 2008:420). The third wave of data, however, changes the picture. The median number of people involved in any way dropped from 150 in 1998 and 2006 to 135 in 2012; the median number of regular participants declined from 80 in 1998 to 75 in 2006, and to 70 in 2012; the median attendance at the main worship service was 70 in 1998, 65 in 2006, and only 60 in 2012; and median attendance at all weekend worship services declined from 90 in 2006 to 76 in 2012. These are not large declines, but there is a consistent signal. The trend for each of the size measures is either down or stable. In addition to being substantively interesting, this illustrates how adding data points and increasing sample size is analogous to building a more powerful telescope. It now looks like there was indeed declining size between 1998 and 2006, but the decline was slow enough that we could not discern the signal from the noise before the addition of the 2012 data. Interpreted most conservatively, these data indicate that American congregations, on average, have either remained stable in size since 1998, or have somewhat shrunk since 1998. There clearly is no sign of growth, and, consistent with Roozen (2011), we think slight decline is the most likely reality behind these numbers.<sup>8</sup>

But there is another aspect to the size trend. At the same time as the average congregation is declining in size, the average religious service attendee is experiencing a congregation of increasing size. Figure 5 presents the relevant trends. This figure shows trends in the same five size measures included in Figure 4, but now from the perspective of the average attendee rather than from the perspective of the average congregation. The numbers in Figure 5 are larger than the analogous numbers in Figure 4, indicating that people are concentrated in

larger congregations. More importantly, Figure 5 suggests that this concentration is increasing. Two of these five indicators suggest that the congregation attended by the average person was larger in 2012 than it was in the earliest time measured. The median of regularly participating adults in the average person's congregation increased from 275 in 1998 to 280 in 2006, and increased again to 301 in 2012. The median attendance at all weekend worship services at the average person's congregation increased from 325 in 2006 to 400 in 2012. The other three measures do not show consistent growth, but neither do they show decline. Even though the size of the average congregation has declined somewhat since 1998, the average attendee is attending a larger congregation in 2012 than he or she attended in 1998 and 2006. This is because the churchgoing population has become more concentrated in larger congregations, an important trend in the social organization of American religion.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

### *Declining Denominational Affiliation*

Another trend in American religion's social organization is that more congregations are unaffiliated with a denomination or convention. Figure 6 shows the basic trend. In 1998, key informants from 18 percent of congregations, containing 10 percent of religious service attendees, said that their congregation was not formally affiliated with a denomination, convention, or a similar kind of association. Those numbers increased to 24 percent and 15 percent, respectively, in 2012.

\* \* \* \* \* FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE \* \* \* \* \*

Although independent congregations made up a larger share of American congregations in 2012 than in 1998, the majority of congregations, containing the vast majority of the

churchgoing population, remain denominationally affiliated. And among congregations that are within a denomination, there is no decline in the proportion who have had a visiting speaker from the denomination or who have sent people from the congregation to attend denominational meetings or serve on denominational committees. In 2012, two-thirds of congregations (66 percent) had a denominational representative as a visiting speaker and three-quarters (77 percent) had people who attended denominational meetings or served on a denominational committee. There are signs, however, of weakening financial connections. The median denominationally affiliated congregation gave 8 percent of its income to the denomination in 1998 and only 4 percent in 2012.<sup>10</sup> Overall, declining denominational affiliation and weakening financial ties between congregations and their denominations are noteworthy developments, but denominations remain a prominent feature on the American religious landscape.

## CONCLUSION

We have focused on trends because having three waves of data makes the NCS especially valuable for studying change in American congregations since 1998. Beyond change over time, however, analysts also can investigate many other subjects using one or more waves of NCS data. Having three waves of data also enhances the NCS's usefulness for studying things other than trends because each NCS wave increases the overall NCS sample size as well the number of sampled congregations in various subgroups. As we noted earlier, the cumulative NCS dataset now includes information from 4,071 cases. And the cumulative sample now includes 538 predominantly black congregations, 172 predominantly Hispanic congregations, 143 non-Christian congregations, and 407 congregations containing at least 10 percent recent immigrants to the United States. Analysts can take advantage of this increased statistical power to learn

more about subgroups of American congregations.

We have only scratched the surface of what can be learned with the new NCS data. There are important subgroup differences in the aggregate trends we have emphasized, there are other trends to explore, and there are subjects other than change over time to investigate. We hope readers will find the new NCS data to be a valuable resource in the ongoing effort to advance knowledge about American religion.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The NCS-III contains data on 235 congregations nominated by self-identified Hispanics, including the oversample of 77 congregations.

<sup>2</sup> See Bowling (2005) for a review of the literature on survey mode effects.

<sup>3</sup> The details of these analyses are available upon request.

<sup>4</sup> The 2006 NCS included a panel of 256 congregations who participated in the 1998 NCS. So the cumulative NCS dataset includes data from 3,815 congregations, 256 of which have both 1998 and 2006 data, for a total of 4,071 cases.

<sup>5</sup> Every difference that we highlight in the text is significant at least at the .05 level for either congregations or attendees, unless otherwise noted. Data are weighted by WT\_ALL3\_CONG\_DUP to produce results from the congregation's perspective and by WT\_ALL3\_ATTENDEE to produce results from the attendee's perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Here and throughout, "predominantly" Hispanic (or white, black, or Asian) means 80 percent or more of the regular attendees are that ethnicity.

<sup>7</sup> Acceptance of gay and lesbian members among white liberal Protestant churches increased



from 67 percent in 2006 to 76 percent in 2012; acceptance of gay and lesbian volunteer leaders increased from 53 percent to 63 percent. Among black Protestant churches the increases were from 44 percent to 62 percent accepting gay and lesbian members and from 7 percent to 22 percent accepting gay and lesbian volunteer leaders. We hesitate to report numbers for non-Christian congregations because that is such a small and heterogeneous category in this sample.

<sup>8</sup> We focus on medians here and in the next paragraph because the heavily skewed size distribution makes medians much more meaningful than means. Trends in the means of logged size show the same qualitative pattern as trends in the medians. For the number of regular participants and for attendees at the main service, the mean of the 2012 logged value is significantly lower than the analogous 1998 value at least at the .05 level. For regular adult participants and for attendees at all weekend services, the mean of the 2012 logged value is significantly lower (at the .05 level) than the 2006 value. There is no statistically significant trend in total number of people associated in any way with the congregation.

<sup>9</sup> As before, trends in the means of logged size show the same qualitative pattern as trends in the medians. For the number of people associated in any way with the religious life of the congregation, the mean of the 2012 logged value is significantly higher (at the .10 level) than the analogous 2006 value. For the number of regular adult participants, the 2012 logged value is significantly higher (at the .10 level) than the 1998 and 2006 values. There is no statistically significant trend in the other three variables.

<sup>10</sup> The 34 congregations who said they gave as much or more to their denominations as they received in income are excluded from these calculations. These seem to be congregations that

are in more centralized denominations in which it is not always easy to distinguish between the denomination's money and the congregation's money, and perhaps also congregations that are fully supported by the denomination.

<sup>11</sup> The cumulative NCS data file and codebook are available from the Association of Religion Data Archives (<http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NCSIII.asp>) and also will be available from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research ([www.icpsr.umich.edu](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu)). The codebook also is available at the NCS website ([www.soc.duke.edu/natcong](http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong)).

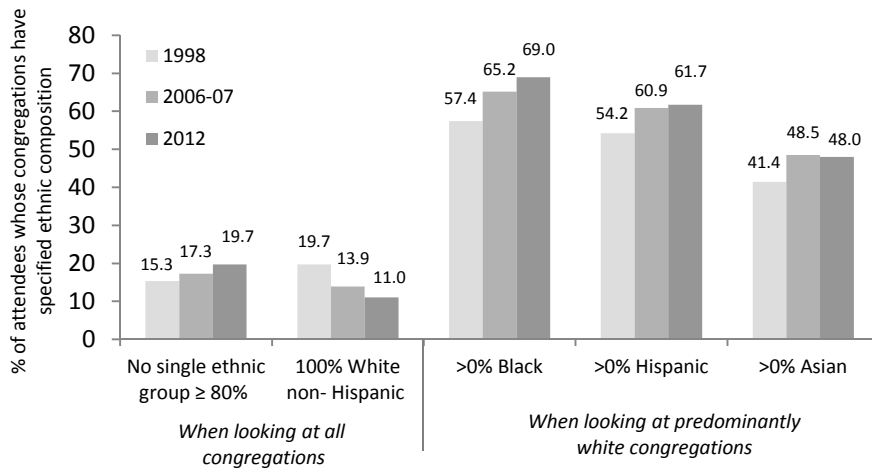
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Figure 1  
Increasing Ethnic Diversity of Religious Congregations in the United States



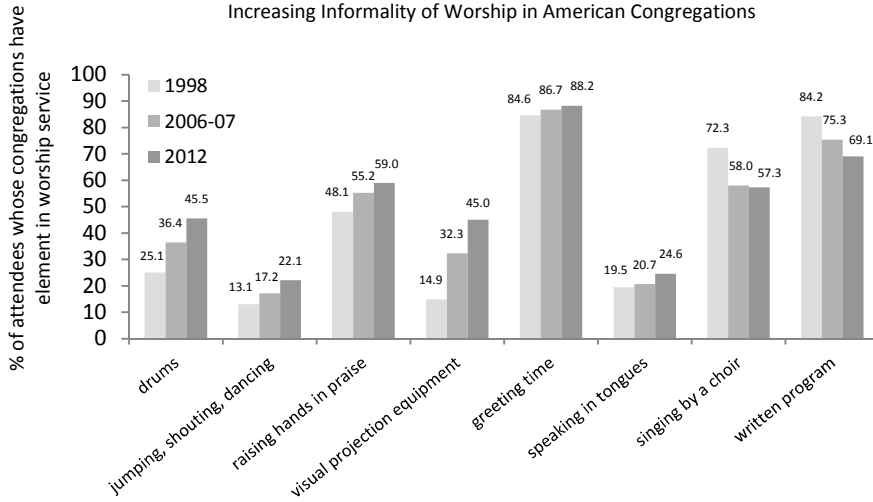
All trends are significant at least at the .05 level.

Figure 2  
Increasing Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians Within U.S. Religious Congregations



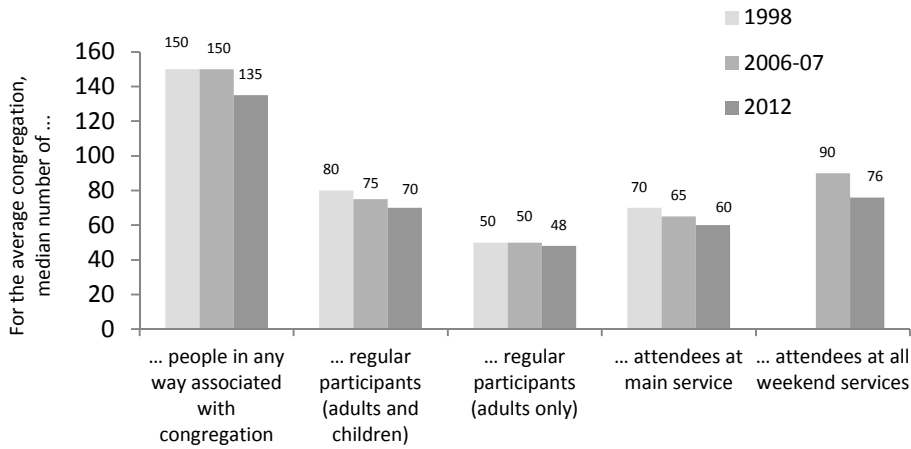
Both trends are significant at least at the .001 level.

Figure 3  
Increasing Informality of Worship in American Congregations



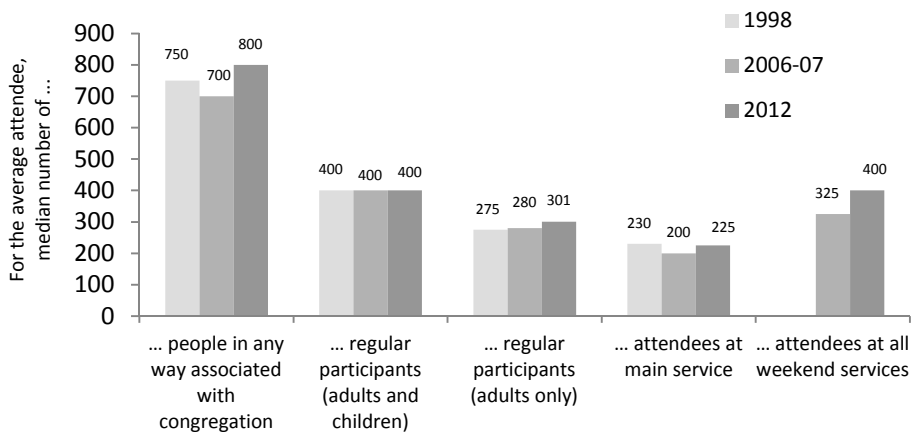
All trends are significant at least at the .05 level.

Figure 4  
Decreasing Average Size of U.S. Religious Congregations



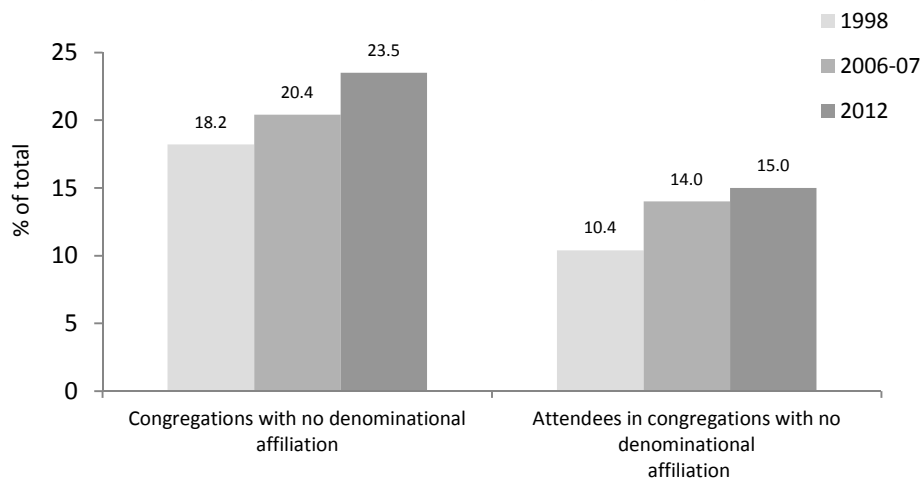
This figure displays medians, but similar trends are evident in the means of the logged variables. For each of these logged variables, there is either a statistically significant (at least at the .05 level) downwards trend or no trend. See main text and associated notes for details.

Figure 5  
Increasing Size of U.S. Congregations Experienced by the Average Attendee



This figure displays medians, but similar trends are evident in the means of the logged variables. For each of these logged variables, there is either a statistically significant (at least at the .10 level) upwards trend or no trend. See main text and associated notes for details.

Figure 6  
Decreasing Denominational Affiliation in U.S. Religious Congregations



All trends are significant at least at the .01 level.