

New People in U.S. Congregations: Who Are They and Why Do They Come?

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Abstract

About 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org) conducted by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April 2001. Congregations were selected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago using hyper-network sampling to be representative of congregations of all denominations and faith groups across the country. All worshipers in each participating congregation completed a survey in worship, providing extensive data about individuals actively involved in religious life in America. Survey topics included worshipers' faith background and current membership, their participation in activities of the congregation, and their values regarding congregational life.

Using data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, worshipers who began participating in their current congregation within the last five years are identified. An examination of the responses of these newcomers provides insights into the religious backgrounds of worshipers in congregations of various faith traditions, their reasons for visiting the congregation for the first time, and the factors that encouraged them to return.

Compared to long-time attendees, worshipers new to their congregation in the last five years: attend services less frequently; are less likely to participate in small groups, outreach activities, or community service projects of the church; are less likely to serve in leadership roles; give less; and participate in congregational decisions less often. The most common reason for visiting the congregation for the first time is a personal invitation. Common reasons for returning after the first visit are the quality of the sermon and worship experience and the friendliness of the people.

The Sample

We contracted with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to identify a random sample of U.S. congregations attended by individuals who participated in the General Social Survey (GSS) in the year 2000. All GSS participants who reported that they attended worship at least once in the prior year were asked to name the place where they worshiped. Since the GSS involves a national random sample of individuals, congregations identified by GSS participants comprise a national random sample of congregations. NORC researchers verified that each nominated congregation was an actual congregation and then invited each congregation to participate in the project. Of 1,214 nominated and verified congregations, 807 agreed to participate (66%), and 434 returned completed surveys from their worshipers (36%). (Congregations that chose not to participate gave many different reasons.) Surveys were given in worship at the end of April 2001. Worshipers in these congregations completed 122,287 attendee surveys. One-third of worshipers came to their congregations within the last five years (34%; n=41,260), and they are the primary focus of this paper.

Table 1
Does Congregational Size Influence the Percentage of New People?

	< 100 in Worship	100-350 in Worship	More than 350 in Worship	Overall
Visitors	3%	3%	6%	6%
New People (attending 5 years or less)	31%	33%	35%	34%
Old-timers (attending more than 5 years)	66%	64%	58%	60%

Table 2
Does Faith Tradition Influence the Percentage of New People?
Catholic Parishes Have More Visitors;
Conservative Protestant Churches Have More New People

	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Historically Black	Other
Visitors	8%	3%	3%	1%	5%
New People	31%	31%	44%	25%	28%
Old-timers	61%	66%	53%	74%	67%

Table 3
Types of New People by Faith Group

	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Historically Black	Overall
Type of New Person:					
First-timer	6%	8%	8%	11%	7%
Returnee	13%	27%	19%	21%	18%
Switcher	8%	22%	31%	21%	18%
Transfer	73%	42%	42%	48%	57%

Table 4
Comparing New People to Other Worshipers:
Demographics

	Visitors	New People	Old-timers
Gender:			
Female	63%	60%	62%
Male	37%	40%	38%
Age:			
15-24	12%	11%	7%
25-44	31%	45%	22%
45-64	36%	31%	39%
65 or older	20%	13%	33%
Education:			
Not a college graduate	62%	59%	64%
College graduate	25%	26%	22%
Graduate degree	13%	15%	14%
Marital Status:			
Currently married	59%	62%	68%
Not married	41%	38%	32%
Children at home:			
Some	41%	51%	45%
None	59%	49%	55%

Table 5
Comparing New People to Other Worshipers:
Congregational Activities and Experiences

	Visitors	New People	Old-timers
Worship attendance:			
Weekly	15%	76%	86%
One to three times a month.....	17%	19%	11%
Less often	68%	5%	3%
Participation in small groups:			
Sunday school, religious education	4%	21%	24%
Prayer groups, Bible study	5%	17%	22%
Social groups, fellowships.....	6%	21%	33%
Not involved in small groups.....	88%	60%	48%
Participation in outreach/service activities:			
Community service.....	5%	13%	23%
Evangelization	4%	10%	15%
Neither	94%	82%	68%
Leadership roles:			
Any leadership role	10%	29%	46%
Giving to the congregation:			
5% or more	10%	40%	53%
Less than 5%.....	50%	54%	43%
Do not contribute.....	40%	6%	4%
Involvement in congregational decision making:			
Often/occasionally.....	11%	22%	37%
Less often/never	89%	78%	63%
Membership in congregation:			
Yes.....	4%	64%	92%
No, but in process of joining	4%	5%	1%
No, but regularly participate.....	12%	20%	5%
No.....	80%	10%	2%
Change in congregational participation:			
Participate more in last 2 years	11%	33%	25%
Participate the same.....	25%	35%	58%
Participate less in last 2 years	6%	9%	15%
Not applicable (coming less than 2 yrs.)	58%	22%	2%
Growth in faith in last year:			
Much growth through congregation	5%	36%	33%
Much growth through own activities.....	23%	15%	15%
Much growth through other groups.....	20%	7%	6%
Some growth.....	41%	36%	40%
No real growth in faith.....	11%	6%	7%
Invited others to worship in last year:			
Yes.....	25%	51%	45%
No.....	75%	49%	55%
Frequency of personal devotions:			
More than once a week	57%	62%	64%
Occasionally to weekly	27%	25%	24%
Less often or never	16%	13%	11%
Pastor and congregation are good match:			
Agree or strongly agree.....	54%	87%	85%
Neutral or unsure.....	44%	11%	11%
Disagree or strongly disagree	2%	2%	4%

Table 6
Visiting the Congregation for the First Time

	New People
First found out about the congregation by . . . : *	
Someone I knew mentioned it or asked me to visit	48%
Looking for church of my denomination.....	12%
Noticed it as I passed by	10%
Other	7%
Child attends preschool/day care here.....	5%
Don't remember.....	5%
Saw it in phone book or yellow pages.....	4%
Through participation in another congregation	3%
Grew up or previously belonged here	3%
Attended wedding, baptism, funeral here	2%
Noticed ad on TV, radio, or in the newspaper	1%
Someone I did not know asked me to visit	1%
Attended community group here	1%
Received a letter or pamphlet.....	<1%
Most important reasons for coming here the first time (mark two): *	
Easy to get to.....	33%
Someone I knew attended here.....	32%
Actively looking for place to worship.....	26%
Heard about the worship services, preaching, activities.....	11%
Other.....	11%
Liked the people here I had already met.....	10%
Convenient times for worship	7%
Was invited to visit by a member	7%
Liked the reputation of the congregation.....	6%
Was invited to visit by the pastor or priest	3%
Don't remember.....	3%
Noticed ad on TV, radio, newspaper.....	<1%
Number of other congregations visited before this one: *	
None.....	28%
One.....	41%
Two or three	20%
More than three	11%
Familiarity with congregation before first time: *	
Very or somewhat familiar	33%
Only a little familiar	21%
Not at all familiar.....	45%
Importance of denomination: *	
Very important	47%
Important	26%
Not very or not at all important	24%
Don't remember.....	3%

* Item answered by sub-sample of worshipers; n=376 new people.

**Table 7
Reactions to First Visit**

	New People
What most impressed you and made you want to come back (mark two): *	
Quality of sermon, homily, talk	35%
Friendliness of the people.....	32%
Overall worship experience	30%
Personality or style of pastor or priest	18%
Sense of God's presence in the congregation	16%
Music during worship	13%
Activities for children and youth.....	5%
Worship space, facilities	4%
Other	4%
Wasn't impressed, but came back anyway	4%
Stance of people here on a particular issue.....	3%
Don't remember	3%
Follow-up contact I received after first visit.....	2%
Quality of the educational program	1%
Were you recognized as a visitor (mark all that apply): *	
Greeted by people sitting nearby.....	45%
Greeted by usher or greeter	40%
Greeted by pastor or priest.....	35%
Asked to complete visitor card or sign book	29%
Don't remember	23%
Invited to gathering or coffee after service.....	14%
Other	6%
Asked to wear special name tag or lapel ribbon.....	2%
Follow-up efforts after first visit (mark all that apply): *	
No contact after first visit.....	37%
Received letter or postcard from member, pastor, or priest	19%
Received package of materials about congregation.....	14%
Don't remember	14%
Pastor or priest called me	13%
Member(s) called me	13%
Pastor or priest visited me	8%
Invited to program or activity for new people	7%
Members(s) visited me.....	5%
Received welcome gift.....	5%
Other	5%

* Item answered by sub-sample of worshipers; n=376 new people.

**Table 8
Denominational Differences**

	Denomination of Congregation Where Each New Person Participates		
	Catholics	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestants
First found out about the congregation by . . . : *			
Someone I knew mentioned it or asked me to visit.....	37%	50%	65%
Looking for church of my denomination	17%	9%	5%
Noticed it as I passed by	12%	10%	6%
Importance of denomination: *			
Very important.....	65%	29%	31%
Important.....	21%	34%	26%
Not very or not at all important	9%	37%	41%
Don't remember	5%	—	—
Most important reasons for coming here the first time (mark two): *			
Easy to get to	45%	27%	17%
Someone I knew attended here	28%	30%	43%
Actively looking for place to worship	22%	43%	21%
Heard about the worship services, preaching, activities	7%	10%	18%
What most impressed you and made you want to come back (mark two): *			
Quality of sermon, homily, talk.....	39%	32%	32%
Friendliness of the people	24%	47%	33%
Overall worship experience.....	27%	30%	34%
Personality or style of pastor or priest.....	17%	19%	18%
Sense of God's presence in the congregation.....	15%	11%	23%
Music during worship.....	14%	13%	12%
Were you recognized as a visitor (mark all that apply): *			
Greeted by people sitting nearby	28%	64%	57%
Greeted by usher or greeter	25%	51%	59%
Greeted by pastor or priest	28%	55%	32%
Asked to complete visitor card or sign book.....	4%	47%	58%
Don't remember.....	36%	15%	7%
Invited to gathering or coffee after service	11%	24%	11%
Follow-up efforts after first visit (mark all that apply): *			
No contact after first visit	53%	25%	20%
Received letter/postcard from member, pastor, or priest....	7%	20%	39%
Received package of materials about congregation	13%	14%	18%
Don't remember.....	16%	16%	10%
Pastor or priest called me.....	5%	25%	18%
Member(s) called me.....	3%	17%	26%

* Item answered by sub-sample of worshipers; n=376 new people.

**Table 9
Age Differences**

	Age of New People			
	15-24	25-44	45-64	65 +
First found out about the congregation by . . . : *				
Someone I knew mentioned it or asked me to visit	48%	53%	43%	46%
Looking for church of my denomination	3%	12%	9%	23%
Noticed it as I passed by	6%	11%	6%	10%
Importance of denomination: *				
Very important	19%	50%	47%	53%
Important	29%	21%	29%	32%
Not very or not at all important	42%	26%	23%	13%
Don't remember	10%	3%	1%	2%
Most important reasons for coming here the first time (mark two): *				
Easy to get to	26%	31%	34%	42%
Someone I knew attended here	45%	34%	28%	31%
Actively looking for place to worship	13%	25%	28%	29%
Heard about the worship services, preaching, activities	—	15%	12%	6%
What most impressed you and made you want to come back (mark two): *				
Quality of sermon, homily, talk	42%	36%	34%	35%
Friendliness of the people	42%	29%	32%	39%
Overall worship experience	26%	27%	33%	36%
Personality or style of pastor or priest	10%	18%	23%	12%
Sense of God's presence in the congregation	13%	18%	14%	19%
Music during worship	13%	11%	16%	17%

* Item answered by sub-sample of worshipers; n=376 new people.

Data Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey (2001): Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce. Louisville, Kentucky: U.S. Congregations and Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).