Buildings and Gatherings: The Shifting Landscapes of American Religious Communities
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Activating Hidden Assets: Making the Most of Sacred Places for the Wider Community
Partners for Sacred Places
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The Backdrop

The rise of the ‘nones’ and the decline that signals
The history of American religious innovation
Our task: Keep both those things in balance
How Many Congregations Are There?

- 2020 Religion Census says 356,642
- Likely undercounted by 20% or more, including
  - African American bodies
  - Nondenominational Churches, including networks
  - Immigrant congregations
- Compare to schools (pre-k – 12)
  ~ 129k

SCHOOLS: HTTPS://NCES.ED.GOV/FASTFACTS/DISPLAY.ASP?ID=84
How Big Are They?

Estimated Number of Congregations by Average Number Regularly-Attending Adults

- 1-49, 10.2%
- 50-99, 13.6%
- 100-249, 22.0%
- 250-499, 15.5%
- 500-2499, 28.7%
- 2500+, 10.1%

% of Adult Regular Attenders by Size of Congregation

- 1-49, 10.2%
- 50-99, 13.6%
- 100-249, 22.0%
- 250-499, 15.5%
- 500-2499, 28.7%
- 2500+, 10.1%

HTTPS://WWW.THEARDA.COM/NCS/NCSFREQ/NUMREGCAT.ASP
Income From All Sources

- < $25,000: 10%
- $25,000-$99,999: 5%
- $100,000-$249,999: 15%
- $250,000-$499,999: 25%
- $500,000-$999,999: 30%
- $1,000,000+: 35%
Which Religious Traditions Do They Represent?

% of **Congregations** by Tradition

- White Mainline, 21.7%
- Black Protestants, 20.6%
- White Conservative, 45.7%
- Roman Catholic, 6.2%
- Other Religions, 5.8%

% of **Attenders** by Tradition

- White Mainline, 19.8%
- Black Protestants, 11.8%
- White Conservative, 36.4%
- Roman Catholic, 27.8%
- Other Religions, 4.2%
How Many People Are Connected?

- 30-45% of the adult population with some regularity
- Perhaps 65% at least tangentially
- 28% (and growing) are unaffiliated, and most of those don’t attend

*Trends in Service Attendance*

- never
- seldom
- few times a year
- once/twice a month
- weekly +

HTTPS://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/RELIGION/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/SITES/7/2019/10/DETAILED-TABLES-V1-FOR-WEB.PDF
Effects of the Pandemic

• Hybrid worship continues
• Fellowship, youth & kids’ activities are largely in-person.
• Adult activities include virtual
• Service work is in person
What about the buildings?

86.6% own the building (including denominational ownership)

51.0% - outside group used or rented space in building in last 12 months

BUT

Building upkeep is 2nd biggest part of the budget

Building issues are among leaders’ biggest concerns
Are Sacred Spaces Disappearing?

- Yes – perhaps 1% per year
- No – lots of ‘churn’ as buildings change hands

- Most likely to disappear
  + Smallest
  + Storefronts & house churches
  + Already dilapidated

STOREFRONT PHOTOS: CAMILO JOSE VERGARA (NATIONAL GALLERY, WASHINGTON.) FOR SALE PHOTO: WENDY CADGE
Are replacements on the horizon?

• Roughly 10% of congregations are less than 10 years old.

• New modes of gathering with uncertain futures
What is at risk?
The Good of the Members
Congregational Gatherings Provide

- A Community of Belonging and Caring -> positive health and wellbeing
- A Community of Tradition -> Identity and inclusion, especially for minority & immigrant groups
- A Moral Community -> neighborliness
- A Public Community -> civic skills
Congregational Gatherings Connect

TO INFORMATION

TO NETWORKS

TO LEADERS
What is at risk?

Community Spaces
Spaces for

• Meeting, organizing, deciding
• Performing
• Providing community services
• Beauty
Congregational Spaces

- Are critical social infrastructure
- Are constantly changing and potentially at risk
- Demand strategic investments
To learn more...

• www.StudyingCongregations.org