

News Release

**Interfaith Worship Increasing,  
Congregations Concerned About Growth**

*HARTFORD (March 12, 2008 – For Immediate Release)*

-- The increased attention given by communities of faith to interfaith engagements since September 11, 2001 continues to be dramatic.

-- Strong beliefs exist among members of congregations at both ends of the theological spectrum, whether conservative or liberal.

-- Membership growth and increasing or maintaining the activity level and participation of existing members are the most important issues facing faith communities today.

These are among the findings of the most recent survey of congregations by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership.

The survey findings are available in a newly released report, “American Congregations 2005,” based on a survey of 884 randomly sampled congregations of all faith traditions in the United States. The survey updates results from a survey taken in 2000, and is the latest in CCSP’s series of trend-tracking national surveys of U.S. congregations.

David A. Roozen, Director of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership and Professor of Religion and Society at Hartford Seminary, said that, “If you are at all interested in research on faith communities, this report is must reading. It provides both an overview of faith communities, broken down by denomination, and also details on worship, spiritual practices, interfaith involvement, conflict, leadership, finances, electronic communication, identity and vitality, growth, and challenges.

**Interfaith Involvement**

One unanticipated consequence in the immediate aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 was an upturn in interfaith awareness and interfaith engagements. And beyond the traditionally presumed melting pot of Protestant, Catholic and Jew, America’s religious consciousness now included Islam.

A comparison of data from this latest survey to the original survey found that interfaith activity among faith communities had more than tripled – from 7 percent to 22 percent participating in interfaith worship and from 8 percent to 38 percent joining in interfaith community service activities.

## **Identity and Vitality**

The theological and political outlooks of congregations tilt decidedly toward the conservative side. Even a majority of Old-line Protestant congregations indicate that their members fall to the somewhat conservative side of the scale.

Old-line Protestant congregations also appear more invested in communal bonds (close-knit family) than purpose-driven or adapting to the rapidity of social change characteristic of today's world.

Theological as well as political stereotypes tend to identify social justice with liberal. Theologically this relates to liberalism's priority for equality and "this worldly" concerns. The survey found that there is considerable truth in the stereotype, at least in regard to the predispositions of American congregations.

The survey confirmed that a congregation's propensity for strong belief is linked to the strictness of its theology. The more conservative a congregation, the greater is its propensity for strongly held beliefs, according to the survey. At the same time, however, the most liberal congregations also have a propensity for strongly held beliefs.

## **Issues and Challenges**

The survey asked, "What is the most important issue or challenge currently facing your congregation?"

More than 90 percent responded. The top five answers were:

- Membership growth
- Increasing or maintaining the activity level and participation of existing members
- Finances and the need to raise more money or reallocate funds
- Changing demographics
- Buildings and the need for more or renovated space

Other findings in the survey were:

Congregational conflict is a near fact of life. A majority of congregations reported either minor or major conflict. There is more conflict and more severe conflict within Old-line Protestantism than within other Protestant denominations. Also, persons of faith tend to view conflict through a negative lens, and it frequently does have negative consequences. Another cost of conflict is its diminishing effect on congregational vitality.

Congregations are increasingly feeling financial strain. With a steady half century of membership losses, the financial pinch has been especially sharp within Old-line Protestantism: Less than half report good or excellent financial health.

The report was written by Roozen, director of the Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

A link to view the report is available at: <http://fact.hartsem.edu/products/index.html>, where it may be purchased online. For special orders and questions, contact Mary Jane Ross, at Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research, (860) 509-9543 or [mross@hartsem.edu](mailto:mross@hartsem.edu).

*Faith Communities Today* surveys and publications are products of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, a collaborative, multifaith coalition of American faith communities affiliated with Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Researchers, consultants and program staff representing 39 denominations and faith groups contributed to the American Congregations survey.

FACT/CCSP strives to offer research-based resources for congregational development that are useful across faith traditions, believing that all communities of faith encounter common issues and benefit from one another's experiences. It also informs the public about the contributions of congregations to American society and about the changes affecting and emanating from one of America's major sources of voluntary association – local congregations. For more information on CCSP, visit [fact.hartsem.edu](http://fact.hartsem.edu).

*About Hartford Seminary and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research:* Hartford Seminary focuses on interfaith relations, congregational studies and faith in practice. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research has a 30-year record of rigorous, policy-relevant research, anticipation of emerging issues and commitment to the creative dissemination of learning.

For more on the Seminary and the Institute, visit the websites ([www.hartsem.edu](http://www.hartsem.edu) or [hrr.hartsem.edu](http://hrr.hartsem.edu)) or contact David Barrett at (860) 509-9519 or [dbarrett@hartsem.edu](mailto:dbarrett@hartsem.edu).

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