

Twenty Year UCC FACT Trends Spotlight

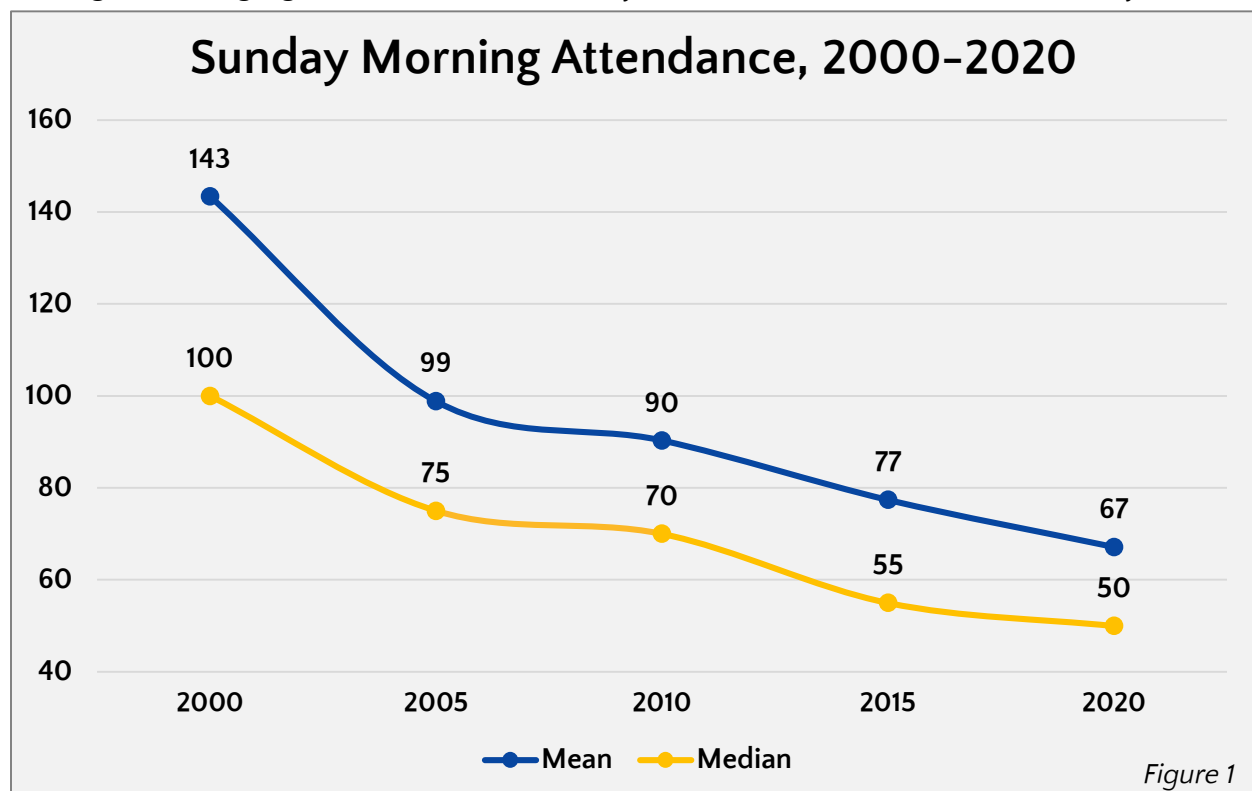
Report by the Center for Analytics, Research & Development and Data (CARDD)

Introduction

The Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey was first conducted in 2000 and has been followed ever since by surveys every five years (with an additional report in 2008). Since its first run over two decades ago, the religious landscape of the United States has changed considerably. Naturally, the UCC has changed with it. The following report highlights several of the most notable trends, drawing on successive FACT surveys to trace changes in attendance, participation, congregational conflict, and part-time clergy.

Attendance and Participation have Declined

On average, mean weekend worship attendance declined by 17% every five years between 2000 and 2020 (Figure 1); the decline in median attendance over the same period was 16% every five years. In 2000, an average of roughly 143 people attended weekend worship at UCC churches; median worship attendance was 100 for the year. In 2020, the average and the median number of attendees were roughly 67 and 50, respectively—approximately 53% and 50% of what they were in 2000. Akin to other American mainline Protestant denominations, worship attendance and membership among UCC congregations have both steadily declined since the mid-20th century.¹⁻⁵



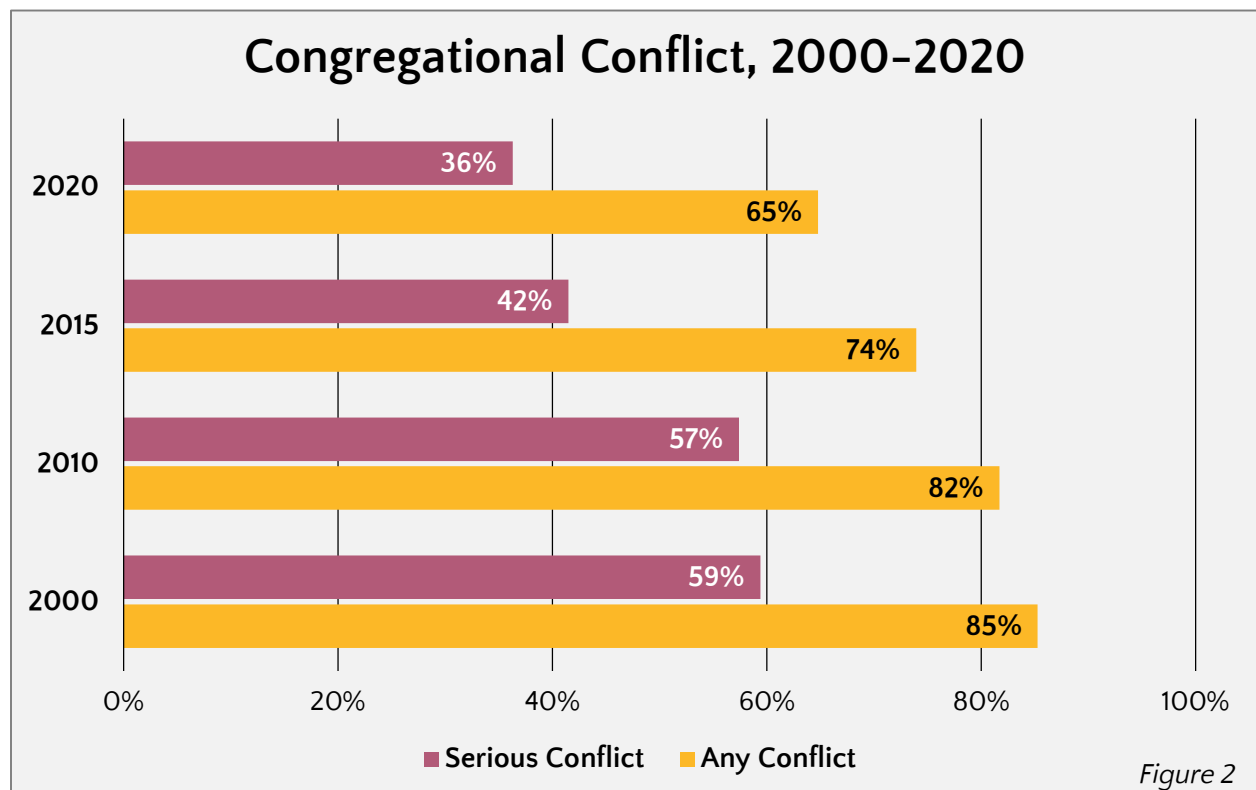
Congregational engagement is not represented by worship attendance alone. Rather, the social and community programs offered by churches are integral aspects of their mission, often involving persons who are not regular worship attendees. Since 2000, median participation among the UCC congregations has been greater than median worship attendance even as both have declined (Table 1). In 2000, median participation and worship attendance were 130 and 100, respectively. Analysis of the UCC’s FACT 2020 sample found median participation (65 people) and attendance (50 people) to be roughly 50% of what they were 20 years ago.⁶

Table 1
Comparison of Participation and Attendance, 2000–2020.

Year	Median Participants	Median Worship Attendees
2020	65	50
2015	65	55
2010	85	70
2000	130	100

Congregational Conflict has Declined

Between 2000 and 2020, conflictⁱ within UCC FACT congregations became less frequent (Figure 2). In 2000, 85% of UCC congregations reported experiencing conflict in the preceding 5 years; in 2020, that figure was 65%. The percentage of UCC FACT congregational respondents reporting serious conflict in the previous 5 years declined



between 2000 and 2020 from roughly 59% to 36%. Intra-congregational conflict is common across faiths: 64% of the overall FACT 2020 populationⁱⁱ reported that at least some level of conflict had occurred in the previous 5 years. Lastly, over 1 in 10 (11%) UCC congregations experienced some level of specifically political conflict in 2020; most (64%) did not.

Part-time Clergy are on the Rise

More UCC clergy are ministering in part-time roles than ever before. Part-time clergy comprised 34% of the 2020 UCC FACT sample's clergy; just 17% of the 2000 sample's clergy were part-time ministers (Table 2). Among part-time clergy in 2020, the mean hours worked per week was 20. The proportion of part-time clergy who are also employed in a secular setting has trended downward since FACT 2000. Fewer than 1 in 3 (32%) part-time clergy members had outside secular employment in addition to their ministerial employment in 2020, landing close to the 35% figure for the 2000 UCC FACT sample.

Table 2
Part-time Ministry & Secular Employment, 2000-2020

Year	Congregations Reporting Part-time Clergy	Congregations Reporting Part-Time Clergy with Secular Employment ⁱⁱⁱ
2020	488 (43%)	155 (32%)
2015	309 (36%)	126 (41%)
2010	208 (35%)	Unknown (data not collected in 2010)
2000	121 (17%)	52 (35%)

Citations:

1. Jones, Jeffrey M. "US church membership falls below majority for first time." *Gallup News* (2021).
2. Saad, Lydia. "Catholics' church attendance resumes downward slide." *Gallup Media* 8 (2018).
3. Thumma, Scott L. "Exploring the dynamics and challenges of congregational size." *Theology Today* 78, no. 3 (2021): 285-296. doi:10.1177/00405736211030245
4. Miller, Alan S., and Takashi Nakamura. "On the stability of church attendance patterns during a time of demographic change: 1965-1988." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1996): 275-284. doi:10.2307/1386559
5. Pew Research Center. "In US, decline of Christianity continues at rapid pace." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (2019).

6. Thumma, Scott. "Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview." *Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary* (2021).

ⁱ Although the questions about congregations' experiences with conflict have varied, they all queried (1) whether respondents' congregations had experienced some level of internal conflict (i.e., between congregants, clergy, or clergy & congregants) about finances, leadership, theology, etc., in the preceding 5 years, and (2) the outcomes or severity of said conflict(s). For example, FACT 2000 queried whether congregations had experienced theological conflict in the preceding 5 years. Response options included *no*, as well as *yes*, and *it was very serious, moderately serious, or not very serious*. FACTs 2015 and 2020 queried for *any* conflict; response options—which were non-exclusive—were *no*, *yes*, *but it/they were not serious*, as well as *yes*, and *it at least one instance some people left, some people withheld donations, and a clergy leader or staff member left*.

ⁱⁱ Traditions [represented](#) in 2020 included Protestant (both Evangelical and Mainline), Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and other Christian groups, as well as Unitarian Universalism, the Baha'i Faith, Islam, and Judaism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of those reporting part-time ministry.