

Religious acceptance of homosexuals on the rise

September 12 2014, by Eric Ferreri

The willingness of religious congregations to welcome homosexuals as members—and place them in leadership positions—is on the rise, according to a new Duke University study.

Data from the newest wave of the [National Congregations Study](#) show that from 2006 to 2012, the number of congregations accepting gay and lesbian members increased from 37.4 percent to 48 percent.

In that same six-year time frame, the number of congregations open to gays and lesbians in volunteer leadership roles rose from about 18 percent to 26.4 percent.

These and other study findings on [racial diversity](#), informality in worship, congregation membership and related issues mirror ongoing shifts in the broader American culture, said Mark Chaves, a Duke professor of sociology, religious studies, and divinity. Chaves directs the study; these 2012 results are from its third wave of data, following surveys in 1998 and 2006.

"The increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians is a well-known trend in America," Chaves said. "Churches are no exception."

The article containing these latest findings is [available online](#) now and will be published in the December 2014 issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Chaves' findings derive from interviews with representatives of 1,331 American churches, mosques, temples,

synagogues and other houses of worship.

While the acceptance of homosexuals is gaining ground in American congregations, that increase doesn't hold true across the board. There was less acceptance of homosexuals among Catholic churches in 2012 than six years earlier, perhaps due to fallout from the child sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic church, which some associate with homosexuality, according to Chaves.

And while more white, conservative Protestant churches were accepting of gay and lesbian members in 2012—up to 23.5 percent from about 16 percent six years prior—there was no increase in the acceptance of gays in church leadership positions. Only 4 percent of white, conservative Protestant churches said in 2012 that gays and lesbians could hold volunteer leadership positions.

"Congregations reflect general cultural trends, but they also reflect divisions on this issue," Chaves noted.

Findings in other areas include:

Racial diversity: The number of all-white congregations has declined. In 1998, 20 percent of churchgoers were members of all-white [congregations](#); in the most recent survey, that number dropped to 11 percent.

"That's driven by important social changes like upward mobility among blacks and increasing racial intermarriage," Chaves said. "And, of course, immigration."

Informal worship: More people are participating in worship services that feature drumming, jumping, shouting or dancing, raising hands in praise, or the use of visual projection equipment, according to the study.

The percentage of people attending services with drums, for example, rose from 25 percent in 1998 to 36 percent in 2006 and to 45 percent in the most recent survey. The percentage attending services using visual projection equipment rose from 15 percent in 1998 to 32 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2012. This trend toward more informal worship may reflect a larger cultural shift toward informality in life; the rise of mega-churches, which tend to be less personal but heavy on entertainment, may be a factor as well, Chaves said.

"There's also a shifting emphasis in American religion toward generating an emotional experience, rather than focusing on doctrine or knowledge," he said.

Congregation size: The study also found a slow decline in congregation size. The average congregation now has 70 regular participants, down from 80 in 1998, the study found.

Beyond the results reported in the forthcoming JSSR article, tables with additional results are available here, and people can dig more deeply into the data using an online data analysis tool here.

More information: The complete report is available online: www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/...g_American_Congs.pdf

Provided by Duke University

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