Racial diversity within a church is associated with higher average attendance over time

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United Methodist churches—whether the congregation is white or not—have higher attendance when located within white neighborhoods. But racial diversity within a church is associated with higher average attendance over time, according to a new study.

“This is a startling contrast to previous research that reported multiracial congregations are less stable,” said lead author Kevin D. Dougherty, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at Baylor University.

The study is published in the journal *Social Forces*.

Researchers tracked data from more than 20,000 United Methodist Church (UMC) congregations over 20 years—from 1990 to 2010—and paired that information with census tract data for that time frame to investigate the effect of demographic change on congregations.

The racial composition of the United States is changing, with a majority of the population to be nonwhite by 2035, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections. Congregations in this country are voluntary organizations, and their growing number, along with advances in transportation, gives people more options for where they attend. The growth also increases churches’ competition to attract and keep members, researchers noted.

While neighborhoods are generally becoming more diverse, congregations are not. Only one in four American adults attends a multiracial congregation, defined as one in which no single racial or ethnic group has more than 80 percent representation.

Changing demographic conditions can threaten the survival of congregations. The number of all-white neighborhoods has fallen sharply since 1980; attendance at United Methodist churches also has declined, and Methodist churches with a higher percentage of whites have had increasingly lower
average attendance over time.

"As one of the largest religious denominations in the United States, with more than 6 million U.S. members, the United Methodist Church is a wonderful test case to explore how changes in neighborhood demographics impact local congregations," said third author Todd W. Ferguson, Ph.D, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

Here are the researchers' three hypotheses and findings:

- Racial uniformity inside congregations will be associated with higher attendance. Findings did not support this hypothesis. Instead, Methodist churches with more racial diversity had higher attendance.
- Neighborhood racial uniformity will be associated with higher congregational attendance. This hypothesis was supported in the study. Specifically, Methodist churches in neighborhoods in which 100 percent of residents were white had more people attending worship services than Methodist churches in racially mixed or predominantly non-white neighborhoods.
- When the racial makeup of a congregation matches that of a neighborhood, this will correspond with higher church attendance. Contradicting the hypothesis, attendance levels were highest for nonwhite Methodist churches in 100 percent white neighborhoods as well as racially diverse Methodist churches in neighborhoods with racial uniformity. The authors speculate that nonwhite or racially diverse Methodist churches may attract more participants because they offer an attractive alternative to typical white Methodist churches found in white neighborhoods.

"Our findings challenge the popular assumption of the Church Growth Movement that churches grow by focusing on a single racial or ethnic group," Martí said. "For Methodist churches, reaching across racial lines proves a better strategy for growth."

Other influences on church attendance were region of the country and population size. The study found that Methodist churches in the Midwest and West had higher attendance, as did Methodist churches in more populated neighborhoods.

"More research is needed on race and attendance over time in other denominations," Dougherty said. "Neither congregations nor neighborhoods stay the same indefinitely. Understanding how change in one impacts change in the other is a crucial task for researchers and religious leaders."


Provided by Baylor University
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