

Wellesley Hills UU Planning Retreat

September 23-24, 2023

America's changing religious landscape (Pew Research Center)

- ▶ Between 2007-2019, the Christian share of the US population fell from 78.4% to 65%

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ All subsets of Christians have declined as a percentage of the population, including Protestants, Catholics, and Evangelicals

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ On the other hand, all subsets of the religiously unaffiliated, including atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular,” are growing

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ The growth of these “nones” is most pronounced in younger generations: In 2019, 40% of all Millennials were unaffiliated.

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ In 2014, only 11% of Millennials identified with mainline Protestantism

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ Median age is getting older:
- ▶ Protestants: 50 > 52
- ▶ Evangelicals: 47 > 49

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ In 2009, 52% of Christians attended at least once/month while 47% attended occasionally
- ▶ By 2019, this had flipped: 45% attended once/month while 54% attended occasionally

America's changing religious landscape

- ▶ In 2019, 49% of Baby Boomers who identify as Christian attended weekly, but only 22% of Millennials

Congregational Behavior Trends

A congregation's identity

≠

its building

Congregational Behavior Trends

Worship

≠

Sunday morning and may not
be the primary way that
some participants connect

Congregational Behavior Trends

“Active” membership

≠

Attending worship most
weeks

Congregational Behavior Trends

Engagement is as important
as membership...but may not
generate revenue in the same
way

Congregational Behavior Trends

Small groups and faith
formation no longer happen
primarily in on-site
classrooms

Congregational Behavior Trends

Smaller congregations can't offer "everything," so members have gotten used to program-hopping

Congregational Behavior Trends

Volunteer activity may look more like occasional event participation than serving on committees or boards

Congregational Behavior Trends

Planning and programming
no longer happens primarily
in regular
monthly
at-night
at-church
committee meetings

Congregational Behavior Trends

Communication is more complicated than it used to be

- ▶ Website
- ▶ Social media
- ▶ Members
- ▶ The building
- ▶ Print

Congregational Behavior Trends

- ▶ The vast majority of charitable giving is coming from Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation
- ▶ Giving is a challenge for younger generations

Congregational Behavior Trends

Most members in the United States belong to large, regionally-based congregations, often multi-site...

- ▶ “Excellent” programs
- ▶ Large staffs
- ▶ Members want to blend in

Congregational Behavior Trends

...Although most
congregations are small (75
members or less)

Observations

- ▶ Growing congregations tend to be newer, independent, entrepreneurial, and/or designed to change rapidly

Observations

- ▶ Growing congregations tend to be focused as much on meeting the needs of incoming members as long-time members

Post-Pandemic

- ▶ Attendance is not back to pre-Covid levels
 - ▶ Worship participants have learned that worship is no longer geographically limited
 - ▶ Youth groups and church schools still do not feel “normal,” and we may have seen the beginning of the end
 - ▶ Digital presence has become primary

What's still the same?

- ▶ Good people, some of whom are willing to work hard, although differently
- ▶ Children and youth may still be present, although attendance is irregular
- ▶ Older adults
- ▶ Community involvement
- ▶ Music, although a wider variety
- ▶ Tackling tough issues
- ▶ Staff (when an institution structure exists)
- ▶ Money (when an institutional structure exists)

What are the options?

- ▶ Increase engagement, especially through digital channels
- ▶ Target particular groups as growth options and program/market accordingly
- ▶ Partner with other congregations
- ▶ Partner with other non-profits in the area
- ▶ Increased use of building as a funding stream
- ▶ Downsize (release the building to other uses and carry on as a congregation at a different site)
- ▶ Start new UU-like groups
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

Areas to Explore

- ▶ Demographics of surrounding community, especially in terms of religious identity
- ▶ Congregational data - membership, attendance, giving, etc.
- ▶ Conversations with regional “experts” about trends - e.g., real estate values, demographics of local schools
- ▶ What are other UU congregations doing?
- ▶ Alternative uses for the building
- ▶ Community needs
- ▶ Opportunities for congregational collaboration
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____



Questions?

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