

# **Baylor study: Percentage of multiracial U.S. churches doubled**

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WACO—The percentage of multiracial congregations in the United States nearly doubled from 1998 to 2012, with about one in five American congregants attending a place of worship that is racially mixed, according to a Baylor University study.

While Catholic churches remain more likely to be multiracial—about one in four—a growing number of Protestant churches are multiracial, the study found.

The percentage of Protestant churches that are multiracial tripled, from 4 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available.

In addition, more African-Americans are in the pulpits and pews of U.S. multiracial churches than in the past, according to the study.



Kevin  
Dougherty

Multiracial congregations are places of worship in which less than 80 percent of participants are of the same race or ethnicity.

“Congregations are looking more like their neighborhoods racially and ethnically, but they still lag behind,” said lead author Kevin D. Dougherty, associate professor of sociology at Baylor. “The average congregation was eight times less diverse racially than its neighborhood in 1998 and four times less diverse in 2012.”

His co-author, Michael O. Emerson, provost of North Park University in Chicago, added: “More congregations seem to be growing more attentive to the changing demographics outside their doors, and as U.S. society continues to diversify by race and ethnicity, congregations’ ability to adapt to those changes will grow in importance.”

For the study, Dougherty and Emerson analyzed data from the National Congregations Study, a nationally representative survey conducted in 1998, 2006-2007 and 2012, with a cumulative sample of 4,071 congregations. The study by Dougherty and Emerson—“The Changing Complexion of American Congregations”—is published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

## **The study found:**

- One-third of U.S. congregations were composed entirely of one race in 2012, down from nearly half of U.S. congregations in 1998.
- Multiracial congregations constituted 12 percent of all U.S. congregations in 2012, up from 6 percent in 1998.
- The percentage of Americans worshipping in multiracial congregations climbed to 18 percent in 2012, up from 13 percent in 1998.
- Mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant churches have become more common in the count of multiracial congregations,

but Catholic churches continue to show higher percentages of multiracial congregations. One in four Catholic churches was multiracial in 2012.

- While whites are the head ministers in more than two-thirds (70 percent) of multiracial congregations, the percentage of those led by black clergy has risen to 17 percent, up from fewer than 5 percent in 1998.
- African-Americans have replaced Latinos as the most likely group to worship with whites. In the typical multiracial congregation, the percentage of black members rose to nearly a quarter in 2012, up from 16 percent in 1998. Meanwhile, Latinos in multiracial congregations dropped from 22 percent in 1998 to 13 percent in 2012.
- The percentage of immigrants in multiracial congregations decreased from over 5 percent in 1998 to under 3 percent in 2012.

Previous research shows congregations have adopted varying ways to encourage racial diversity, among them integrating music genres, using more participatory worship, hosting small groups to foster interracial networks and creating programs to address racial or ethnic issues. Churches with shorter histories are more likely to have diversity, and change is harder to bring about in long-established congregations.

The new study by Dougherty and Emerson concluded the complexion of American congregations is indeed changing—and the authors see benefits for American society.

“During a several-year period of heightened racial tensions, the growth of multiracial congregations is a dramatic development,” Emerson said. “Such congregations are places of significantly increased cross-racial friendships and cross-racial common experiences.”