Exploring Congregations in America

Congregations have been called the “basic unit” and “bedrock” of American religious life (Warner 1994; Chaves 1999). As one group of sociologists summarized (Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein and Barman 1999):

[Congregations] are the primary site of religious ritual activity, they provide an organizational model followed even by religious groups new to this country, they provide sociability and community for many, they offer opportunities for political action and voluntarism, they foster religious identities through education and practice, and they engage in a variety of community and social service activities.

In this learning module, you will explore a nationally representative survey of congregations in the United States to learn more about this central feature of American religion.

If you find yourself lost at any point, look to the instructions on the right.

Open your Web browser and go to the home page for the Association of Religion Data Archives.

Studying congregations can be surprisingly difficult because there isn’t a comprehensive list of every congregation in the United States. This makes simple sampling techniques impossible. The National Congregations Study, however, solved this issue using innovative methods to create the first nationally representative sample of congregations.

Let us begin by locating the instructional dataset for this file in the Data Archive.

1. The National Congregation Study has been conducted three times. When was each “wave,” or edition of the survey, completed?

   Wave 1: ____________
   Wave 2: ____________
   Wave 3: ____________

Open your web browser.
Go to www.thearda.com
Click on “Data Archive” in the main menu.
Click on the “Browse Alphabetically” tab.
2. According to the “Collection Procedures,” what individual within congregations typically answered the survey? (Hint: this person is often called the key informant.)

Let’s now begin exploring the findings of the National Congregations Study. You can find the full list of questions included in the survey by clicking on the “Codebook” tab. You can search this codebook by clicking on the “Search” tab and entering keywords.

Many congregations are affiliated with a larger network of congregations united by historical or theological tradition. These networks are often called denominations.

3. According to the National Congregations Study, what percentage of congregations are “formally affiliated with a denomination, convention or some similar kind of association”?

If you click on “Analyze results” under the question, you can look at some patterns of denominational affiliation by a select number of other questions.

4. Find the table looking at how responses to this question have changed with each wave of the NCS. Fill in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent not affiliated with denomination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, the percentage of congregations that are not affiliated with a denomination has been increasing over time. How does affiliation with a denomination vary across religious traditions?

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking about denominational affiliation.

Hint: The shorthand name for this question is HAVEDEN.

Click on “analyze results.”

Scroll down and find the table for “Year (I-YEAR)”
The physical appearance and location of congregations varies widely, from congregations that worship in sports arenas to congregations that worship in movie theatres or other non-traditional locations. Let’s explore this issue.

5. What percent of congregations worship in a…

   School: ____________
   Storefront (e.g., in a strip mall): ____________
   Stand-alone church: ____________
   Other (e.g., movie theaters, community center, etc.): ____________

6. Although it seems like a paradox, most congregations are small while most people attend a large congregation. This is because one very large congregation can contain the same amount of people as many small congregations. Let’s look at the average number of people at worship services across congregations. Find the question asking for the “Number of people (adults and children)” at the congregation’s “main service” (ATTMNCAT) and fill in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of people (adults and children) at main service:</th>
<th>Percentage of congregations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 or more</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to a physical location, congregations typically have a primary religious leader or clergyperson. However, like the physical location of a congregation, religious leaders vary in type and nature.
7. What percentage of congregations would allow a woman to be its head clergyperson or religious leader?

_______________________________________________________

8. What percentage of congregations actually have a female religious leader?

_______________________________________________________

9. Why might these percentages differ so much? Write your thoughts:

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

10. Has the percentage of congregations with a female religious leader changed much over the three waves of the NCS? Fill in the following table to find out:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent that have female religious leader</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2006-2007</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. How does the likelihood of having a female religious leader vary across religious traditions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman Catholic</th>
<th>White conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Protestant</th>
<th>Black Protestant</th>
<th>White liberal or moderate Protestant</th>
<th>Non-Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent that have female religious leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some religious leaders are essentially volunteers who hold other jobs in addition to their work as the congregation’s leader. Furthermore, some religious leaders have multiple congregations that they lead. Let’s explore how common these leadership situations are:

12. What percentage of congregational leaders are not paid for their work?

_______________________________________________________

13. What percentage of congregational leaders serve more than one congregation?

_______________________________________________________

Regardless of physical location or leadership, at the heart of all congregations is worship. Here again, though, we find significant variation in what worship looks like across congregations.

14. Find the percentage of congregations with worship services that included the following features:

Silent prayer or meditation (MEDITATE): ________________

Greeting one another by shaking hands (GREET): __________

“Amen[s]” or expressions of approval voiced (AMEN): ______

People heard speaking in tongues (TONGUES): ____________

Incense used (INCENSE): ________________________________

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking if the clergyperson is paid (CLERPAID).

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking if the clergyperson serves more than one congregation (OTHCONG).

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking the questions about worship elements on the left.

Go back and click on “Analyze..."
15. How do features of worship vary across religious traditions? Fill in the following table to explore this issue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Roman Catholic</th>
<th>White conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Protestant</th>
<th>Black Protestant</th>
<th>White liberal or moderate Protestant</th>
<th>Non-Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent featuring “Amen[s]” or expressions of approval voiced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent featuring Silent prayer or meditation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Congregations, like any organization, are shaped by their environment and larger social trends. One major social change that has occurred between the first edition of the NCS in 1998 and the latest in 2012 is the increased prevalence and importance of the internet to our everyday social life. Can we see evidence of this in the NCS?

16. What percentage of congregations say they have a Facebook page? (Note: This question was only asked in the 2012 edition of the NCS).

__________________________

17. Have congregational websites become more common? Fill in the following table to find out:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation has a website</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2006-2007</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Click on “Analyze Results” and scroll down to find the religion table (I-RELIGION).

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking whether the congregation uses Facebook (FACEBOOK).

Click on the “Search” tab.

Enter keywords to locate the question asking whether the congregation has a website (WEBSITE).

Click on “analyze results.”

Scroll down and find the table for “Year (I-YEAR)”
Another social change in the past two decades has been increased acceptance of homosexuality in the United States. Has this shaped the policies and activities of religious congregations?

To examine this, let’s look at whether the percentage of congregations that would give full-fledged membership to an openly gay or lesbian couple has changed across two waves of the NCS (the 1998 NCS did not ask a question about this topic):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation would give full-fledged membership to openly gay/lesbian couple in committed relationship</th>
<th>2006-2007</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. As with any organization or group of people, it is not unusual for conflicts to arise within a congregation. What percentage of congregations report that they have had a conflict that required a special meeting in the past 2 years?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. Many congregations engage in social and political activism at the local, state or national level. Find the percent of congregations that report the following activities:

- Organized or participated in a demonstration or march (MARCH):

- Organized voter registration groups or meetings (VOTERREG):

- Distributed voter guides to congregation (VOTRGUID):

Enter keywords to locate the question asking whether the congregation would give membership to gay\lesbian couple (MBRGAY).

Click on “Analyze results.”

Scroll down and find the table for “Year (I-YEAR)”

Click on the “Search” tab.

Search for the question on whether the congregation has had a conflict requiring a special meeting. (CONFLCT1)

Click on the “Search” tab.

Search for the activities on the left.
20. Do religious traditions differ in their likelihood of engaging in these activities? Fill in the following table to explore this issue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Roman Catholic</th>
<th>White conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Protestant</th>
<th>Black Protestant</th>
<th>White liberal or moderate Protestant</th>
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<td>Organized or participated in a demonstration or march</td>
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<td>Organized voter registration groups or meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed voter guides to congregation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. Now, find another question that interests you in the National Congregations Study. What is the question?

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________________________________________________________________________________

22. What do the responses to this question tell you?

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________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Click on “Analyze Results” and scroll down to the religion table (I-RELIGION).

Click on the “Search” tab and enter keywords that interest you or click on the “Codebook” tab and scroll through the questions.
23. Do responses to this question vary over time or across the religious tradition of the congregation?

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________________________________________________________________________

Click on “analyze results.”

Scroll down and find the table for “Year (I-YEAR)”

Scroll down and find the table for “Religion (I-RELIGION)”