

# The Changing Face Of Religion In America

What does it mean for architects and artists? By Richard S. Vosko

*The Healing Place Church Arena is part of a large church project in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that caters to all aspects of a congregant's life.*



When Volume One of *Faith & Form* was released in 1967, the United States was on the verge of two assassinations, was embroiled in an unwanted conflict in Vietnam, and had an unemployment rate of 3.3 percent. While most religious congregations maintained the status quo, others, in the style of “The Sixties,” took to the pulpits and streets to protest war, racism, and gender inequality. Generally, attendance in mainline religions was high and stable, e.g., 70 percent of Catholics attended church regularly compared with about 35 percent today. Although the mainstream architectural context of that era may have been midcentury modern, most houses of worship replicated the designs found in the European homelands of first-generation American immigrants. Such a familiar architectural vernacular would also offer a sense of spiritual continuity and security for post-World War II baby boomers.

Today, some studies claim that the religious scene in American is going through a transition that, perhaps, began in the 1960s. For example, the Pew Religious Landscape Survey of 35,000 American adults ([www.religions.pewforum.com](http://www.religions.pewforum.com)) finds that 28 percent of those who responded have left the religion they were raised in and 44 percent have switched religions or have dropped affiliation completely. Fifteen percent of those polled in the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey ([www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org](http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org)) said they were not affiliated with a religion.

Other research suggests there are signs of stability and even steady congregational growth. J. Gordon Melton of the Baylor Institute for the Study of American Religion ([www.isreligion.org](http://www.isreligion.org)) reports that the number of non-affiliates today has actually decreased dramatically since the early 1900s. Although it appears that religious behavior is in a state of flux and that the mainstream religions (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish) are struggling to keep members, the Association of Religion Data Archives

([www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)) reminds us that, collectively, Americans are still very religious in beliefs and practice when compared to other nationalities. Spiritual development, one could say, is not necessarily dependent on religious affiliation.

How does a shift in religious behavior affect the contributions of architects and artists who specialize in places of worship? If churches and synagogues express the identity of those who gather there and if those congregations are dwindling, merging, or vacating, what symbolic or theological statement do those buildings make? If the trend in newer nondenominational churches is to avoid traditional religious symbolism and imagery, are there any design formulas that distinguish those buildings from those in banal shopping malls? Finally, is there any desire at all to express the belief system or teleology (the end purpose) of the congregation in built forms and works of art?

While it is impossible to answer all of these questions, a good place to begin is for design professionals to explore the data that track the demographic, social, and spiritual shifts taking place in religious groups. One comprehensive study is called “Faith Communities Today” and the “Cooperative Congregations Study Project” ([www.faithcommunities-today.org](http://www.faithcommunities-today.org)). Sponsored by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research the project regularly releases its findings. One of the reports, “American Congregations 2008” by David A. Roozen, is based on a study of 14,201 churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. Also available on the Web site is a timely article titled, “Changes in American Megachurches: Tracking Eight Years of Growth and Innovation in the Nation’s Largest-attendance Congregations.”

The most accessible compilation of facts and figures, however, is found in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* by Robert Putnam and David Campbell (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). This enormous work is based largely on the “Faith Matters Survey”



*Coffee and reading materials are becoming more common in faith communities that seek to become 'Third Places.'*



*More stadium than sanctuary, the Healing Place Church is standard megachurch fare.*

(www.ropercenter.uconn.edu) conducted for Harvard University by International Communications Research. With 3,108 respondents the data give metrics for “religious belief and behavior to help scholars determine relative stability among different subpopulations and as compared to nonreligious beliefs and behaviors.” The authors have managed to create a readable volume that summarizes the findings of this survey and others.

The chapter on “Innovations in Religion” documents reasons for fluidity in congregational affiliation, e.g., joining a spouse’s congregation and finding a church close to home (p. 175). The chapter also refers to the “emerging” church which is described by the authors as an ongoing innovation in American religion that focuses less on a style of worship and more on what people do (p. 178). It also says the emerging church blends traditional religious symbolism with modern technology. The word “emerging” suggests that this church has not yet established strong roots: that it is still unfolding. Therefore, a church that is emerging is in an experimental stage that is likely to change as it grows, resulting in more fluctuation. Whether Americans who are concerned about the development of moral certitude on many issues can tolerate such inconsistency is a major question for all religions.

Worship in the emerging church is different not only from mainline religions but also from the independent nondenominational churches. It is often described as leaderless and taking place in nonconventional places such as a home, a restaurant, a tavern, or online. The ritual frequently is a mixture of patterns, texts, and objects borrowed from older religious traditions. Some writers have referred to this practice as “ancient future.” Scot McKnight describes it this way in his article “Five Streams of the Emerging Church” (*Christianity Today*, January 19, 2007). “Many in the emergent movement are creative, experiential, and sensory in their worship gatherings.” Emerging Christians, according to McKnight, wonder if there is another way to express – theologically, aesthetically and anthropologically – what we do when we gather. For example, would there be a clearer sense of the priesthood of all believers if the preacher were on the same level as the congregation?


The emerging religious movement is not only a Christian phenomenon. Jewish leaders are also monitoring the shifts that are taking place in their congregations. As in other denominations a prime target is the 18-39-year-old group who feel disenfranchised from their congregations. The Working Group on Emergent Sacred Communities (www.synagogue3000.org) has committed itself to establishing transformative spiritual communities unrestrained by the conventional understanding of what a synagogue congregation is supposed to be.

In every study and commentary mentioned above there are no direct questions or opinions about the architecture of the worship space. It is hard, therefore, to determine if the style of the building, the arrangement of seats, or the presence of religious symbols is an important factor in someone’s decision to leave a congregation, join another, or

not practice at all. The good news for the design professions is that the lack of information in the data about the significance of architectural styles has not altogether erased interest in sacred space. Conferences and organizations dedicated to the topic are numerous. There appears also to be a strong desire to breathe new life into venerable old buildings. Partners for Sacred Places is one nonprofit organization that assists congregations in maintaining and restoring their houses of worship (www.sacredplaces.org).

The Worship Facilities Conference & Expo (www.wfxweb.com) is an example of how some congregations want new technologically advanced buildings to house their programs and worship. The WFX brochure claims that 76 percent of the churches attending the conference and expo “are planning, considering, or in the process of building and/or upgrading their church technology and facilities.” This annual gathering attracts thousands of pastoral leaders looking for the latest information on building and construction methods, technical products, and social media. The speakers’ program is designed to address timely approaches to community and team building, administration, and fundraising, as well as conflict management and resolution.

In the face of what are sometimes confusing data about the state of religious life in America, architects, designers, artists and pastors can continue to play a role in creating efficient and prayerful places of worship. However, it is important for these professionals to be aware of those programmatic requirements that have surfaced as absolutes. Hospitality, charisma, outreach, technology, and sustainability are key components in any large or small, old or new worship facility. New religious campuses are best described generically. They are conveniently located, they offer ample parking, they have hospitable gathering areas, bookstores, and coffee shops, they are safe and secure places for all children’s programs, they employ up-to-date technology to support lively worship music and preaching, and they are “green.”

Even though abundant information is available on the subject of religion in America there are simply not enough data to suggest that places of worship are no longer required or important. Eventually, as a new congregation emerges it will soon discover a need to house those events that will serve not only the needs of the congregation but also their outreach programs. The desire to create prayerful experiences that make the congregation feel bodily refreshed, mentally affirmed, and spiritually satisfied while worshiping God and tending to one another’s needs is very important. How design professionals can express these expectations in built form continues to be an acceptable challenge. Perhaps the large sign in front of a megachurch in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, publicly states what a church is supposed to be today: “The Healing Place for a Hurting World.” 

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## FURTHER READING

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