U.S. Jewish congregational life is showing signs of stagnation, with few young adults, many older members and more than adequate sanctuary space, according to a new survey of Jewish congregational life. The survey, which included responses from leaders in 1,215 synagogues, offers the most comprehensive view of Reform and Conservative movement congregations to date. Conducted by sociologist Steven M. Cohen for the Synagogue Studies Institute of Synagogue 3000, the survey is part of the larger Faith Communities Today (FACT), a national data set of American religious congregations. The survey shows the Conservative movement is struggling, with smaller congregations in older suburbs, fewer innovations in service styles, ambivalence about the need to change, and strained financial resources. Reform congregations, by contrast are larger, more geographically dispersed, offer a more diverse set of programs and enjoy higher morale. Both Jewish movements suffer from lackluster attendance and pallid attempts at recruitment of new members.

A Dearth of Young People

Among the survey’s most alarming findings, young people between the ages of 18 and 34 represent a scant 8 percent of Reform and Conservative congregations. By contrast, there were three times as many members aged 65 and older, or about 24 percent of synagogue membership. In smaller congregations with less than 250 families, elderly members number more than 30 percent.

“Synagogues have not known what to do with young people after 9th grade and until they get married and have children,” said Rabbi Aaron Spiegel, Synagogue 3000’s chief executive. “We’ve turned the Jewish spiritual development of these kids over to Hillel. But once they graduate from college, what’s available to them is far from adequate.”

Younger adults are scarce in Christian churches as well, but the problem may be especially acute in Jewish circles where educated young adults marry later, bear children later, and have competing opportunities for social interaction and spiritual searching. Making matters worse, religious commitment among the newer generation appears to be tapering, said Rabbi Larry Hoffman, co-president of Synagogue 3000.
“The civic sense of obligation to belong has dropped along with ethnicity and anti-Semitism, while intermarriage and openness to the full gamut of options beyond the traditional ones have increased,” said Hoffman. “We may also be seeing a general falloff in religious commitment for all Americans, of which the study regarding Jews is merely indicative.”

### Attendance is Lackluster

With the exception of bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, attendance at synagogue services is thin.

Saturday morning services in Conservative synagogues drew an average of 24 worshipers for every 100-member families. Friday evening services at Reform temples drew an average of 17 worshipers for every 100 families.

Proximity may be one reason Conservative Jews attend services more often. The survey shows they are more likely to live within a 15-minute drive to synagogue than their Reform counterparts. In addition, they tend to be older, so they may have more leisure time. Finally, they are more likely to value prayer as a mitzvah (obligation), said Hoffman.

Still, the lackluster attendance suggests people are joining synagogue for practical reasons such as bar and bar mitzvah training, rather than for personal spiritual enrichment.

“They are conditioned by the past orientation of synagogues to provide programmatics,” said Hoffman, who described synagogues as “limited liability communities.”

### Worship Attendance Metrics for Friday and Saturday, by denomination

![Graph showing attendance metrics](image-url)
The survey did not measure whether membership has declined over a stipulated period of time, but it did ask congregational leaders if their sanctuaries were big enough to accommodate their members. The majority of leaders in both traditions said their worship space was “just about right.” Among Conservative congregations, 11 percent say their worship space is “more than we need.” Only 6 percent of congregations complain they have less than adequate space.

**Welcoming Newcomers**

Regardless of denomination, congregations did a poor job welcoming newcomers. While Reform temples did slightly better than Conservative synagogues, neither displayed vigorous welcoming efforts.

Only 36 percent of Reform leaders said their congregation followed up with visitors by phone, mail and email (including sending printed material about the congregation). Among Conservative congregations, 31 percent followed up using these outreach methods.

“Chabad is terrific at this,” said Dr. Ron Wolfson, co-president of Synagogue 3000, and the Fingerhut professor of education at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. “You walk into Chabad and you’ll get an invitation to a Shabbat lunch or dinner almost automatically. Most Conservative and Reform synagogues are behind the curve.”

Wolfson, who wrote *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community* (Jewish Lights 2006), said part of the problem may be that Jews don’t seek to convert others to Judaism. Still, he said, a core value of Jewish life is hospitality or *hachnasat orchim* in Hebrew. Congregations that don’t work to create open, warm and inviting congregations will never see lifelong commitments to synagogue membership.

Synagogue 3000, which sponsored the survey, has long taken the position that Jews must change their *modus operandi* with regard to synagogue membership. Instead of trying to lure new members with activities or classes, they should try building relationships.

“It’s not about the programs we offer,” said Spiegel. “People want relationships.” Added Hoffman, “Synagogues became programmatic centers in an era before the internet and two-career families. People were attracted to vibrant centers with lots of activity. Now people are too busy for that. Programming without a deeper sense of spiritual purpose just asks busy people to sign on to becoming busier – an unlikely prospect these days.”

**Recession Hurt Jewish Congregations**

Conservative and Reform congregations both suffered from the economic fallout of the 2008 recession with cuts in staff, programs and building campaigns, the survey shows.

The survey found that 67 percent of Reform leaders and 62 percent of Conservative leaders reported spikes in unemployment among congregational members. Those unemployment spikes had a direct impact on congregations.

Nearly 30 percent of congregations resorted to layoffs or furloughs, and about 60 percent cut or froze congregational staff salaries.

Staff cuts were deepest in large congregations of 750 families or more. Since the largest Jewish congregations tend to be Reform, those congregations bore the brunt of the cutbacks.
“Reform staffing was hurt more than Conservative staffing because Reform was spending more money on staff to start with, and had more staff to cut loose,” said Hoffman.

But overall, leaders in the Conservative movement were more likely to report that their synagogues were struggling financially. The survey found that 17 percent of Conservative respondents described their synagogues as facing “serious difficulty” compared to 7 percent of Reform temples.

Hoffman suggested one reason might be that smaller Conservative synagogues had less of a cushion.

“With, say, only one rabbi, there’s not much a small synagogue can do,” Hoffman said. “Larger synagogues with many rabbis and educators can let people go more easily, and they did, but at less cost overall to themselves.”

Reform Congregations Fare Better

The survey had some positive news, especially for Reform congregations, where leaders in 71 percent of temples reported their congregations were “spiritually vital and alive.” Only 64 percent of Conservative synagogue leaders could say the same.

In addition, 79 percent of Reform leaders said their congregations had a “clear mission and purpose,” compared to 64 percent of Conservative leaders. And perhaps most telling, 79 percent of Reform leaders said their congregations are “willing to change to meet new challenges,” compared to 68 percent of Conservative leaders.

“Conservative Jews suffer from an inability to change in the face of challenge,” said Hoffman.

Not surprisingly, Conservative synagogues are heavily concentrated in the older suburbs of New York and the Northeast, areas that made up the post-World War II expansion. By contrast, there are twice as many Reform synagogues in the Midwest, and in outlying sectors, the exurbs, for example — that is, areas settled more recently.

The majority of Reform congregations, or 56 percent, are congregations with 750 member families or more. Only 39 percent of Conservative synagogues have such large membership rolls.
To Hoffman, these trends suggest a rosier outlook for Reform movement congregations. “The easier future may lie with large congregations, which have the potential for adequate staffing, diversity and growth,” said Hoffman. “They also have higher morale and are hit less by economic downturns. Except in small towns where they are the sole synagogue available, mid-size and small congregations will do well to niche their appeal, becoming what has been called ‘intentional’ in their approach.”

Problems and Solutions

The larger question posed by the survey is what congregations are doing to ensure a Jewish future. On this count, leaders of the Synagogue 3000 agree immediate action is needed.

“Synagogues have been in a default position for years,” said Spiegel. “They are program focused with little or no innovation. But that won’t sustain them for much longer.” Hoffman added, “Non-intentional synagogues will probably survive as what they are – they actually do many things very well (life-cycle ceremonies, for example); but they will increasingly face competition from freelancers willing to do the same things for less; and they will constantly face budgetary issues and the challenge of increasingly large percentages of members who belong nominally, who come on occasion, but whose energy and passion lie elsewhere.”

Spiegel argues that synagogues should engage far more aggressively by reaching out to unaffiliated Jews in the community rather than waiting for them to show up at synagogue. In this, congregations might take a lesson from the success of the megachurch movement, which has been able to reach people where they are and motivate them to get involved in deeper spiritual pursuits.

“We have to move from a synagogue of programs targeting different populations to a deepening relationship between the synagogue and their members,” said Wolfson. “The best way to root people in the life of the congregation is through relationships. If we don’t, people will drop their memberships, and that’s a big problem.”

The Synagogue 3000 survey was mailed to all U.S. synagogues in 2010. The survey is a modified version of the questionnaire used by Faith Community Today (FACT), a series of ongoing research surveys about congregational life. FACT surveys are conducted by the Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership, a multi-faith group of religious researchers and faith leaders of which Synagogue 3000 is a member and the provider of Jewish data. Congregational leaders, including rabbis, cantors, educators, presidents and synagogue executives, completed the surveys. Steven M. Cohen, research professor of Jewish Social Policy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion analyzed the survey results. The complete FACT findings are available at www.faithcommunitiestoday.org.
Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Indianapolis and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

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