

FACTS About Non-Seminary-Trained Pastors
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This report is one of a series summarizing the findings of two major interdenominational and interfaith studies, the Faith Communities Together (FACT) and the US Congregational Life Surveys (CLS). Congregations of the United Church of Christ participated in both studies first in 2000 and again in 2008-2010.

In the most recent FACT survey, non-seminary-trained (NST) pastors constituted 12% of all senior or solo pastors in participating churches. Of the pastors in the 2008 CLS, 11% reported having less than a seminary degree when asked about their theological training. These percentages are surprisingly high in a denomination that considers a seminary education to be one of the prerequisites for ordination. They also have increased since 2000. In the FACT 2000, 7.6% of pastors reported having less than a seminary degree, while in the CLS in 2000, only 3.6% reported having less than a seminary degree. This report provides information on these pastors who do not fit the mold in order to help decision-makers support them and the churches that hire them.

Mistakes?

One possible reason for this relatively high percentage might be that, because either the pastor or a key lay leader could complete the FACT survey, some of these responses may be coming from lay leaders describing themselves, rather than their pastors. In fact, respondents to three surveys did say that “the pastor” had less than a seminary degree, but also reported that the congregation was without pastoral leadership at the moment. These were eliminated from the analysis, or the percentage would have been 0.5% higher. Similarly, in the CLS, all respondents said they were either the principal leader or women who said they were co-pastors.

Sampling Error?

A second potential cause of this relatively high percentage of NST pastors might be that the sample is somehow biased and not a good representation of the UCC as a whole. Two factors argue against this idea, however.

First, the surveys were designed to minimize bias. In the 2010 FACT surveys, a random sample of over 1200 congregations was invited to participate, with racial/ethnic congregations oversampled so that these smaller subgroups would have enough participants for meaningful analysis. The response rate overall was 51%, with somewhat lower rates among the smallest churches and racial/ethnic churches. The oversampling of racial/ethnic congregations partially corrected for their lower response rates, so that the distribution of those responding generally is similar in race/ethnicity to that of the UCC as a whole. Congregations that had lost members over the past 5 years were no more or less likely to participate than those that had gained members. Overall, the sample of 640 congregations appears to be a good representation of the denomination at large.

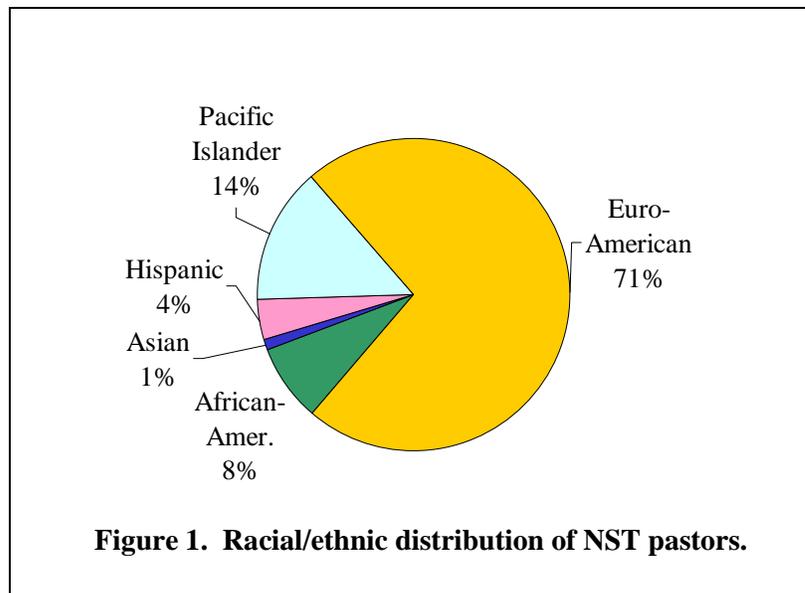
The Congregational Life Surveys were administered in 2008 to 9377 laity and 138 clergy from 143 UCC congregations. This project examined a more limited number of congregations in greater depth, with surveys being completed by the pastor, all worshipers on a Sunday morning, as well as a survey describing the congregation and its programs. Because of the effort involved, only 28% of the congregations that were randomly sampled to be invited chose to participate, although almost all of those who agreed to participate completed the surveys. Participating congregations did not differ significantly from the denomination as a whole in size, location, race/ethnicity, or whether they were growing or declining.

Second, these two surveys used different samples and somewhat different methodologies at two different points in time. Similar findings across samples suggest that the estimate of NST pastors is fairly accurate and not due to any idiosyncrasies in a particular sample.

Small differences in response rates by region or by size could have affected the estimate of the percentage of pastors who are NST if the percentages differ by size and by region, which was the case. To correct for these possible biases, the percentage of NST pastors was recalculated, weighting responses by region and also by congregational size. In both cases, the rate of NST pastors increased, to 14.6% when weighted by size and 13.8% when weighted by region. Using all these estimates, the percentage of NST pastors in the denomination is likely to be in the 11 to 14% range.

A Different Ethnic Mix?

Perhaps these rates are relatively high because, as the number of racial/ethnic congregations increases in the UCC, the pastors in these congregations have less formal training. While non-white pastors in the FACT sample were more likely to lack seminary degrees, with 14% of Asians, 23% of African-Americans, 33% of Hispanics, and 69% of Pacific Islanders lacking seminary degrees, the vast majority of those without seminary degrees (71%) were European Americans, 10.6% of whom lacked a seminary degree (see Figure 1).



Results were similar in the CLS sample, although the small numbers of non-white clergy make statistics about those groups unreliable. Although two (14%) of the NST pastors were non-white (higher than the 3% of non-white pastors in the sample as a whole), 86% of the NST pastors were European-Americans.

Are They Clergy?

One possible reason that these pastors are not seminary-trained may be that they are currently serving a church while completing seminary. The age of the NST group in the FACT sample suggests that this may be true for some, but not the majority. 8% are in their 20's and 30's, 12% are in their 40's, and 27% are in their 50's (as compared with 5%, 17%, and 38% of other pastors). However, 20% are 70 years of age or older, and another 9% are over 65, so probably few of these are seminarians. Also, when pastors in the CLS were asked whether they were attending seminary, none said that they were.

In other ways, NST pastors seem to be in a different category from other pastors, although the groups overlap considerably. When FACT NST pastors were asked whether they are ordained, 39% report that they are not, as compared with 2% among seminary-trained pastors. However, they report that they are serving as pastors (83%), co-pastors (8%) or senior pastors of multi-pastoral teams (12%). Most of those who say they are senior pastors are from non-white congregations. Often they are at or above retirement age, so they may be the elder supervising younger leaders in the congregation. 82% of NST pastors have standing in their associations; another 5% are in the process (as compared to 94% and 2%). Similarly 80% say they are the called pastor, 16% are interim and supply, and 4% are retired, but serving a local congregation. These percentages are not very different from other pastors, 85% of whom are in called positions, 12% as interims, and 2% retired. 37% are in full-time paid positions, as compared with 68% of seminary-trained pastors. Although they may not have graduated from seminary, the majority are college-educated.

NST pastors from the CLS present a similar picture. Of the 15 NST pastors in the sample, 27% are ordained, 40% are working toward ordination (although not in seminary), and 33% are not ordained. 80% have completed a certification program, one (7%) has a Bible college degree, and two (14%) report no theological training. 40% have a college degree or advanced degree. The majority are installed pastors, 14% describing themselves as senior pastors, 40% as solo pastors, and 20% as co-pastors. All of the called pastors have completed a certification program and most are either ordained or working toward ordination. The remainder include an interim pastor (7%) and three lay ministers (20%).

Where Do They Serve?

As would be expected, NST pastors serve much smaller congregations than do others. As Figure 2 indicates for FACT pastors, nearly 2/3 (63%) serve congregations with 50 or fewer attendees. Most of the congregations with higher attendance are non-white racial/ethnic congregations.

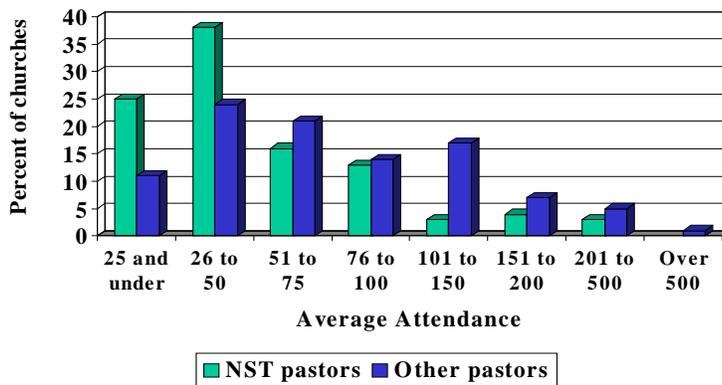


Figure 2. Size of churches served by NST pastors, FACT.

For pastors in the CLS sample, the differences are even more marked as can be seen in Figure 3. Three fourths of them (73%) serve congregations with fewer than 50 members. This sample had only a few non-white racial/ethnic congregations, which may explain the smaller numbers of larger congregations served by NST pastors in the CLS sample.

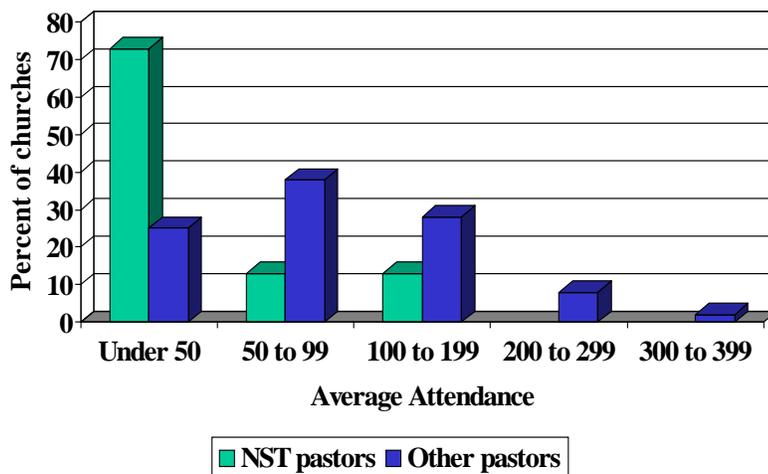


Figure 3. Size of churches served by NST pastors, CLS.

NST pastors are twice as likely as other pastors to be serving rural congregations, and somewhat more likely to be in the central areas of large cities, particularly with racial/ethnic congregations, as can be seen in Figure 4. They are less likely to be in small cities, residential areas of large cities and suburbs.

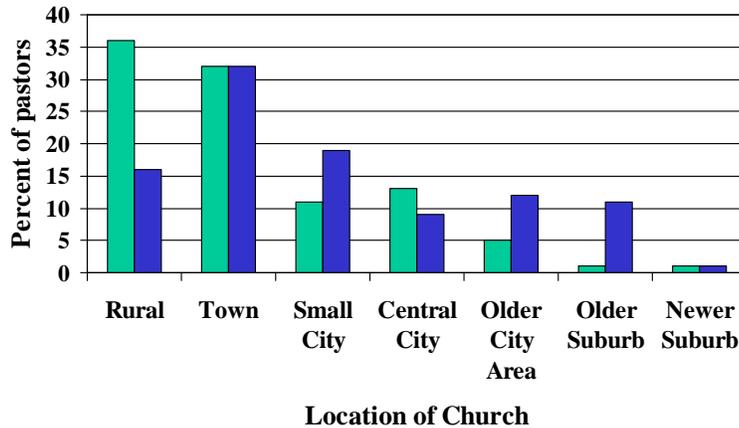
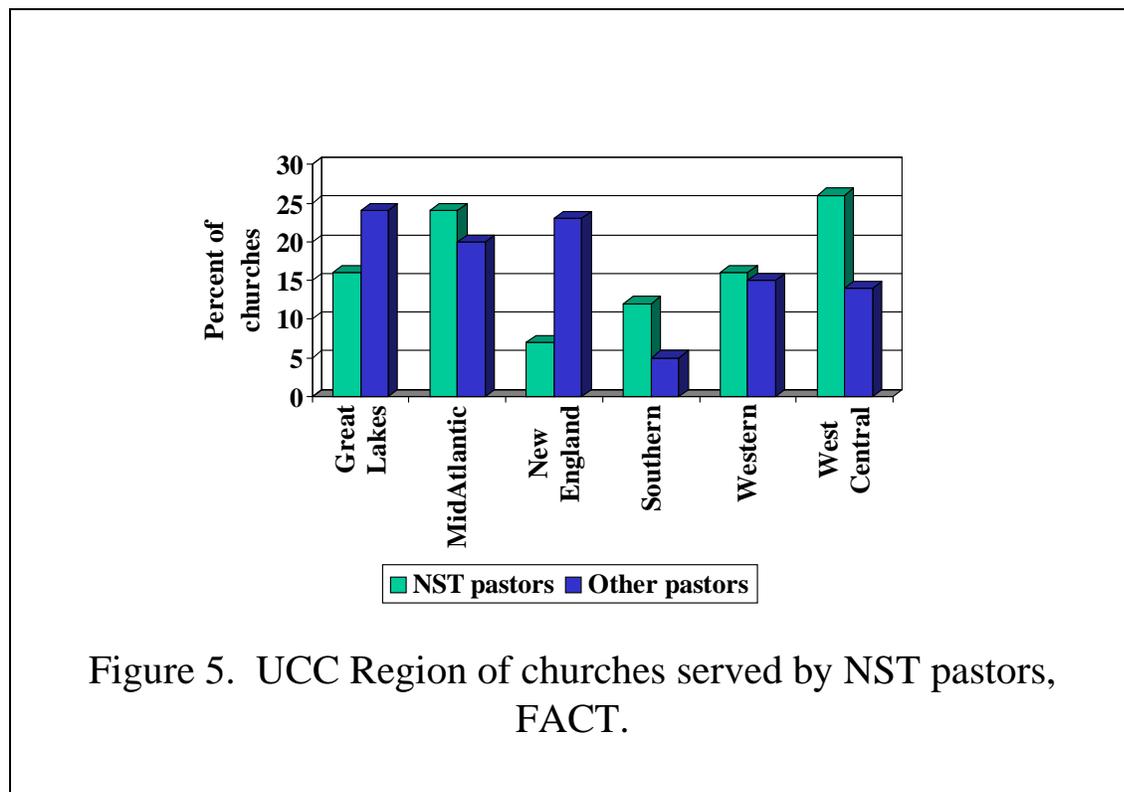


Figure 4. Location of congregations with FACT NST pastors.

These congregations may be different from other UCC congregations in ways related to their size and location. Both the FACT and the CLS surveys asked participants to describe their congregational life and programs in detail. These characteristics were compared for congregations served by NST and other pastors, limiting the sample in the FACT survey to congregations with an average attendance of less than 75 to control for differences in size between groups. The two groups of congregations did not differ significantly in most areas, including being spiritually alive, working for social justice, and being willing to change. They did differ significantly in two specific areas, however. NST pastors were significantly more likely than others to rate their congregations as NOT that different from other congregations in their area, as having a clear mission and purpose and being a beacon in their community, holding strong beliefs and values, and being theologically more conservative. In addition, they give more emphasis to practices such as fasting, dietary restrictions, abstaining from sex before marriage, and family devotions. These characteristics seem like traditional values that are thought to exemplify rural and small town churches. However, the NST pastors also were more likely than others to rate their congregations as celebrating their denominational heritage and participating in the UCC wider church.

A parallel analysis of comparable questions on the CLS that included only those congregations with fewer than 50 in attendance also found very few differences between the characteristics of congregations served by NST and other pastors. One not surprising difference was that NST pastors thought their congregations saw ordination or a seminary degree as less important for ministry than did pastors who were seminary graduates.

NST pastors are not evenly distributed across the nation, but are concentrated in particular conferences and regions, as can be seen in Figure 5 for the FACT sample. The West Central Region has both the greatest numbers of NST pastors and also the highest proportion of their pastors who are NST. Both the Southern and Middle Atlantic Regions have higher than average proportions of pastors who are NST, while the Great Lakes and New England Regions have lower than average.



The numbers of NST pastors varied within region, as well. By conference, Nebraska had the highest proportion of NST pastors in the FACT sample. Of the 10 Nebraska pastors participating in the FACT, 6 or 60% were NST. Other conferences that had at least 10 participants and relatively high rates of NST were Minnesota with 24%, Penn Central with 26%, Penn West with 33%, and the Southern Conference with 26%. Other conferences in the West Central, Middle Atlantic, and Southern Regions, such as Iowa, Penn Southeast, New York, and Florida Conferences had few or no NST pastors in the sample.

Because the CLS sample was much smaller than the FACT sample, differences by Conference and even by Region are subject to sampling error and not reliable. However, even in this sample, 40% of the NST pastors were from the West Central Region.

Several factors probably are at work in addition to the differences in conference makeup by size of congregation and urban/suburban/rural types of settings. Association policies and practices may differ widely regarding who can be ordained or granted standing or whether lay pastors should be encouraged. Opportunities to receive training, both from local seminaries and from certification courses differ from conference to conference. Conferences in more densely settled areas may be able to fill pulpits by yoking congregations, while those in the West Central may not have that option. In addition, regions such as New England with many seminaries and many retired clergy settling there may have a larger pool of seminary-trained clergy available for part-time positions in small churches than other areas.

So What?

Probably the most important question about NST pastors is whether they are as effective in their ministry as other clergy. Because the surveys were based on self-report, this question cannot be investigated adequately using this database. A few analyses indicate that their ministry in the places where they serve is similar to that of other clergy, however.

For example, when FACT congregations with 75 or fewer people in attendance were examined, NST clergy and other clergy did not differ significantly in the time they spent on various clergy tasks, such as preparing and leading worship, providing pastoral care, and dealing with conflict. NST pastors reported spending significantly more time in teaching people about the faith than did other pastors. In general, they spent more time in person-to-person activities and less in administrative tasks than other pastors. When pastors' ratings of how their churches had grown in various areas of church life were compared, again differences generally were not significant, although NST pastors were a bit more likely to say that their congregations had grown in affecting the lives of their members. Their congregations offered similar programs both within the congregation and to the larger community. They did not rate their congregations differently on the state of their current financial health. Congregations with NST pastors were significantly more likely to have increased and less likely to have decreased in attendance over the last five years than other congregations; however, differences in attendance in the last two years were small and not statistically significant. NST pastors were less likely than others to report conflict over finances, program priorities, and the leader's style, while the groups did not differ significantly in reported conflict over worship, denominational issues, the leaders' or members' behavior or facility use.

A parallel analysis of data from the CLS sample of congregations with 50 or fewer in attendance also found few differences between NST and other pastors in their reports of the time they spend on various tasks, as well as on other ratings of congregational life and characteristics. In terms of conflict, NST pastors reported more minor conflicts but fewer major ones than did other pastors. They did not differ significantly from others in the issues over which the congregation was in conflict or in the way that they managed it.

Because the CLS asked extensive questions about clergy well-being, NST pastors could be compared with other pastors on their satisfaction with aspects of the ministry and various measures of stress. The groups did not differ significantly on almost all measures, as well as overall composites of satisfaction and stress. NST pastors reported financial aspects of the ministry as being less important than did other pastors, however.

The CLS also asked large samples of laity about their own experiences in their congregations. Laity in congregations led by NST pastors did not differ significantly from those led by seminary-trained pastors on any of the factors examined. These included how well their spiritual needs are being met, whether they have grown in their faith over the past year, whether they are involved in charitable or social justice activities, and whether they are satisfied with what is offered for children. They were slightly more likely to say that worship helps them in their daily life, although differences only approached statistical significance. When pastors on the FACT survey were asked to rate their congregations' growth in affecting the lives of members, ratings from NST pastors were higher than from other pastors. This parallel finding from laity in the CLS survey suggests that the difference may be a real, though small one.

Summary and Implications

NST pastors are a significant and increasing segment of the UCC clergy population, serving over 10% of all congregations. In general, they serve small churches, often in rural areas, small towns or city centers. Although African-American, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic pastors are more likely than European-Americans to be NST, the vast majority of NST pastors are European-American.

The majority of NST pastors have a college degree, and many have completed a certification program. They are less likely than seminary-trained pastors to be ordained and more likely to be interim or supply than to be installed. While those who are not ordained generally seek ordination, they are not currently attending seminary.

In the small congregations in which they serve, NST pastors appear to provide a ministry that is similar to that of other pastors. They spend their time in similar ways, their congregations appear to be like others their size in programs, finances, conflict, and growth or decline, and their congregations are similar in ratings of satisfaction and growth in faith.

The presence of NST pastors varies considerably across the UCC with a concentration in the West Central Region. This situation provides an opportunity for conferences to share expertise and different models for selecting, training, placing and supporting these pastors. Whether NST pastors would welcome opportunities for educational experiences leading to a seminary degree rather than a certificate program if such opportunities were available through the internet or through satellite programs also might be explored.