

Profile of Excellent Congregations: Findings from a National Sample of Congregations

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About 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey conducted by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in April 2001. Congregations in the national random sample were selected by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago to be representative of congregations of all denominations and faith groups across the country. Other congregations were selected from specific denominations to be representative of congregations and worshipers within those denominations. All worshipers in each participating congregation completed a survey in worship, providing extensive data about individuals actively involved in religious life in America. Survey topics included worshipers' faith background and current membership, their participation in activities of the congregation, and their values regarding congregational life. For more information about the project: www.USCongregations.org.

All strength calculations were based on data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey attendee forms, aggregated to the congregational level and weighted to compensate for size and non-response biases. Reported results are for 434 congregations in the random sample, chosen to be representative of congregations across the U.S. Using aggregated data, each variable on the survey became several aggregated variables, each indicating the percentage of worshipers in the congregation who chose a particular response option for that variable. For example, a two-option variable such as gender becomes two variables when aggregated—the percentage of worshipers who are female and the percentage of worshipers who are male.

Ten strength indices were developed. These tap the essential purposes of congregations. We used a systematic method to determine the specific questions that make up each strength. First, we listed all survey questions that were designed to measure each strength. Second, we selected for inclusion the specific response categories that were most relevant to the concept we were attempting to measure. For example, when using the question about worshipers' private devotions, two answers were chosen because they are most reflective of growth in faith—spending time in private devotional activities either “every day or most days” or “a few times a week.” Third, we used factor analysis to examine this pool of questions to determine those combinations that do the best job of measuring that strength. Sometimes, questions that we thought would be important in measuring a particular strength, turned out to relatively unimportant and were dropped. In other instances, aggregated response categories chosen for a particular question were changed (to include a larger or smaller number of responses) to maximize variability among congregations. Finally, Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure acceptable levels of reliability.

Each strength index was calculated as the average of the items in the scale and had potential scores ranging from 0% to 100%. The number of items in each index and the coefficient alpha for each are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1
Ten Strengths in U.S. Congregations**

Strength	Number of Items	Coefficient Alpha
Growing Spiritually Index.....	5	.77
Meaningful Worship Index	8	.86
Participating in the Congregation Index.....	5	.82
Sense of Belonging Index	3	.74
Caring for Children and Youth Index.....	3	.65
Focusing on the Community Index	7	.81
Sharing Faith Index	4	.90
Welcoming New People	1	**
Empowering Leadership Index	4	.84
Looking to the Future Index.....	4	.82

** No coefficient alpha is reported because Welcoming New People is measured with a single variable.

Mean scores for each strength are not provided in this table because comparing scores across strengths is inappropriate. The indices are based on questions and responses that vary widely in their structure and average scores and this prevents the ability to compare across indices. That is, just because the average score on the Meaningful Worship Index is higher than the average score on the Growing Spiritually Index does *not* mean that congregations in general are doing better in the area of worship than in the area of spirituality. Comparisons of scores on a particular index across congregations are, however, possible.

To examine how these 10 strengths are distributed across congregations, we first looked at the percentage of congregations that can be described as “excellent congregations.” We used two measures of “excellence.” The most generous one defined an excellent congregation as one with a score above the 50th percentile on a particular strength (that is, a congregation that is above average on that strength). Thus, 50% of congregations are excellent on each strength using this measure. The second definition of excellence restricted this label to those congregations above the 80th percentile on a particular strength. How many strengths do typical congregations have using these two criteria? With the more generous 50th percentile criteria, all but 4% of congregations can claim at least one strength, and the most strengths that an individual congregation had was nine (see Table 2). With the stricter measure, one-third of congregations lack any strengths, and the most strengths attributed to a single congregation was eight.

Table 2
Percentages of Congregations with Various Numbers of Strengths
by Two “Excellence” Criteria

Congregations with:	Excellence Criteria	
	Above the 50 th Percentile	Above the 80 th Percentile
10 strengths	0%	0%
9 strengths	2%	0%
8 strengths	9%	<1%
7 strengths	15%	6%
6 strengths	8%	3%
5 strengths	10%	7%
4 strengths	12%	4%
3 strengths	14%	10%
2 strengths	18%	12%
1 strengths	9%	26%
0 strengths	4%	33%
Total	100%	100%

To examine how these 10 strengths play out in various types of congregations, we examined the relationship of each strength to three factors: congregational size, faith group, and average age of worshippers in the congregation.

Congregations were categorized by size according to their self-reported average worship attendance for 2000 (the last full year before the survey). Three size categories were used: under 100, 100-350, and over 350. Small congregations excelled on five strengths: Growing Spiritually, Participating in the Congregation, and Having a Sense of Belonging, Sharing Faith, and Empowering Leadership (see Table 3). Mid-sized congregations excelled on one strength: Caring for Children and Youth. The remaining four strengths showed no significant differences by size.

Table 3
Mean Strength Scores by Congregational Size

Strength	Small (under 100)	Mid-Size (100-350)	Large (over 350)	All Congregations	Sign.
1. Growing Spiritually	49%	46%	42%	47%	.001
2. Meaningful Worship.....	63%	61%	62%	62%	ns
3. Participating in the Congregation.....	63%	59%	48%	60%	.000
4. Having a Sense of Belonging	37%	36%	32%	37%	.016
5. Caring for Children and Youth.....	46%	55%	53%	50%	.000
6. Focusing on the Community	32%	35%	32%	33%	ns
7. Sharing Faith	35%	29%	25%	32%	.000
8. Welcoming New People	33%	33%	35%	33%	ns
9. Empowering Leadership.....	51%	47%	46%	49%	.01
10. Looking to the Future	40%	42%	41%	41%	ns

To examine differences by theology or faith group, congregations were categorized based on their self-reported denominational affiliation. Five categories were used: Catholics, mainline Protestants, conservative Protestants, congregations in historically black denominations, and other (non-Christian congregations such as Buddhists, Jews, and Mormons). Because congregations in the other category were so diverse, they were excluded from analysis by faith group. Conservative Protestants and historically black congregations scored higher on average than mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations on eight strengths: Growing Spiritually, Meaningful Worship, Participating in the Congregation, Having a Sense of Belonging, Caring for Children and Youth, Sharing Faith, Empowering Leadership, and Looking to the Future (see Table 4). Conservative Protestants alone excelled in Welcoming New People. Mainline Protestant congregations tended to score higher than other congregation on one strength: Focusing on the Community.

Table 4
Mean Strength Scores by Faith Group

Strength	Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	Historically Black	Sign.
1. Growing Spiritually	38%	41%	55%	55%	.000
2. Meaningful Worship.....	58%	56%	69%	67%	.000
3. Participating in the Congregation.....	44%	55%	69%	72%	.000
4. Having a Sense of Belonging	30%	31%	43%	45%	.000
5. Caring for Children and Youth.....	46%	49%	53%	53%	.000
6. Focusing on the Community	33%	38%	28%	36%	.000
7. Sharing Faith	20%	23%	43%	45%	.000
8. Welcoming New People	27%	29%	39%	24%	.000
9. Empowering Leadership.....	39%	44%	57%	53%	.000
10. Looking to the Future	34%	35%	47%	52%	.000

Note. Catholic = Roman Catholic; mainline Protestant = Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, etc.; Conservative Protestant = Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Assemblies of God, Nazarenes, Pentecostal, etc.; historically black = National Baptist Convention, Church of God in Christ, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, etc.

To study difference by average age of worshipers, congregations were categorized based on the average age of worshipers relative to the average across the whole sample (52 years). Two categories were used: average age at or below 52 and average age above 52. Congregations with younger than average worshipers scored higher than those with older worshipers on four strengths: Having a Sense of Belonging, Caring for Children and Youth, Welcoming New Worshipers, and Looking to the Future (see Table 5). Congregations with older than average worshipers scored higher than other congregations on one strength: Focusing on the Community. There were no differences by age for the other five strengths.

Table 5
Mean Strength Scores by Average Age in the Congregation

Strength	Younger	Older	Sign.
1. Growing Spiritually.....	48%	46%	ns
2. Meaningful Worship.....	62%	62%	ns
3. Participating in the Congregation.....	59%	61%	ns
4. Having a Sense of Belonging.....	39%	35%	.000
5. Caring for Children and Youth.....	53%	47%	.000
6. Focusing on the Community.....	32%	34%	.018
7. Sharing Faith.....	34%	31%	ns
8. Welcoming New People.....	41%	27%	.000
9. Empowering Leadership.....	49%	49%	ns
10. Looking to the Future.....	46%	37%	.000

Table 6 shows the correlations among the 10 strengths. With the exception of Strength 6, Focusing on the Community, most strengths are positively correlated with other strengths.

We also examined interrelationships among these indices another way—that is by examining the extent to which scores on one strength help to predict scores on another. To do so we first identified congregations in the top 20% on each strength (the more conservative strength criteria presented in Table 2). We then used logistic regression to determine which other strengths distinguish between strong congregations and other congregations on that index. Table 7 shows the results of these analyses. As can be seen, these strengths are interwoven. For every index, at least two other strengths help to distinguish between congregations that excel and those that do not.

These measures of ten strengths provide an effective, broad-based look at congregational effectiveness. We have used them here to compare samples of congregations to determine how typical congregations of various faith groups and sizes compare. They can be used to help individual congregations learn more about where they are strong. They can be used to compare individual congregations to national benchmarks for the random sample of congregations or to benchmarks for random samples from a variety of specific denominations that participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. They can also be used to compare individual congregations to samples of congregations of certain sizes. These various comparisons allow congregations to assess their strengths in comparison to benchmarks that are most appropriate for their unique faith group and size.

Furthermore, using multiple measures ensures that most congregations can find at least one area in which they can proclaim strength. The traditional focus of church growth as the single most important measure of congregational health puts many congregations at a disadvantage and means that it is unlikely they will ever be judged as “successful.” Multiple measures go beyond the traditional approach and serve to value the many ways that congregations can be successful.

Table 6
Correlations among 10 Congregational Strengths

Strength	1. Growing Spiritually	2. Meaningful Worship	3. Participating in the Congregation	4. Having a Sense of Belonging	5. Caring for Youth	6. Focusing on the Community	7. Sharing Faith	8. Welcoming New Worshipers	9. Empowering Leadership	10. Looking to the Future
1. Growing Spiritually		.798**	.759**	.725**	.187**	-.454**	.818**	.180**	.685**	.510**
2. Meaningful Worship			.598**	.579**	.122*	-.440**	.756**	.179**	.758**	.453**
3. Participating in the Congregation				.631**	.226**	-.334**	.770**	.007	.586**	.457**
4. Having a Sense of Belonging					.258**	-.300**	.693**	.301**	.658**	.641**
5. Caring for Children and Youth						.041	.136**	.170**	.248**	.406**
6. Focusing on the Community							-.503**	-.090	-.193*	-.079
7. Sharing Faith								.286**	.660**	.491**
8. Welcoming New Worshipers									.145*	.366**
9. Empowering Leadership										.618**
10. Looking to the Future										

* = p < .05

** = p < .01

**Table 7
Strength by Strength**

Strength	What Other Strengths do Congregations in the Top 20% on This Strength Also Possess?									
	1. Growing Spiritually	2. Meaningful Worship	3. Participating in the Congregation	4. Having a Sense of Belonging	5. Caring for Youth	6. Focusing on the Community	7. Sharing Faith	8. Welcoming New Worshipers	9. Empowering Leadership	10. Looking to the Future
1. Growing Spiritually		X	X	X	X					
2. Meaningful Worship	X								X	
3. Participating in the Congregation	X						X			
4. Having a Sense of Belonging	X					X	X			X
5. Caring for Children and Youth								X		
6. Focusing on the Community									X	
7. Sharing Faith			X					X		
8. Welcoming New Worshipers	X						X			X
9. Empowering Leadership		X				X	X			X
10. Looking to the Future			X	X	X			X	X	

For each strength listed across the top, the column below shows the other strengths that congregations in the top 20% on that strength also possess. For example, congregations in the top 20% on Growing Spiritually also tend to score high on Meaningful Worship, Participating in the Congregation, Having a Sense of Belonging, and Welcoming New Worshipers.

Based on logistic regression comparing congregations in the top 20% on the strength at the top of the column to other congregations.

Appendix: Calculations for Each Strength

Strength 1: Growing Spiritually

- A. Worshipers who are growing in their faith *through participation in activities of their congregation*
- B. Worshipers who spend time at least *a few times a week* in private devotional activities
- C. Worshipers who feel their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation (*agree or strongly agree*)
- D. Worshipers who report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation (from a list of 14 options)
- E. Worshipers who report the prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation (from a list of 14 options)

Mean.....47.35
Median.....46.49
SD.....10.88
Alpha......77

Strength 2: Meaningful Worship

- A. Worshipers who *always or usually* experience God's presence during services
- B. Worshipers who *always or usually* experience inspiration during services
- C. Worshipers who *always or usually* experience joy during services
- D. Worshipers who *always or usually* experience awe during services
- E. Worshipers who *rarely* experience boredom during services
- F. Worshipers who *rarely* experience frustration during services
- G. Worshipers who report the sermons, preaching, or homilies as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation
- H. Worshipers who report worship services or activities of the congregation help them with everyday living to a *great extent*

Mean.....62.03
Median.....62.48
SD.....11.38
Alpha......86

Strength 3: Participating in the Congregation

- A. Worshipers who attend worship services *usually every week or more than once a week*
- B. Worshipers who are involved in one or more small groups (e.g., Sunday school, prayer or Bible study, discussion groups, fellowships)
- C. Worshipers who have one or more leadership roles in the congregation (e.g., board member, teacher, leading worship)
- D. Worshipers who often participate in important decision-making in the congregation
- E. Worshiper who give *5% or more* of their net income regularly to the congregation

Mean.....60.08
Median.....60.36
SD.....13.44
Alpha......82

Strength 4: Having a Sense of Belonging

- A. Worshipers who report they are participating *more* in the activities of the congregation than compared to two years ago
- B. Worshipers who say *most* of my closest friends are part of this congregation
- C. Worshipers who feel they have a strong sense of belonging to their congregation that is *growing*

Mean36.53
Median34.71
SD11.37
Alpha74

Strength 5: Caring for Children and Youth

- A. Worshipers who are satisfied with what is offered for children and youth (less than 19 years of age) in the congregation (*satisfied* or *very satisfied*)
- B. Worshipers who report ministry for children or youth as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation
- C. Percentage of children and youth (living at home) in congregation who worship here

Mean50.05
Median51.11
SD12.46
Alpha65

Strength 6: Focusing on the Community

- A. Worshipers who are involved in social service or advocacy groups through their congregation
- B. Worshipers who are involved in social service or advocacy groups in their community
- C. Worshipers who *donated money to charitable organization (other than congregation)* in previous 12 months
- D. Worshipers who report wider community care or social justice emphasis as one of the tree most valued aspects of their congregation
- E. Worshipers who report openness to social diversity as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation
- F. *Worked with others to try to solve a community problem* in previous 12 months
- G. Worshipers who *voted in the last presidential election* in previous 12 months

Mean32.88
Median32.21
SD8.93
Alpha81

Strength 7: Sharing Faith

- A. Worshipers who are involved in evangelistic activities in the congregation
- B. Worshipers who *feel at ease talking about their faith and seek opportunities to do so*
- C. Worshipers who have *invited to a worship service a friend or relative who does not currently attend in the past year*
- D. Worshipers who report reaching those who do not attend church as one of the three most valued aspect of their congregation

Mean32.23
Median29.54
SD14.63
Alpha90

Strength 8: Welcoming New Worshipers

- A. Percentage of worshipers who have been going to worship services or activities of this congregation for 5 years or less

Mean.....33.26
Median.....30.19
SD.....17.37
Alpha.....—

Strength 9: Empowering Leadership

- A. Worshipers who feel the congregation's leaders encourage them to find and use their gifts and skills *to a great extent*
B. Worshipers who feel the minister, pastor, or priest takes into account the ideas of worshipers *to a great extent*
C. Worshipers who describe the leadership style of the pastor, minister, or priest as one that *inspires people to take action*
D. Worshipers who strongly feel there is a good match between the congregation and the minister, pastor, or priest (*strongly agree*)

Mean.....49.25
Median.....48.65
SD.....15.92
Alpha......84

Strength 10: Looking to the Future

- A. Worshipers who feel the congregation has a clear vision, goals, or direction for its ministry and mission and they are *strongly committed* to them
B. Worshipers who have a sense of excitement about their congregation's future (*strongly agree*)
C. Worshipers who feel the congregation is *currently moving in new directions*
D. Worshipers who feel the congregation is always ready to try something new (*agree* or *strongly agree*)

Mean.....40.82
Median.....38.30
SD.....13.18
Alpha......82