

Profile of Numerically Growing Congregations: Findings from a National Sample of Congregations

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What factors predict numerical growth in a congregation? What is the relationship between congregational health or strength and numerical growth? Various studies have documented some of the correlates of congregational growth, but our interest was in documenting multiple dimensions of congregational health and strength beyond numerical growth. This project, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, involved a national random sample of congregations representative of all faith groups and denominations. Hyper-network sampling using the 2000 General Social Survey as the initial selection vehicle yielded an N of 434 congregations and more than 100,000 worshippers. Additional oversamples were drawn from nine denominations yielding a final N of about 300,000 participants in over 2,000 congregations. This paper is based on the national random sample collected in April 2001. All worshippers attending services were asked to complete a questionnaire in worship. Data could then be analyzed at the individual worshiper level or aggregated to form congregational level variables. Congregational level variables were weighted to compensate for size and non-response bias. Survey topics included worshippers' faith background and current membership, their participation in activities of the congregation, and their values regarding congregational life.

We examined the impact of 16 factors on numerical growth. Ten variables were measures of congregational strength or health: spiritual growth, meaningful worship, participation in the congregation, a sense of belonging, caring for children and youth, focusing on the community, sharing faith, welcoming new worshippers, empowering leadership, and looking to the future. All strength calculations were based on data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey attendee forms aggregated to the congregational level. Factor analysis was used to develop the 10 indices. Six other factors that many believe influence congregational growth were included in the regression equations: congregational size, average age of worshippers, average income of worshippers, percentage of worshippers who are female, theology/faith group of the congregation, and local population growth. Zero-order correlation coefficients among all independent and dependent variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Multiple regression analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Using individual congregational strengths one at a time along with the six other congregational characteristics (e.g., size) to predict numerical growth shows a different pattern of relationships than when all 10 strengths are included in the equation. Thus, controlling for various strengths in a congregation appears to be essential for an accurate understanding of congregational numerical growth. When all 16 variables are taken into account, three congregational strengths are positive predictors of numerical growth: *Caring for Young People*, *Participating in the Congregation*, and *Welcoming New People*. Three congregational strengths are negative predictors of numerical growth: *Growing Spiritually*, *Focusing on the Community*, and *Sharing Faith*. Finally, the remaining strength measures were found to be unrelated to numerical growth: *Meaningful Worship*, *Having a Sense of Belonging*, *Empowering Leadership*, and *Looking to the Future*. None of the control variables were found to be related to numerical growth: congregational size, average age or income of worshippers, percentage of female worshippers, the theology of the congregation, and local population growth.

While we do not believe that numerical growth is the best barometer for determining whether a congregation is healthy or effective, we recognize that many congregations struggle with declining membership and resources. Our findings do not suggest that congregations should refrain from focusing on the community, for example, as the above might indicate. Rather our findings are descriptions of the current mix of strengths possessed by U.S. congregations that are growing. Congregations currently doing well in one of three areas negatively related to growth also tend to be below average on several other strengths that are significant predictors of congregational numerical growth. Congregations that desire to grow numerically should develop multiple strengths.

Additional information about the project can be found at www.UScongregations.org and in the forthcoming *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

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