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C. Kirk Hadaway

FACTs On Growth: 2010

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FACTs On Growth: 2010 is a report on the Faith Communities Today 2010 (*FACT 2010*) national survey of congregations conducted by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP). Sample and survey methodology are described in the appendix.

CCSP is a multi-faith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary. The primary purpose of CCSP is the development of research based resources for congregational development. An on-going purpose is to advance the public's understanding of the most numerous voluntary organization in the U.S.—our religious congregations.

FACTs On Growth: 2010 was written by C. Kirk Hadaway, Officer for Congregational Research, The Episcopal Church. He has been involved with CCSP/FACT since its inception in 1996. For a list of publications and contact information visit the Faith Communities Today web site at: www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org.

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Introduction

Growth for its own sake is not a goal for most religious communities in America. But most congregations do want to grow in order to reach more people with their message, or at least to stay viable. Although many congregations remain on relatively stable attendance plateaus for years, the prospect of decline is all too real without occasional growth. Decline—even slow decline that looks like stability—typically leads to institutional retrenchment and, over time, even to the death of a congregation. Decline is more prevalent today than it was just five years ago and congregational economics are much more precarious. Still, many congregations in America are growing. What are they like and what are they doing?

Why do many congregations thrive but others find growth to be elusive? In seeking answers to this question, this report examines the many sources of congregational growth and decline, including:

- The context and demographic makeup of the congregation
- The congregation's identity and character
- The congregation's worship
- The congregation's activities and programs
- The congregation's leader

Growth is measured by change in average weekly worship attendance from 2005 to 2010 using a 5-category growth/decline measure that ranged from severe decline, decline, plateau, some growth, to greatest growth. Congregations with the greatest growth scored at the top of a scale that combined percent change in worship attendance with net change in worship attendance from 2005 to 2010. Using this growth scale mitigates the problem of small congregations typically having greater percentage change in attendance and large congregations having greater change in net attendance. In order to be included in the top growth category a congregation must have experienced substantial net and percentage growth from 2005 to 2010.

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The charts you will see in this report show the proportion of congregations with greatest growth within response categories on various survey questions. For instance, when congregational leaders are asked, "Is your congregation willing to change to meet new challenges?" among those congregations saying they "strongly agree," 48% have experienced the highest level of attendance growth. Among those who "agree," 35% are growing strongly. For those who are "unsure" 28% are growing. And finally, among congregations who say they "strongly disagree," or "disagree" about whether they are willing to change to meet new challenges, only 17% have the highest level of attendance growth (see Figure 13). The strength of the relationship with growth is seen in the degree of difference between extremes in question responses (strongly agree and disagree), which in this case is 31 percentage points (a quite large difference).

Congregational Context and Composition

Congregations are located in community settings and, as such, are affected by the character of those setting and the changes taking place there.

In all previous studies of congregational growth and decline, newer suburbs were associated with the greatest potential for growth. And until recently, downtown and central city areas were places where growth was least likely. That situation has changed. Figure 1 shows that congregations located in the downtown or central city area are more likely to experience growth than congregations in any other type of location. Newer suburbs are next most likely to be home to growing congregations, but only 40% of congregations in newer suburbs experienced substantial growth from 2005 to 2010, as compared to **72% from 2000 to 2005**. Congregations are least likely to grow in small towns and rural areas.

In general, areas with newer housing and a growing population tend to be better for growth. This stands to reason because when new people move into new housing they sometimes look for a worshipping community nearby. In more recent years, however, new housing units and population growth are not just features of the suburbs. They can happen anywhere (including central city locations) and are related to congregational growth wherever they occur.

Even if a congregation is in a growing area, it does not mean that most of the new residents will automatically join a congregation in their community. That is the reality when so many Americans view worship attendance as optional. Add in the fact that the economic crisis has slowed suburban growth, and the result is that growth is no longer nearly automatic for congregations in newer suburbs.

More important today than rural, urban, or suburban location is the region in which a congregation is located. The South, from Maryland to Texas, is better for growth than all other regions. In the South, 42% of congregations experienced the highest level of growth. In other regions, only 29% of congregations grew substantially. Not only is the South growing more in population than most other regions due to "sunbelt migration," but also it is the most religious part of the nation—a place where religious observance remains more normative. Churches and other religious congregations are more likely to grow in the South. In other regions of the nation, growth is much more difficult.

Figure 1: Location, Location, Location?

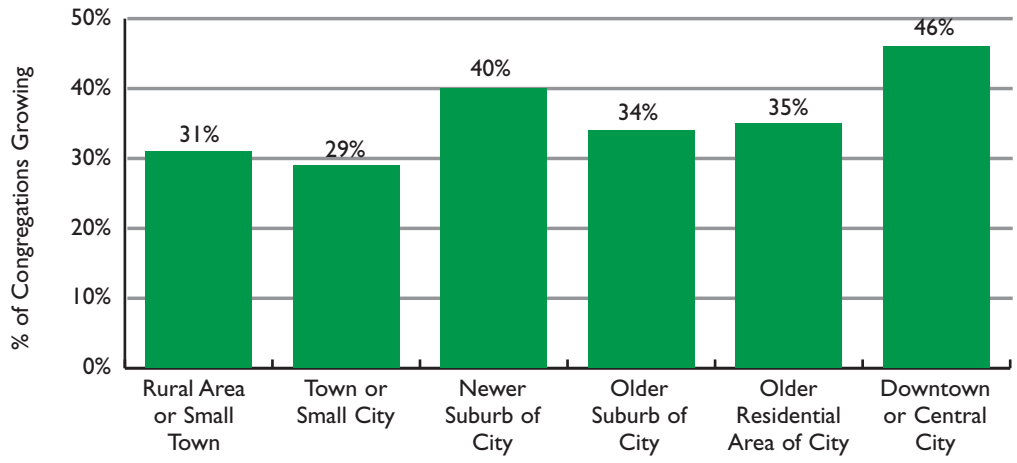
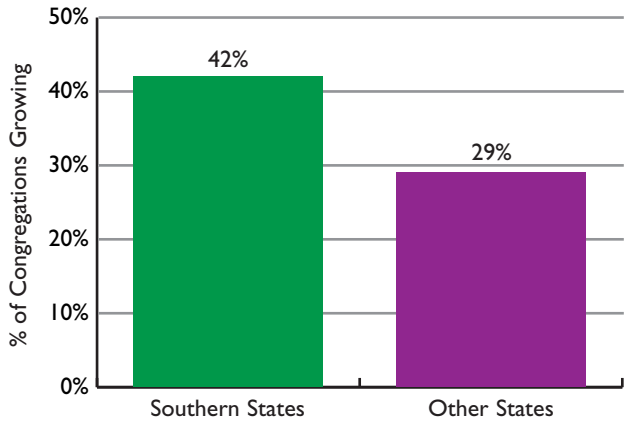


Figure 2: Region and Growth



Congregations are living, changing communities. All have a date of birth and all go through something akin to a life cycle (although death is not inevitable). Sometimes congregations flourish for many years. For others, that time may be brief before they reach a stable plateau. Typically, it is the early years of a congregation's life where the most rapid growth occurs. As shown in Figure 3, the youngest congregations (those started since 1992) are most likely to grow. In part, this is because new congregations are more likely to be started in areas most conductive to growth. However, in all areas, suburban, rural or urban, younger congregations are more likely to grow than older congregations. New organizations of all types tend to be more focused on establishing themselves as viable institutions. They cannot take it for granted and usually they don't. They are also less burdened by hardened organizational structure and established routines that keep a congregation from making the changes necessary for continued growth.

The growth advantage of being a younger organization does not last forever, of course. After 15 to 20 years, the window of opportunity closes up and the "adult" congregation does not grow as much, on average, as it did when it was more "youthful."

The members of most congregations in America represent a single predominant racial/ethnic group. There are a lot of "white churches" and "black churches" out there, for instance, and few racially pluralistic congregations of any type. This is due to a variety of factors, including residential segregation, denominational history, and the tendency of voluntary groups to form within social divisions in society (race, ethnic heritage, socioeconomic status, etc.). If the predominant racial/ethnic group in the congregation happens to be white, European-American, growth is less likely. On the other hand, if the majority group is Latino, Asian, or Black, growth is much more prevalent. Part of the issue is a simple matter of demographics. Not only is the Anglo majority a shrinking proportion of the

Figure 3: Young Congregations Grow More

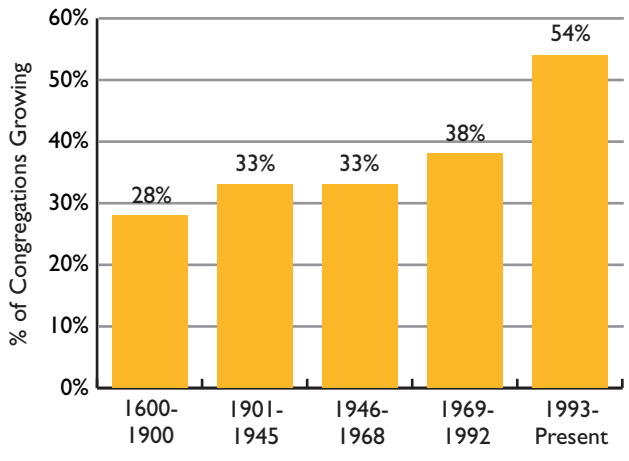
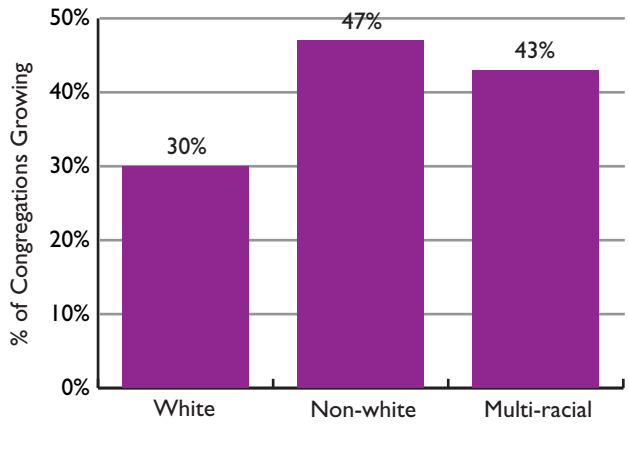


Figure 4: Race, Ethnicity and Growth



American population, but it has also essentially reached zero population growth. So in order to grow, predominantly white denominations must reach out beyond their own constituencies. Growing by incorporating the children of members is not a viable long-term option. Predominantly white congregations tend to have other disadvantages. They are more likely to have older members and to have been founded earlier. On the other hand, non-white congregations and multi-racial/ethnic congregations tend to be both younger and newer. They also tend to have more dynamic, exciting, and inspirational worship services.

An issue strongly related to growth is the language used in the congregation. Congregations that use a language other than English in one or more of their worship services or have a bilingual worship service are much more likely to grow than congregations where services are in English only.

It is generally assumed that the average person attending religious services is older than the average American. Images of congregations populated mostly by persons with gray hair (or hair that should be gray) are quite pervasive. Still, those assumptions can only be verified with the data from this research. And they are, but perhaps not to the extent suggested by conventional wisdom. As can be seen in Figure 5, 42% of participants in religious congregations are age 50 or over, as compared to 31% of all Americans. The difference is there, but it is not huge. For mainline congregations, however, the difference is much larger because the proportion of members and participants age 65 or older is much higher than it is for American congregations generally.

Growth is highly related to the age structure of the congregation, but not all congregations are composed primarily of older adults. Those that have a healthy mix of ages tend to be growing, but most important to growth is the ability of congregations to attract younger adults and families with children.

Congregations in which middle age or older adults (age 50 or older) comprise 30% or less of all active participants are most likely to grow. Congregations in which more than half of their regular participants are 50 or over are very unlikely to grow. The mere presence of older adults is not problematic in and of itself. But a congregation where a large proportion of the members are older tends to have a cluster of characteristics that inhibit growth. Not only are no children being born to members, but such congregations tend to lack a clear sense of mission and purpose, vibrant worship or involvement in recruitment and evangelism. They also are more likely to be located in rural areas and smaller towns, where growth is difficult.

Figure 5: Age Structure of the US Population and US Congregations: 2010

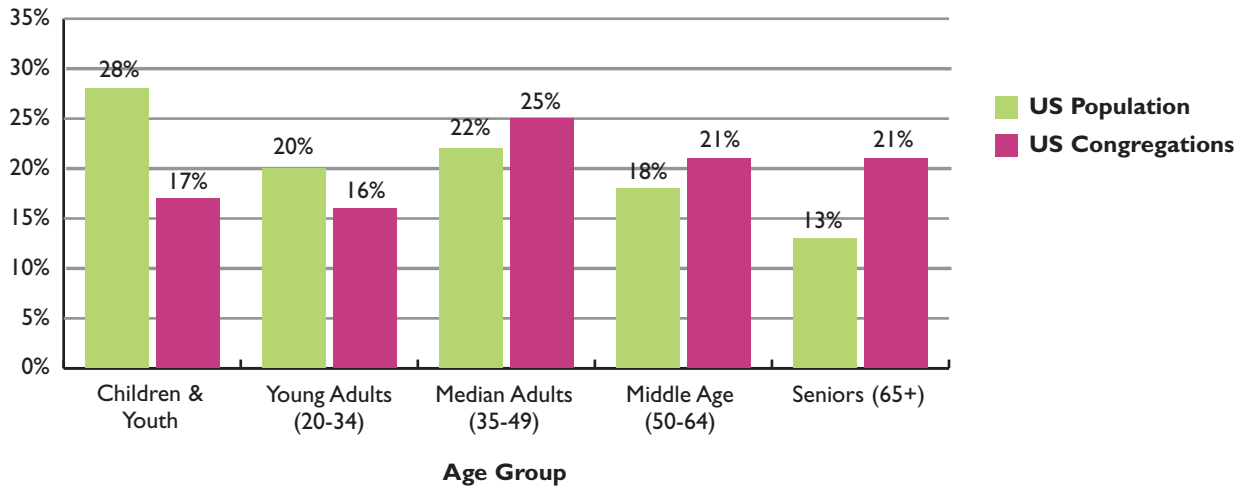
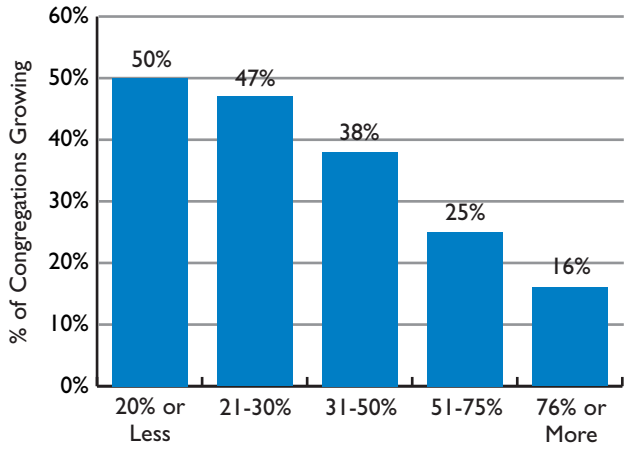
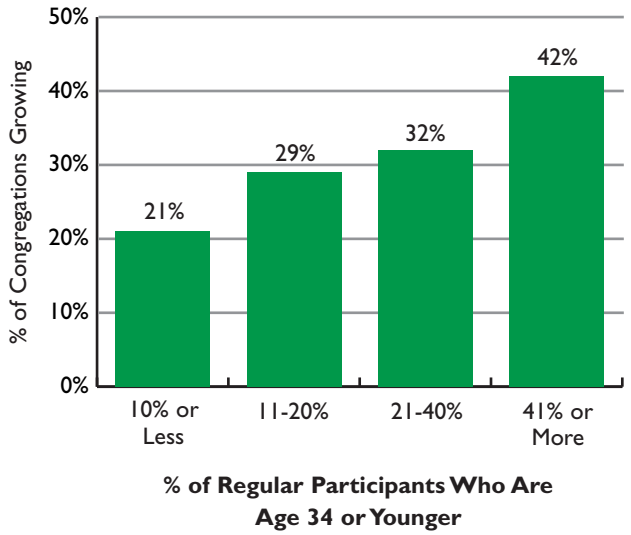


Figure 6: Aging Congregations Don't Grow



If larger proportions of older adults lead to growth problems, larger proportions of younger adults lead to growth opportunities. The congregation that is able to attract younger adults is somewhat exceptional. To be sure, such congregations are most often found in the suburban and urban areas and are thus able to reach that increasingly elusive commodity in American society: married couples with children in the home. Yet the fact that such congregations are also able to reach younger adults in general—people who are less frequent attendees—implies that they have qualities that go beyond an advantageous location. They tend to be more exciting, innovative and are more involved in recruitment. They want to reach people and make the effort to do so.

Figure 7: Young Adults, Children and Growth

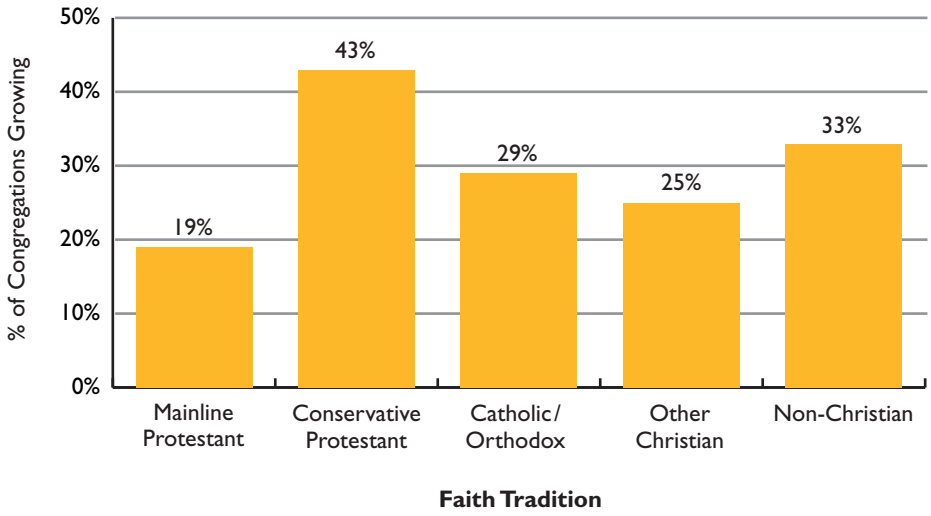


Congregational Identity and Orientation

There are a huge variety of religious bodies in America, but most, if not all, represent a larger denominational family. One of the most obvious ways to group a religious organization is by the faith tradition that they represent. The 2010 Faith Communities Today survey included both Christian congregations and non-Christian congregations, although 96% of the congregations included were Christian. Christian congregations can be subdivided into mainline churches (United Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian Church in the USA, Evangelical Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, etc.), conservative Protestant churches (most Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, Church of Christ, Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, Presbyterian Church in America, etc.), Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and a residual "other Christian" category (Latter Day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist, Brethren, etc.).

There are substantial differences in the growth profile of American denominational families. Figure 8 shows that growth is much ***more likely*** among conservative Protestant groups. Growth is ***least likely*** among mainline Protestant congregations. In addition to a greater emphasis on evangelism and recruitment, conservative churches tend to have younger members and are located disproportionately in the South. Few mainline churches are growing, which should not be surprising given the serious declines experienced by nearly all mainline bodies during the past five years. Not only are mainline churches heavily populated with older, white

Figure 8: Denomination Matters



members, the dropout rate is high among mainline Protestants and lost members are not being replaced by former evangelical and Catholic adherents (as was the case in the past).

It is well known that mainline denominations have been declining, but the lack of growth among Catholic congregations (particularly Roman Catholic) may be somewhat surprising—given continued increases in the overall Catholic population through immigration. However, increases in the Catholic constituency have not translated into increased worship attendance in their churches.

The disparity in growth between mainline and conservative Protestant churches may seem to reinforce the widely held view that theological differences are the key to understanding why so many mainline churches are declining and why so many evangelical churches are growing. However, the situation is not so simple.

When all congregations are combined, there is very little relationship between growth and theological orientation.

All congregations were asked about the theological orientation of the majority of their members or participants. Options ranged from very conservative to very liberal. When all congregations are combined, there is very little relationship between growth and theological orientation. In fact, the proportion of congregations growing is highest on the two end points: very conservative congregations and very liberal congregations (with growth rates of 39% and 35%, respectively). Growth is least likely among congregations that say they are somewhat liberal (25%) or moderate (31%).

But since the debate over conservative vs. liberal growth is primarily focused on mainline and conservative/evangelical Christian churches, it is instructive to look at the relationship between theological orientation and growth among churches representing these two denominational families. Looking first at both groups combined, theologically conservative churches are less likely to decline but are no more likely to grow than more liberal churches. The net result is a small, but positive correlation between congregational conservatism and growth.

However, within conservative/evangelical denominations and within mainline denominations, there is no relationship at all between congregational conservatism and growth. Relatively few congregations in America describe themselves as "very liberal," so it was necessary to combine the very liberal and somewhat liberal categories. Among conservative/

evangelical congregations, 46% of the liberal churches are growing, as compared to 45% of very conservative evangelical churches.

Among mainline congregations the proportion of growing congregations is generally low, but more liberal mainline churches are slightly more likely to grow. Overall, only 17% of mainline churches claim to be liberal, and 22% of these churches are growing, as compared to 19% of the predominantly conservative mainline churches.

So are more conservative churches growing? The answer is yes, but primarily because they are part of growing evangelical denominations where most churches happen to be theologically conservative. But the findings of the Faith Communities Today survey suggest that it is not theological conservatism per se that leads to growth, but rather something intrinsic to the evangelical/conservative Christian family and their constituency. Likewise, the weakness of mainline churches probably has more to do with pervasive problems among the mainline constituency (such as lower levels of church involvement, competing demands for time, and lower birth rates) than it does with their more moderate theology.

More important than theological orientation is the religious character of the congregation and clarity of mission. Growing churches are clear about why they exist and about what they are to be doing. They do not grow because they have always been at the corner of 2nd and Main. They do not grow because they are focused on themselves. They grow because they understand their reason for being and they do the things well that are essential to their life as a religious organization.

One of the stronger correlates of growth was the extent to which the congregation "has a clear mission and purpose."

One of the stronger correlates of growth was the extent to which the congregation "has a clear mission and purpose." For congregations that have such an orientation, growth is quite likely, but for those that do not, very few are growing. Not surprisingly, churches in conservative/evangelical denominations and "other Christian" groups are considerably more likely to "strongly agree" that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose than mainline congregations. So it would appear that at least part of the explanation for mainline decline is lack of a clear motivating purpose.

Figure 9: Denominational and Theological Orientation by Growth

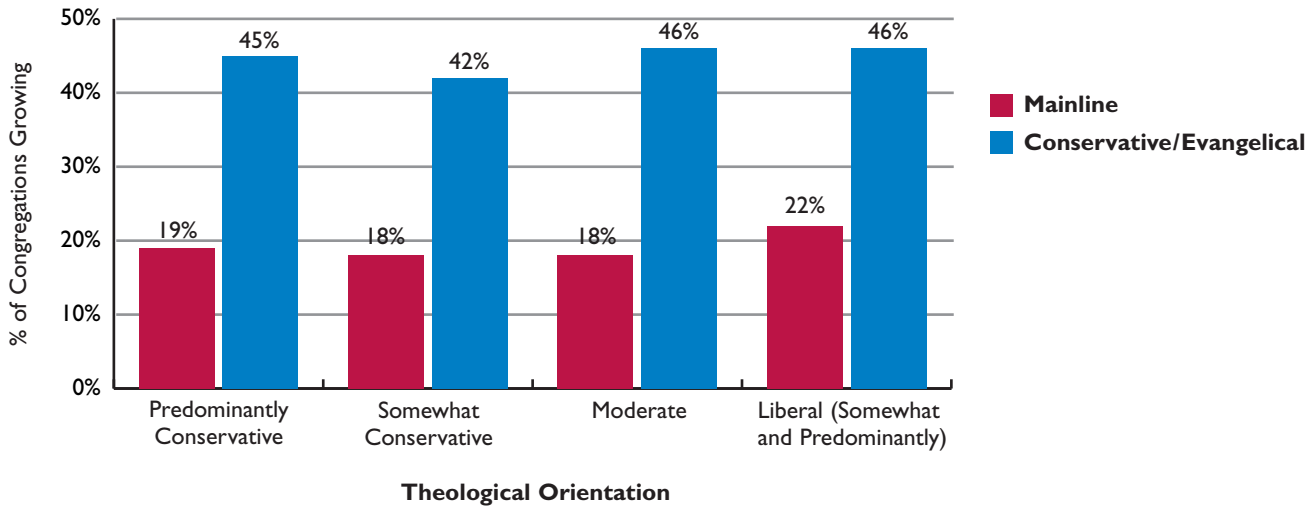
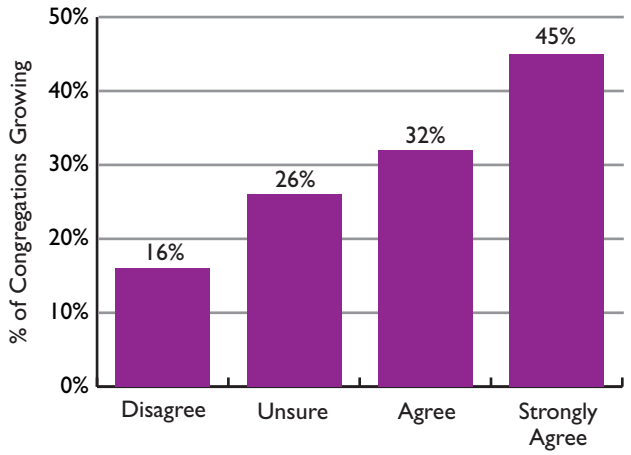


Figure 10: Purpose-Driven Growth



Our Congregation Has a Clear Mission and Purpose

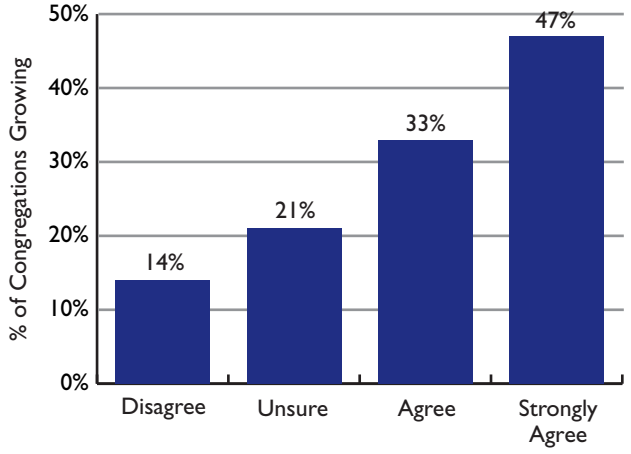
Essential to the mission of any religious congregation is to create a community where people encounter God. Otherwise, congregations often resemble inward-looking social clubs with little sense of uniqueness or even a reason for being. In Figure 11 we see the strong relationship between growth and the sense that the congregation is "spiritually vital and alive." This is one of the keys to whether a congregation is fulfilling its unique purpose—doing that thing that religious communities are more able to do than any other organization in society.

Even liberal congregations are inherently conservative in that they hold a particular set of beliefs and support a system of moral values. Congregations differ, however, in the extent to which "standing for" traditional (or non-traditional) morality is a part of their identity. To get at this sense of morality as symbolic meaning, the survey asked to what extent the congregation was "a moral beacon" in the community. Not surprisingly, theologically conservative congregations tended to agree most strongly with this question; and the question also had the greatest relationship with growth among conservative/evangelical churches. However, being a "moral beacon" was positively related to growth among all groups. It helps to stand for something.

Congregations exist in communities that are constantly changing. The membership of congregations themselves is in constant flux as people join, become active or inactive, drop out, move away and so forth. Vital organizations are those that adapt, and adaptation requires change.

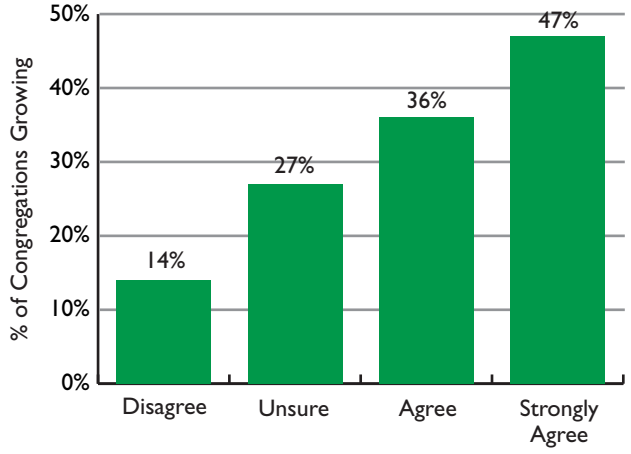
Figure 13 shows that congregations that say they are willing to change to meet new challenges also tend to be growing congregations. Most congregations (over two thirds) believe that they are willing to change, which is somewhat surprising given the traditionalistic reputation of religious groups in America. But among the minority of congregations that doubt their ability

Figure 11: Spiritual Vitality and Growth



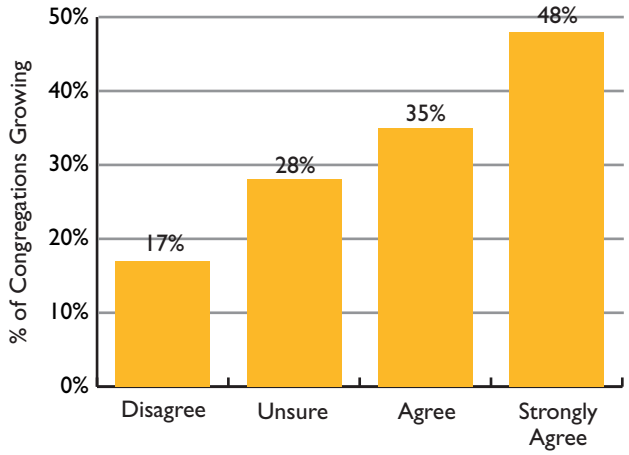
Our Congregation is Spiritually Vital and Alive

Figure 12: Being a "Moral Beacon" and Growth



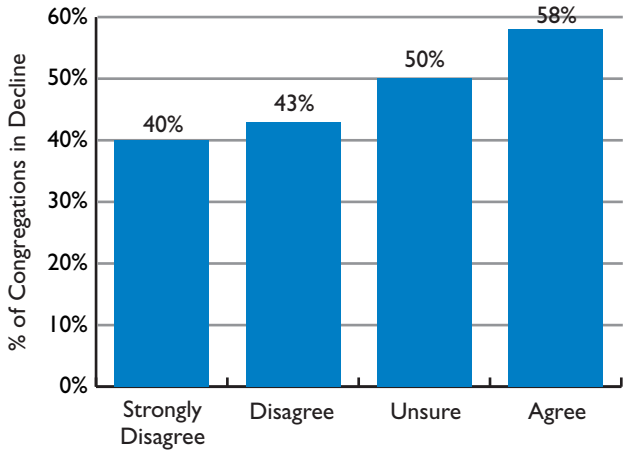
Our Congregation is a "Moral Beacon" in Our Community

Figure 13: Living Things Change



Our Congregation is Willing to Change to Meet New Challenges

Figure 14: Difference Makes a Difference



Our Congregation is Not That Different From Others Nearby

to change, growth is very unlikely. Only 17% of these congregations experienced significant growth in worship attendance from 2005 to 2010.

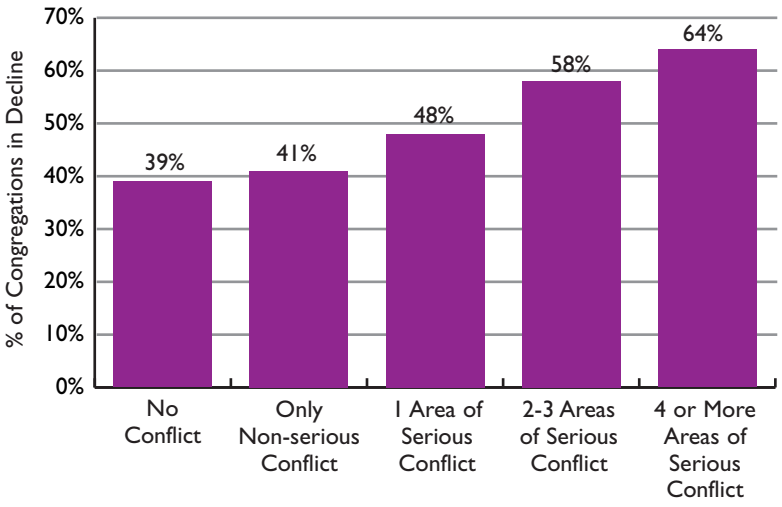
Relatively few congregational leaders are willing to admit that their congregation is not particularly unique, different or somehow "exceptional." And clearly, all congregations are at least somewhat unique. Still, congregations that see themselves as "not that different from other congregations in our community" or who are unsure about that difference are more likely to decline than congregations which see themselves as offering something unique or different.

Congregations, families, communities, and clubs are all social groups and one characteristic they share is the possibility for internal conflict. Members sometimes argue, fight, and hold grudges. Congregational conflict tends to be unpleasant, creating a situation in which some leave or withhold funds and others are dissuaded from joining.

Although previous studies indicate that conflict is a major source of congregational decline among all religious communities, the relationship was only strong here among Protestant Churches. So, as seen in Figure 15, Protestant congregations (mainline, conservative, evangelical and Black Protestant) that have experienced multiple conflicts are quite likely to have declined in attendance. Congregations with no conflict or only minor conflict during the previous five years are least likely to decline and most likely to grow.

What types of conflict are most likely to cause decline? The answer is conflict over the leader's style of leadership followed by conflict over money. Conflict in these areas tends to be more disruptive than does conflict over worship, program priorities, the behavior of members or the actions of denominational bodies (even for denominations that are highly conflicted).

Figure 15: Conflict and Declining Attendance



Conflict in Congregations in Past 5 Years

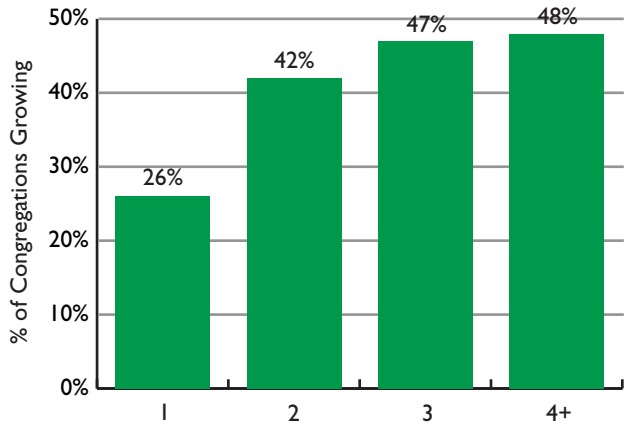
The Character of Congregational Worship

Worship defines most congregations. It is the central ritual observance and involves the greatest number of regular participants. In worship, the community gathers, they hear homilies, messages or sermons, they engage in religious rites, and in most cases they sing and pray. There is, of course, a great deal of variation within and among faith traditions in the manner and frequency in which these elements take place.

One key difference in the manner in which congregations worship is the number of services they hold. By far the most prevalent number of services is one. Over half (57%) of congregations in America hold a single service during a typical weekend, and few of these congregations are growing: only 26%. Churches with a single service are disproportionately located in more rural areas of the nation and are more typically mainline or "other Christian."

Many congregations also hold two services each weekend (28.5%) and this includes evangelical churches that hold a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening service—which are attended by the same people for the most part. Growth is considerably more likely among congregations holding two services.

Figure 16: Worship Services and Growth



How many worship services does your congregation usually hold each weekend (not counting weddings or funerals)?

Only 9% of congregations have three services and 5% have four or more on a typical weekend. Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have by far the largest percentage of congregations with three or more services.

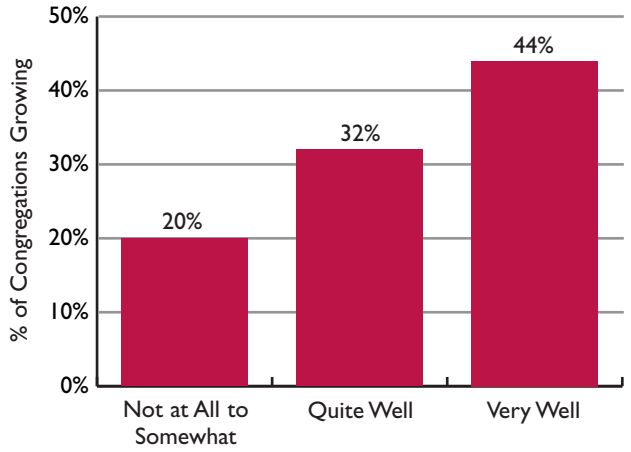
In general, the more worship services a congregation holds, the more likely it is to have grown. However, there is little difference in growth rate between congregations holding three services or four or more. Almost half (47% and 48%, respectively) of congregations with three or four or more worship services grew substantially from 2005 to 2010. But do churches grow because they have more worship services or do they grow first and then need to add additional services? Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer to that question, but controlling for size suggests that congregations tend to add worship services to accommodate additional attendees ***and*** to encourage growth.

In terms of the character of worship itself, the descriptors most strongly associated with growth are "joyful," "innovative," and "inspirational." Less important, but still related to growth, were "thought provoking" and "filled with a sense of God's presence." A sense of being "reverent" was not related to growth at all.

Figure 17 shows that a congregation where worship is "joyful" is more likely to experience substantial growth. This relationship exists among all denominational families, but is strongest among mainline congregations (even though mainline congregations are somewhat less likely to say joyful describes their worship "very well"). But clearly, the character of worship as celebration rather than lament is important to encouraging the growth of a congregation.

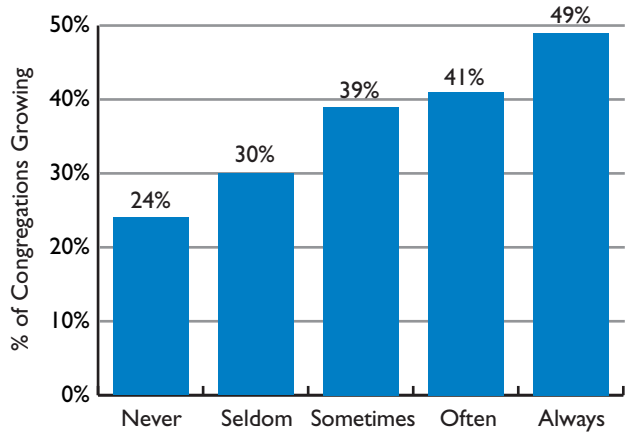
In recent decades, the use of music other than organ and piano has become more prevalent in worship in congregations across America. When the use of guitars and drums is combined with

Figure 17: Making a Joyful Noise



How well does "it is joyful" describe your worship service with the largest attendance?

Figure 18: Guitars and Growth



How often are electric guitars or bass a part of your congregation's worship services?

visual projection equipment and simple gospel choruses the result is often called "contemporary worship." Among evangelical/conservative churches contemporary Christian worship is so widespread and longstanding that it has become almost traditional. But even churches and congregations that would not describe their worship as "contemporary" frequently use less traditional musical elements in their worship, whether they describe the service as "blended," "emergent," "fresh expressions," etc.

Looking at one element of more contemporary worship, we see in Figure 18 that the use of electric guitars or bass is fairly strongly related to congregational growth. Although the relationship holds across denominational families, the use of electric guitars is primarily a feature of Christian churches (mainline, conservative/evangelical and Catholic/Orthodox). Congregations that use guitars "often" or "always" are much more likely to grow than are congregations that use them "seldom" or "never."

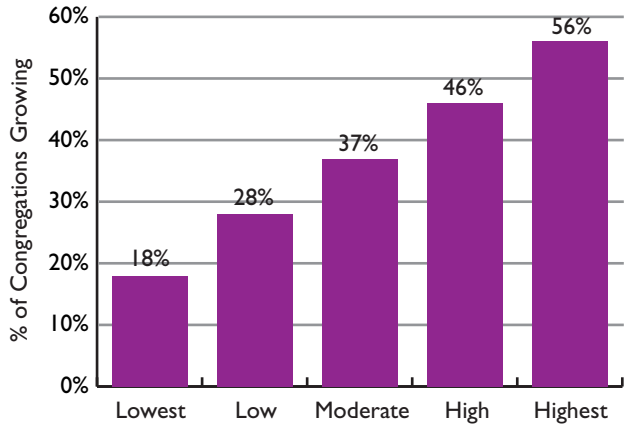
Conservative/evangelical churches tend to be split between congregations that seldom or never use electric guitars (44%) and those that use them often or always (47%). Few conservative/evangelical congregations use electric guitars sometimes (only 8%). For mainline churches and Catholic/Orthodox churches, regular use of electric guitars is less typical, with only a little more than 20% doing so often or always. Still, the relationship between the use of electric guitars and growth is stronger for mainline Protestants than it is for conservative/evangelicals.

The use of drums and other percussion instruments, visual projection equipment and simply describing your congregation's worship as "innovative" are all related to growth in much the same manner as electric guitars. In fact, these questions can all be combined into an innovative worship scale that has a stronger relationship with growth than any of the questions used separately.

As can be seen in Figure 19, among congregations scoring highest on the scale, over half (56%) of the congregations experienced the highest level of growth, as compared to only 18% of congregations scoring the lowest on the scale.

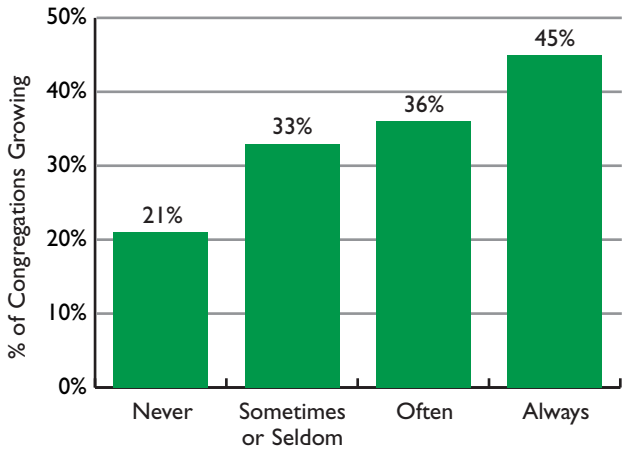
One of the more interesting relationships with growth/decline was the participation of children in worship through speaking, reading and performing. Congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience substantial growth, and congregations that did not were much more likely to experience

Figure 19: Innovative Worship Scale and Growth



Score on Worship Scale (Visual Projection Equipment, Drums, Electric Guitar, & Innovation)

Figure 20: Seen and Heard?



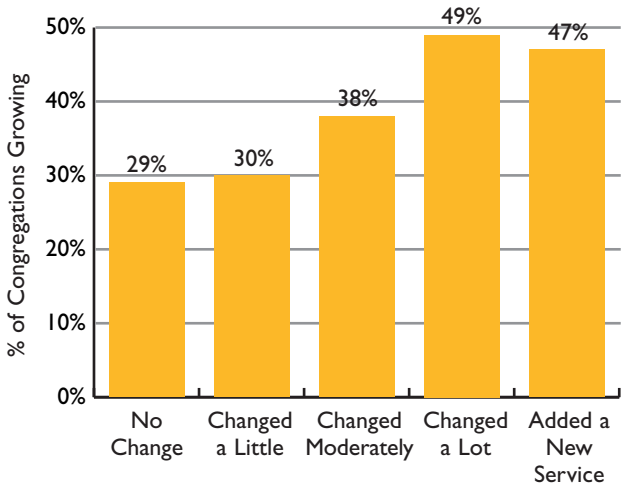
How often do children or youth speak, read or perform during your congregation's worship services?

decline. Among congregations that always included children, 45% experienced the highest level of growth. Of course, in order to involve children and youth in worship a congregation must have children present—and many congregations have none. Controlling for the proportion of households with children and youth in the home reduces the strength of the relationship somewhat, but it does not disappear. Whether a congregation has relatively few or more than a few children and youth, involving them in worship is associated with growth.

As was shown earlier in Figure 13, institutional change is necessary for a congregation to adapt to a changing environment. Part of that change may be in its worship services. Obviously, changing worship format and style may involve very minor things such as a different worship time or a slight alteration in the order of the service. Such changes do not really affect whether or not a church grows. However, more substantial changes tend to be associated with growth, as does adding a worship service with a different style of worship.

What do congregations do that justifies saying they changed worship moderately or a lot? Synagogues may hold different styles of worship at different times and different Shabbats to appeal to a diverse community. Even fairly traditional churches may be open to new and contemporary music and to involving young people in various ministerial roles—lectors, cantors, ushers, Eucharistic ministers, altar servers, and greeters. But whether or not the change involves elements of contemporary worship or more inclusive participation, the focus in growing congregations is openness to change.

Figure 21: Changing Worship, Growing Congregations



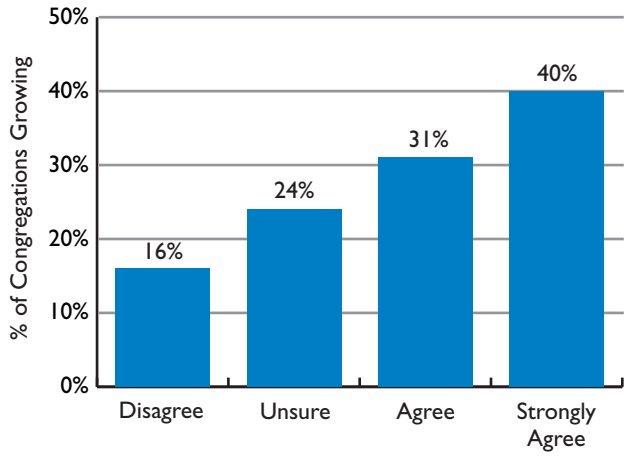
During the past 5 years, has your congregation changed the format or style of one or more weekend worship services?

Congregational Program and Recruitment

Almost all congregations say they want to grow. When asked if they agree or disagree with the statement, "our congregation wants more members," 43% said they strongly agree and another 47% said they agree. So, 90% of congregations want to grow. Figure 22 shows a fairly strong relationship between wanting to grow and actually growing in worship attendance. Although only 10% of all congregations are unsure about wanting to grow or actually don't want to grow, growth is indeed unlikely among such congregations. The relationship between wanting to grow and actually experiencing growth is much stronger than it was just five years ago. Apparently, greater intentionality is required than in the past. It helps to want to grow, but then a congregation must do something about that intent.

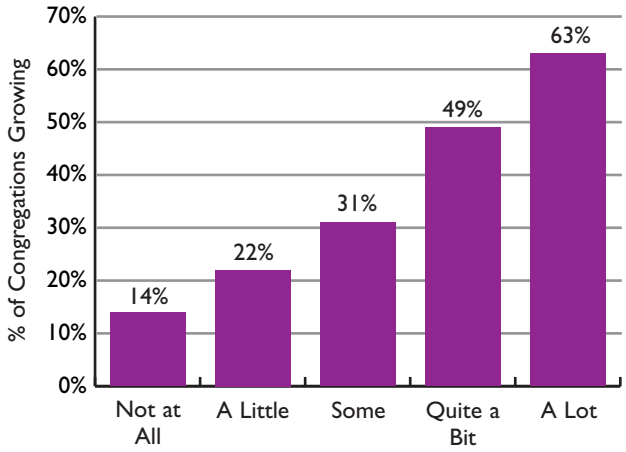
Growth requires intentionality, but it also requires action and the involvement of leaders, members and active participants. Recruitment success results not just from official programs and events, but also from the behavior of members who promote the congregation and invite others to attend and join. As other studies have shown, the primary way people first connect with a congregation is through someone who is already involved.

Figure 22: Wishing Doesn't Make it So, but it Helps



Our Congregation Wants More Members

Figure 23: Recruiting New Members



To what extent are your congregation's members involved in recruiting new members?

Figure 23 shows a very strong relationship between recruitment activity on the part of members and growth. Where "a lot" of members are involved in recruitment, 63% of congregations are growing. By contrast, where very few if any members are involved in recruitment, hardly any of those congregations are experiencing substantial growth.

Growing congregations are more likely to engage in a variety of recruitment-related activities, both formal and informal. Some of the formal activities, such as radio and television spots, newspaper ads, flyers, etc. help only a little. The jury is still out on how much organized evangelism programs help. Growing churches are good at greeting people, following up when newcomers visit and at incorporating newcomers into existing groups within the congregation. The informal and probably most effective approach is characterized by a layperson in a growing Episcopal congregation outside of Charlottesville, Virginia: "We are not doing recruitment, but we sort of are…I mean you are talking about your church with people and then they come."

When people visit a congregation, follow-up is essential. Few people decide to join or become

regular participants after one or two initial contacts, so to help transition people from visitor or prospect to active participant, congregations follow-up with information, material and invitations. But first it is necessary for a congregation to know that a newcomer attended. If visitors attend a worship service, the congregation asks them to complete a visitor's card, sign a pew pad or some other means of letting their presence known. Many congregations also make sure they collect the names and/or addresses of persons who attend special events or support groups and those who visit their web site.

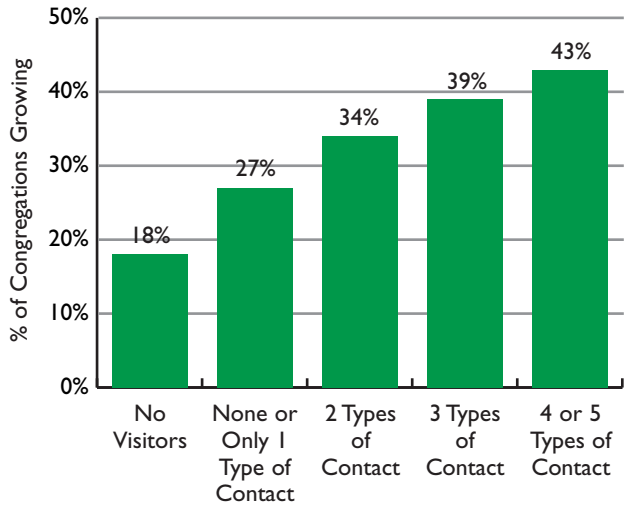
Congregations that follow-up on visitors through mail, phone calls, emails, personal visits, mailed materials, etc. are those most likely to grow. Of course, in order to be able to follow-up on visitors it is necessary to have visitors. Some congregations say they have few if any visitors, but even among these congregations, following up on the few visitors that they have is important to growth. And for congregations that have more than a few visitors, following up reaps even greater rewards.

Many churches are using web sites and social media as a way to inform potential newcomers about their church and to keep in touch with members. Just five years ago having a web site was a big deal. Many churches had them, but a lot did not. Those that had web sites and maintained them regularly were very likely to be growing. But now, almost three quarters of congregations have a web site and the relationship between simply having a web site and growth is much weaker.

Today the issue is the use of a variety of newer technologies for advertising, keeping members and potential attendees informed about the congregation and its activities, and for helping create and maintain community. Figure 25 shows that using only one or two technologies is unrelated to growth. Growing churches tend to use multiple technologies, including email, a website, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Podcasts, electronic newsletters, and other social media/technologies. The more they use, the more likely they are to grow.

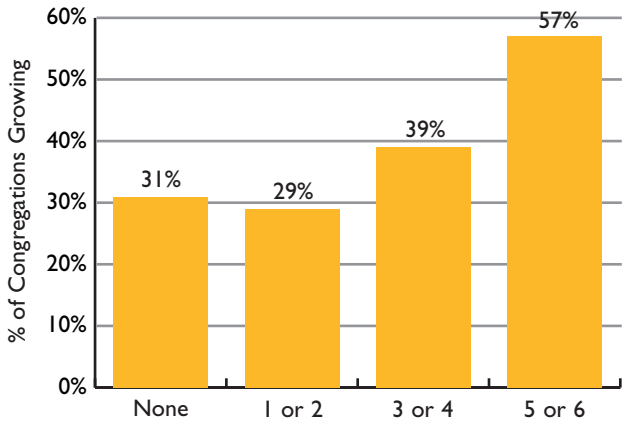
Obviously, larger congregations are more likely to use newer technology than are small congregations. Is technology a result of larger size or does it actually encourage growth? Controlling for initial size (in 2005) suggests that use of multiple newer technologies has an effect on growth, independent of congregational size. It is part of a constellation of activities that congregations use to enhance their growth possibilities.

Figure 24: Letting Them Know You Care



Number of Ways That Congregations Do Follow-up with Visitors (mail, phone, e-mail, personal visit, sending materials)

Figure 25: Doin' the Twitter



Number of New Technologies Used by Congregation

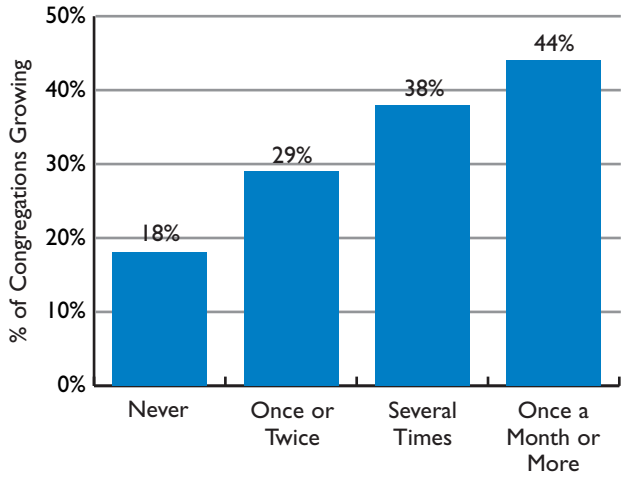
Another specific action that a congregation can do to encourage growth is by sponsoring a program or event to attract non-members. As shown in Figure 26, 44% of congregations that held such events once a month or more grew substantially from 2005 to 2010. Congregations that never held special events were very unlikely to experience growth.

The types of special events and programs offered by congregations can be quite varied, but what they have in common is the intent of attracting both members and non-members. They are not just held for the enjoyment of the congregational family. Congregations hold seminars, concerts, fairs, and sponsor groups that would be of interest to people in the congregation and in the surrounding community. This adds value to congregational involvement and also gives non-members a low-key opportunity to visit the congregation's facility. They can participate on their own terms and "check out" the church, synagogue, etc. without the imagined pressure of attending a worship service.

In general, having congregational programs of all kinds is related to growth. Be it Sunday school, Scripture study, fellowship, retreats, youth programs, team sports, or community service, nothing works against growth. However, some programs are more strongly related to growth than others. The programs that produced the strongest relationships with growth were: 1) young adult activities; 2) parenting or marriage enrichment activities; and 3) prayer or meditation groups. As shown in Figure 27, 64% of congregations that consider parenting or marriage enrichment activities to be a specialty of the congregation are growing. Similarly, 54% of congregations where young adult ministry is a specialty are seeing substantial growth. Congregations without either activity are very unlikely to grow and are quite likely to be declining. As might be expected, congregations with a younger age profile are much more likely to have active parenting and young adult programs. Still, the association between growth and these two programs is positive among congregations that are predominantly young, middle age or older.

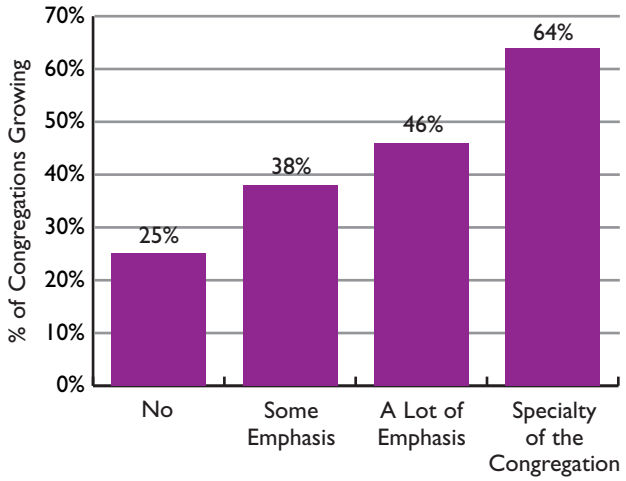
As noted above and as can be seen in Figure 28, having prayer or meditation groups is also related to substantial growth in worship attendance. Congregations with a strong emphasis on prayer or meditation tend to have younger active participants; they also tend to say their

Figure 26: Special Events and Growth



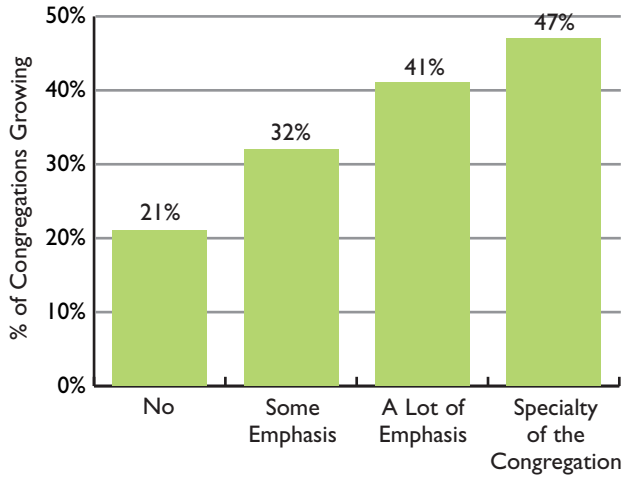
Did your congregation hold special events or programs to attract people from the community in the past year?

Figure 27: Parenting Activities and Growth



Does your congregation have parenting or marriage enrichment activities

Figure 28: Prayer Groups and Growth



Does your congregation have prayer or meditation groups?

congregation is "spiritually vital and alive" and that worship is "joyful" and "filled with a sense of God's presence." An emphasis on prayer and meditation groups seems to add to a congregation's overall sense of spirituality and that is associated with growth.

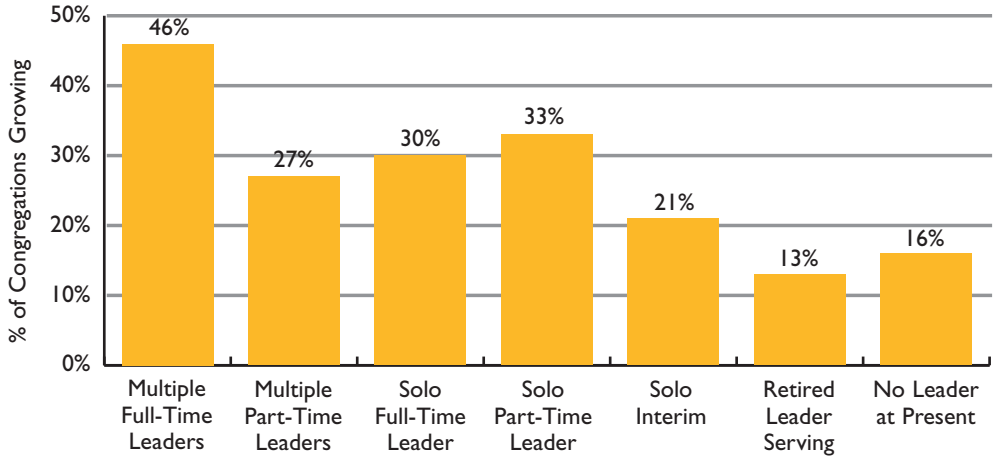
Leadership and Growth

Assessing the "quality" of a pastor, priest, elder, rabbi or imam is difficult when that person is often the one completing the survey. So rather than ask about effectiveness or what they do best, the survey asked about characteristics (age, when called, etc.) and what the person does most. The results were instructive, but also raise some questions.

Congregations without a leader or with a retiree serving as leader are least likely to experience growth. Congregations with interim leaders are also unlikely to experience growth and are second only to congregations without a leader in the percentage declining. This stands to reason. Congregations without leaders are typically either in the midst of leadership transition or have become too weak to afford a paid leader, even one who is part time. Both situations are associated with decline. Congregations with interim leaders are experiencing leadership transition. In some cases these are troubled congregations where leaders come and go, but more often it is simply a situation where the leader has left and a new one is not in place. This transition period is one of flux and congregations tend to thrive on stable leadership rather than flux. Congregations with interims are in flux, of course, but the fact that they are able to afford interims suggests that they have more resources than congregations without a current leader at all.

Congregations with a retired person serving

Figure 29: Leader Status and Growth



Leader Status in Congregation

as leader are typically small congregations with average attendance of 50 or less and are most often located in small towns, villages and rural areas. Such congregations are very unlikely to see any growth. They are not necessarily in financial difficulty, however, because their expenses are low.

Congregations with multiple leaders (at least one of whom is full time) are by far the most likely to have grown between 2005 and 2010. These congregations are larger, have greater resources and when one leader leaves, the transition to a new leader is typically less traumatic. Congregations with multiple part time leaders or a solo leader are less likely to grow than congregations with multiple full time leaders and are considerably more likely to grow than congregations with an interim, retired leader or no leader.

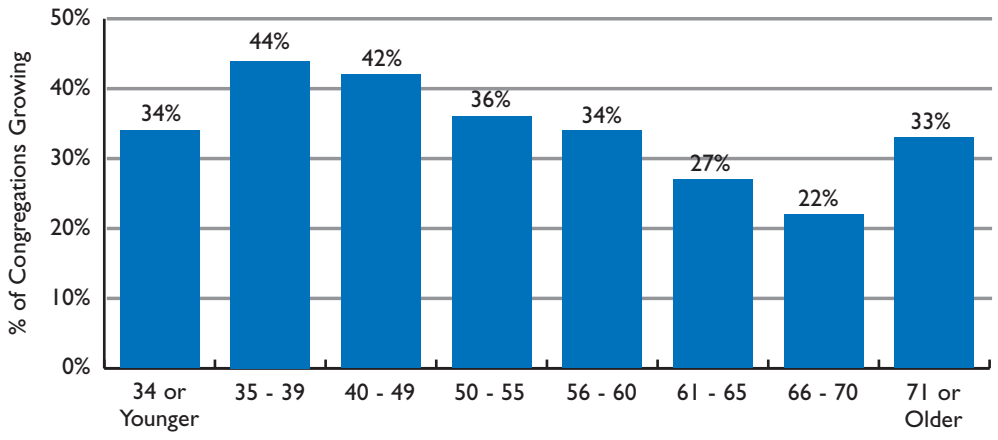
The survey on which this report is based was conducted in 2010. Congregations that called or had their leader start that same year were particularly likely to have declined seriously in worship attendance during the previous five years. Congregations that called their leaders in 2009 or the two previous years were somewhat less likely to decline than were congregations calling their leader in the current year, but were still more likely to decline than other congregations.

Of course the leader who was called in the same year of the survey had nothing to do with the decline of the congregation in the five years prior to their arrival. Again, the issue is one of leadership transition, which is more often than not associated with decline rather than growth.

It is often assumed that the younger the leader, the more likely is a congregation to grow. And this is generally true. However, the youngest age cohort of congregational leaders (34 years old or younger) is less likely to see growth in their congregation than leaders in their mid-to-late 30s. Overall, leaders aged 35-39 are most likely to be in growing congregations. Experience matters, at least to some extent and very young leaders are also more likely to be newly called (which is associated with decline).

Looking at Figure 30 it can be seen that after age 39, the proportion of clergy in growing congregations drops steadily, reaching its lowest point for leaders age 66 to 70. The percentage of congregations experiencing growth increases for the oldest leaders, which is odd given the fact that congregations with retired leaders are typically declining. Many leaders in their 70s and older are retired, but more are in multiple full time or solo full time situations. Leaders in their 70s who are retired are quite likely to be in declining congregations, but the oldest leaders

Figure 30: Age of Pastor or Leader and Growth



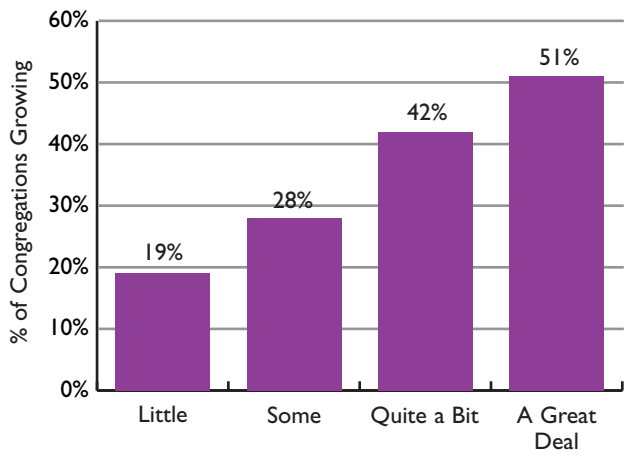
who are not retired and are in multi-staff or solo, full time situations are more likely to experience growth in their congregations than leaders age 66 to 70.

What leaders do is also related to congregational growth and decline. The three areas of activity most strongly related to growth were: 1) evangelism or recruitment; 2) developing and promoting a vision and purpose for the congregation; and 3) teaching people about the faith and scripture. Also helpful to growth were recruiting and training lay leaders, representing the congregation in the community and engaging youth and young adults.

Figure 31 shows the strong relationship between recruitment and evangelism and growth. The more time their leader spends in this area, the more likely is a congregation to experience growth. The most frequently selected response in all denominational families (including conservative/evangelical congregations) is that their leader only spends "some" time doing evangelism or recruitment—which may help explain why so many congregations are not growing. However, this activity is least prevalent among non-Christian congregations, Roman Catholic and Orthodox congregations and mainline congregations (in that order). Conservative/evangelical groups and "other Christian" groups are much more likely to say their leader spends quite a bit of time or a great deal of time doing recruitment or evangelism. A congregation cannot presume that new people will somehow find their way to a congregation and eventually join. Recruitment efforts are essential for growth and the leader of the congregation must be involved. Some leaders avoid such activities, but more often than not, their congregations are declining.

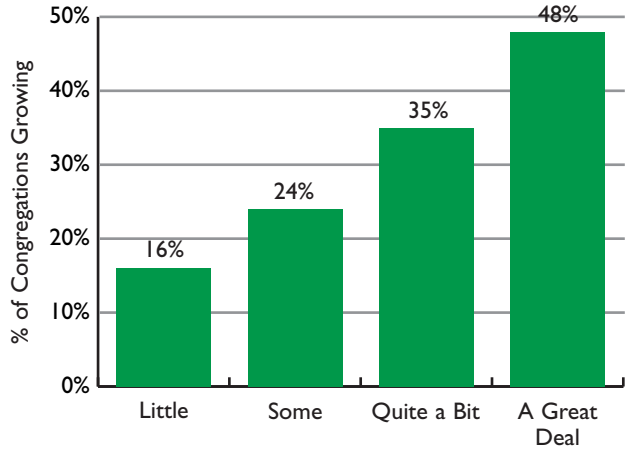
Time spent developing and promoting a vision and purpose for one's congregation is a good bit harder to define than recruitment or evangelism. Someone might ask what does this mean? Essentially it means efforts to articulate and support the mission and purpose of a congregation. As noted earlier, the degree to which a congregation has a strong mission and purpose, the more likely is it to grow. Growing congregations typically have a clear identity and purpose and the leader plays a central leadership role in focusing the congregation on that purpose through preaching, teaching, administration and more informal activities. Whether that purpose is articulated in a vision statement (that is actually known by members) or simply acknowledged as the "way" of a congregation, growing congregations know what they are about and how they differ from other congregations. It is all too easy for a congregation to drift along and presume

Figure 31: Leader's Time Spent in Evangelism or Recruitment



Time Leader Spends in Evangelism or Recruitment

Figure 32: Leader's Time Spent Visioning



Time Leader Spends Developing and Promoting a Vision and Purpose for the Congregation

that they have a purpose other than "being there." The leader is very important in helping a congregation find its purpose and in reinforcing that purpose and the identity out of which it flows.

There was no leadership activity found negatively related to growth—in that spending more time doing it led to congregational decline. There were, however, some activities with virtually no relationship to growth. The smallest correlation was with "planning and leading worship," followed by "administration, supervision and committee meetings" and "providing pastoral care." The lack of correlation between time spent planning and leading worship may be a surprise in that one would think that efforts to have quality worship would be associated with growth. The problem is that the vast majority of leaders (three quarters) spend quite a bit or a great deal of time in this area. It is not an unusual characteristic limited to growing congregations. Furthermore, leaders of Catholic and Mainline congregations (which are more likely to decline) spend proportionately more time dealing with worship than leaders of other congregations. For many congregations, worship is pretty much all they do in terms of organized activities. Such congregations are unlikely to grow and their leaders necessarily devote a large proportion of their time to this central activity.

Even when controlling for all other growth related variables, being located in the South is very advantageous when it comes to growth.

Putting It All Together

The charts in the sections above each looked at the relationship between growth and a single congregational issue, usually in isolation from other growth-related factors. It is possible using multivariate statistical procedures to look at the independent effect of each factor in order to determine which is more important to understanding why some congregations grow and others do not.

Clearly, some things a congregation has some control over and other things a congregation cannot control. Among those things that are related to growth and about which a congregation has no control are the location of the congregation nationally and the increase (or decrease) in households in the surrounding community. Of these two issues, by far the most important is ***South/non-South location***. Even when controlling for all other growth related variables, being located in the South is very advantageous when it comes to growth. Congregations do better in the South because it is both a growing region and because the culture is more supportive of religion. But ***growth in households*** also remains statistically significant as a source of growth. And this stands to reason—areas where the population is increasing through new households and new housing units are areas where people are moving to and putting down new roots. Population growth helps congregations grow, as does the need of newcomers to establish community connections.

A congregation has limited control over the age structure of its membership, and this factor has a very strong independent effect on growth. Congregations with ***smaller proportions of older members*** and larger proportions of younger adults are more likely to experience growth.

Obviously, it is easier for congregations to reach a younger constituency in areas where there are more young families, but the effect of age structure is fairly strong even when controlling for the location of a congregation. In order to be healthy a congregation must be able to include younger and older persons, retirees and families with children.

In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was whether a congregation was part of a ***conservative/evangelical religious body***. Congregations that belong to the conservative/evangelical family (including historic black churches) were more likely to grow than congregations in other families (which were combined into one group for this analysis). The difference was significant and fairly strong, even when controls for other factors were in place.

Among other identity-related issues, rating the congregation as ***"spiritually vital and alive"*** was a key independent predictor of growth. Since congregations are religious institutions, it is essential that religion be central to their collective identity. And it is odd that so many congregations find other, more tangential activities and identities to crowd out the core function of a congregation. Being a ***"moral beacon"*** was also positively related to growth when controls were in effect. This identity item gets at an issue different from than spiritual vitality—the role of religious institutions as reinforcing moral values.

Somewhat stronger in terms of the effect on growth than being a moral beacon was whether or not a congregation saw itself as ***not that different from other congregations***. In this case, the effect was negative. To the extent that congregations saw themselves as not that different, they tended to decline rather than grow.

For Protestant churches, the strongest correlate of growth when all controls were in effect was the presence or absence of serious ***conflict***.

To the extent that congregations saw themselves as not that different, they tended to decline rather than grow.

Among all congregations, conflict was also one of the strongest correlates of decline when controls were in effect, even though it did not seem to have much of an effect in some denominational families when considered alone. Conflict cannot be completely avoided, of course, but whether or not a congregation finds itself mired in serious conflict is a very strong predictor of congregational decline. This finding points out the need for conflict resolution skills among congregational leaders so minor conflict does not become serious, debilitating conflict. The fact that conflict over the pastor's (or other leader's) exercise of leadership is the area of conflict most strongly associated with decline makes it all the more critical that the leader understand how leadership is done best. And in these tough economic times, the fact that conflict over money is also a source of serious decline increases the likelihood of debilitating conflict over this issue.

Very few worship related-factors had an independent relationship with growth. The ***innovative worship scale*** that combined several variables (projection screens, use of electric guitars and drums in worship, and characterization of worship as "innovative" had a modest, but positive independent association with growth. Interestingly, a characterization of corporate worship as ***"reverent"*** had an independent negative effect on growth—despite the fact that the question was weakly associated with growth when measured alone. Although most worship services probably could be said to be reverent to some extent, characterizing worship as reverent seems to imply a level of stiltedness and somberness that works against the possibility of growth. The obverse of reverence, characterizations of worship as "joyful" and "exciting" had no independent effect on growth even though they added to the overall ability to predict growing

congregations. So apparently, as was observed in the case of congregational conflict, not having a growth-deadening factor is more important than having something that would seem to encourage growth.

Moving from what congregations are to what they do in terms of activities and programs, the strongest relationship of all (except for conflict for Protestant congregations) was the extent to which a congregation is ***involved in evangelism or recruitment***. Although not very specific in terms of what the congregation actually does in this area, it was the overall orientation toward reaching out to newcomers and wanting to invite others in that was important. Similarly, ***the amount of time the leader of a congregation spent doing evangelism or recruitment*** was also related to growth, independent of other factors. So it helps for both a congregation and its leader to be involved in this activity.

The only other evangelism/recruitment, advertising, or visitor follow-up question that was independently associated with growth was ***holding special events to attract people from the community***. Such events not only bring in people who would not ordinarily visit a congregation, but they also allow regular participants to interact in a situation other than worship or other religious activities. Unlike five years ago when use of the web had one of the strongest independent effects on growth, now the effect of the web and new technology in general is much weaker, with no independent effect. Such is the rapidity of change in American society.

Activities other than evangelism, recruitment and special events did not have strong independent relationships with growth. The one area that helped modestly was whether or not a congregation had ***parenting or marriage enrichment activities***. Even when controlling for the effects of the age of members, an active focus on families was important. Given the large number of congregations dominated by older persons, it is the congregations that focus efforts on attracting younger families that tend to see growth.

The positive effect of leadership involvement in evangelism or recruitment was noted above, as was the negative effect of conflict over leadership. Other leadership-related issues contributing to growth included the ***age of the leader***, the ***year the leader was called*** and whether or not the leader is part of a ***full-time staff***. In general, younger leaders fare better in terms of growth (except for the youngest cohort of leaders). Leaders called within the past several years are more likely to lead congregations that have declined. The decline usually preceded them, but transition to new leadership is proving problematic for many congregations. And finally, congregations with more than one full time leader are more likely to grow than congregations which have only one leader, an interim leader or no leader at all. This is true even when controlling for the size of congregations. In order to continue to grow, congregations must staff for growth.

Congregations grow (and decline) for many reasons and it is not possible to examine them all. We cannot, for instance, get at the relative quality of preaching or effectiveness of congregational leadership. Also, growth occurs for different reasons within different contexts. Here we look only at the national, gross picture. The relationships are instructive, but each faith family and denomination is different and the relative impact of growth-related factors may vary among them, at least to some extent.

Even when controlling for the effects of the age of members, an active focus on families was important.

Appendix: Sample Description

FACTs on Growth: 2010 is based on the Faith Communities Today 2010 Survey of U.S. Congregations (***FACT 2010***). ***FACT 2010*** is a key informant survey of American congregations. It is the fourth in a series of national congregational surveys that began in 2000.

The ***FACT 2010*** sample included 11,077 congregations and is broadly representative of US congregations. The sample is a composite of 26 separate surveys. There was a national general sample and 25 representative over-samples from specific denominations, denominational clusters and faith groups. The denominational surveys included the Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church of the Nazarene, the Bahá'í Faith, the Episcopal Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and 12 others. In addition, several surveys were sent to a sample of congregations that included more than one denomination. For instance, there was a survey of Muslim congregations, a survey of Orthodox congregations, a survey of Jewish congregations, a survey of Non-denominational congregations, and a survey of congregations within historically Black denominations. A full listing of surveys can be found in the appendix to ***A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000 – 2010*** available at: www.faithcommunitiestoday.org

Research partners developed a common core questionnaire of just over 150 questions from the ***FACT 2000***, ***FACT 2005***, ***FACT 2008*** and ***FACT 2010*** surveys. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available on the FACT website. Using the common questionnaire, research partner groups conducted their own surveys (typically online and via direct mail) using a random sample of their own congregations.

The ***FACT 2010*** survey was an 8-page instrument that was completed through returning a mail or on-line survey. A key informant completed the survey and in most cases that person was the pastor, rector, priest or clergy leader. However, this was not the case in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Bahá'í Faith. Questions were included about worship, congregational programs, evangelism and outreach, mission and congregational identity, the characteristics of active members and participants, the leaders of congregations, congregational conflict, finances, and the congregation's setting.

In order to make the congregations surveyed precisely representative of ***all*** American congregations, for purposes of *FACTs on Growth: 2010*, we deleted (by sampling) a fairly large percentage of United Methodist, Episcopal, Orthodox, and other congregations. This was because the number of congregations sampled by these denominations was much too large and would have required extreme down-weighting. The total number of congregations was reduced to 7,403 and then weighted. The result was a dataset with 23.8% Mainline congregations, 55% Conservative Protestant and Black congregations, 6.4% Roman Catholic and Orthodox congregations, 11.2% Other Christian congregations, and 3.6% Non-Christian congregations.

In addition, denominations were weighted within denominational families. Thus, congregation's denominations were representative both nationally and within denominational families.