

WHAT NUMBERS MATTER FOR CONGREGATIONS? LESSONS FROM FIVE-YEAR TRENDS

Church growth, as measured by the average number of regular participants or worship attendees, has been the go-to statistic for many researchers and leaders tracking religion. Leaders less often consider other yardsticks of vitality—such as more meaningful worship, growth in ministry with youth, social advocacy, or engagement in foreign mission work. A new report based on information from over four thousand congregations gives us new insights about how congregations have responded to change over the past five years.¹ The study suggests that some churches are thriving and surviving, despite the discouraging overall attendance trends.

Declining Attendance Overall

The change in worship attendance reported by congregational leaders between 2010 and 2015 is disheartening. For the first time since 2000, half of all congregations report 80 or fewer worshippers as their church size. In 2010, just five years ago, this median size was 110 worshippers. To put this drop in perspective, almost 30,000 additional churches nationally dropped below 110 in worship attendance in the past five years.² This leaves nearly 60 percent of all congregations with an attendance size lower than the median size of just six years ago.

The exceptions to this downward trend are congregations where the majority of members are racial/ethnic worshippers. However, even fewer of these churches are growing compared to five years ago.

Some Churches Continue to Grow

The study examines the 45 percent of congregations that reported 2 percent or more growth over the past five years. This modest yardstick of growth means almost half of U.S. congregations are holding their own or adding new worshippers.

Some patterns emerged among those congregations reporting attendance growth. Growing congregations describe their worship as innovative. Their demograph-

ics include fewer senior adults and more young adults, eighteen to thirty-four years of age.

Dr. David Roozen, the report's author, comments on one broad cultural change, namely the "perception of one's life as a continual set of options and choices." Thus, even religious identity and participation are increasingly seen as choices. Today's worshippers feel comfortable deciding which congregation to attend as one choice among many options. Roozen goes on to argue that, to the extent religion has become part of a consumer-oriented marketplace, growing congregations must find ways to "stick out from the crowd." The data support his assertion. Six out of ten growing congregations claim to be very different from other congregations.

The research shows that distinguishing one's congregation from others in the community is linked to the willingness to change worship and a commitment to spiritual vitality. Thriving congregations are nearly ten times more likely to have changed themselves in



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the past five years than are struggling congregations. For example, one strategy to achieve distinctiveness is a move toward more contemporary worship. Another tactic is to add one or more services with a different style that speaks to a specific group, such as young adults.

Adapting to changing conditions creates some conflict, and the data show that growing churches experience more conflict than those that are declining. Still, while conflict is a necessary by-product of change and growth, serious levels of conflict remain detrimental to church health.

Engaging Young Adults Is Key

Currently about 20 percent of the U.S. population is in the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old age group. In 2015, only one in ten congregations could claim to have reached this same level of regular participation by young adults in church activities. Only two in ten congregations said they put young adult ministry as a top priority. Growing congregations make the necessary changes to engage higher percentages of this critical age group as compared to stable or declining churches.

Easing Financial Stress

An earlier analysis from the 2010 FACT survey revealed that the 2008 recession generated a mix of negative effects beyond the church budget.³ Two out of three congregations reported some decline in income due to the recession. However, most congregations now are feeling an increased sense of financial security.

How did congregations adapt and cope with the economic downturn? Some used savings while others postponed capital projects and maintenance. Many congregations decided to reduce their mission and benevolence giving. The researchers estimate that only one in ten congregations chose the least attractive strategy—laying off staff or delaying the filling of positions.

In 2015, more congregations (62 percent) say that they are thriving rather than struggling financially. Even so, for the first time since 2000, more than one in three congregations were unable to employ a full-time, paid senior or sole clergy leader. The shrinking size of many congregations probably fuels this pattern. The declines in size and budget also likely accounts for some of the erosion of member-oriented programming, such as prayer and study groups, music programs, or young adult and youth programs.

Focusing on Mission

Church leaders find it helpful to distinguish between those things over which the congregation has control, generally dynamics internal to the congregation, and those things over which it has little control, generally dynamics in the community or region. The good news is that the majority of congregations were able to recover from a difficult external event that affected the entire country—the 2008 recession—and continue to do vital ministry. The evidence also points to the commitment of most congregations to remain spiritually vibrant and welcoming to new worshipers. The key to doing so lies with their willingness to change, adapt worship so that it attracts newcomers, and innovative programming.

Congregations that grew stronger in spirit and ministry over the past five years were able to say that the following statements accurately described their worshiping community. How well do these describe your congregation?

- Our congregation has a clear mission and purpose.
- Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive.
- We are caring and supportive of members who have health, financial, or personal needs.
- We are good at incorporating newcomers into the congregation.
- Our congregation is working for social justice.
- Our congregation is intentional about maximizing the number and variety of small groups offered.
- We use the Internet and social media tools effectively.
- Our congregation is quite different from other congregations in our community.

1. The Faith Communities Today Project (FACT) is a series of national surveys, beginning in 2000, and conducted in 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2015. This issue is based on the most recent report written by David Roozen, *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving*, <http://www.faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/American-Congregations-2015.pdf>.

2. This figure is based on an estimate of 330,000 congregations in the U.S.

3. *Holy Toll: The Impact of the 2008 Recession on American Congregations*, <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/default/files/HolyTollReport.pdf>.