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# Faith Communities Today 2008 *A First Look*

***Faith Communities Today 2008*** is the report on the *Faith Communities Today 2008 (FACT<sup>2008</sup>)* national survey of congregations conducted by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP). CCSP is a multi faith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

The full report on ***Faith Communities Today 2008*** will be available Oct. 15, 2009 at:  
<http://fact.hartsem.edu>

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# Introduction

The following first look at **FACT<sup>2008</sup>** focuses on what we take to be the most significant storyline in the survey results. It is a story of concern, but also of hope. It is the story of an emerging, but persistent and broad based downward drift in congregational vitality (and note, the survey results are from before the economic crisis that began in late 2008). But it is also a story of pockets of vitality that are suggestive of the potential for moving forward.

A copy of the **FACT<sup>2008</sup>** questionnaire is available on the *FACT* Web site and should be consulted for exact question and response category wordings. Key informants in each surveyed congregation, typically the senior or sole clergy leader, completed the survey. The survey sample is a composite of three layers of random national samples designed to represent the universe of American congregations. The final aggregated data set contains questionnaires from 2,527 congregations. The sampling error for such types of samples is difficult to calculate with precision. We estimate it to be +/- 4 percent. A fuller description of the sample is contained on the back page.

A First Look is exactly that. The full report on **FACT<sup>2008</sup>** will be available Oct. 15, 2009 on the *FACT* Web site (<http://fact.hartsem.edu>). Its 12 sections include:

- I. Trends at a glance
- II. Worship
- III. Identity
- IV. Program
- V. Youth
- VI. Attracting and tracking new members
- VII. Assimilated new members and deepening lay leadership
- VIII. Conflict
- IX. Fiscal health and conflict
- X. Budget profiles
- XI. Clergy education and congregational health
- XII. Clergy time usage.

The Faith Communities Today series of national surveys of American congregations was launched in 2000 with the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States, containing information from 14,301 local churches, synagogues, parishes, temples and mosques. It will be replicated in 2010, and like **FACT<sup>2000</sup>** the decadal replication will be a mega survey timed to coincide with the decadal U.S. Census. Between decadal surveys CCSP is committed to conduct more typically sized, national surveys of American congregations to track short-term changes and highlight a limited number of key areas of congregational life and structure. **FACT<sup>2005</sup>** was the first of these. **FACT<sup>2008</sup>**, the results of which are presented in this report, is the second.

Online copies of all CCSP/*FACT* publications are available on the *FACT* Web site, including:

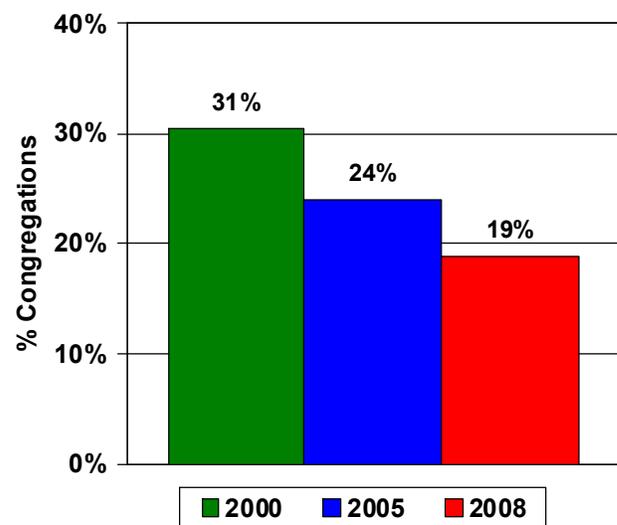
*Faith Communities Today 2000* (March, 2001)  
*American Congregations 2005* (June, 2007).

# First The Bad News

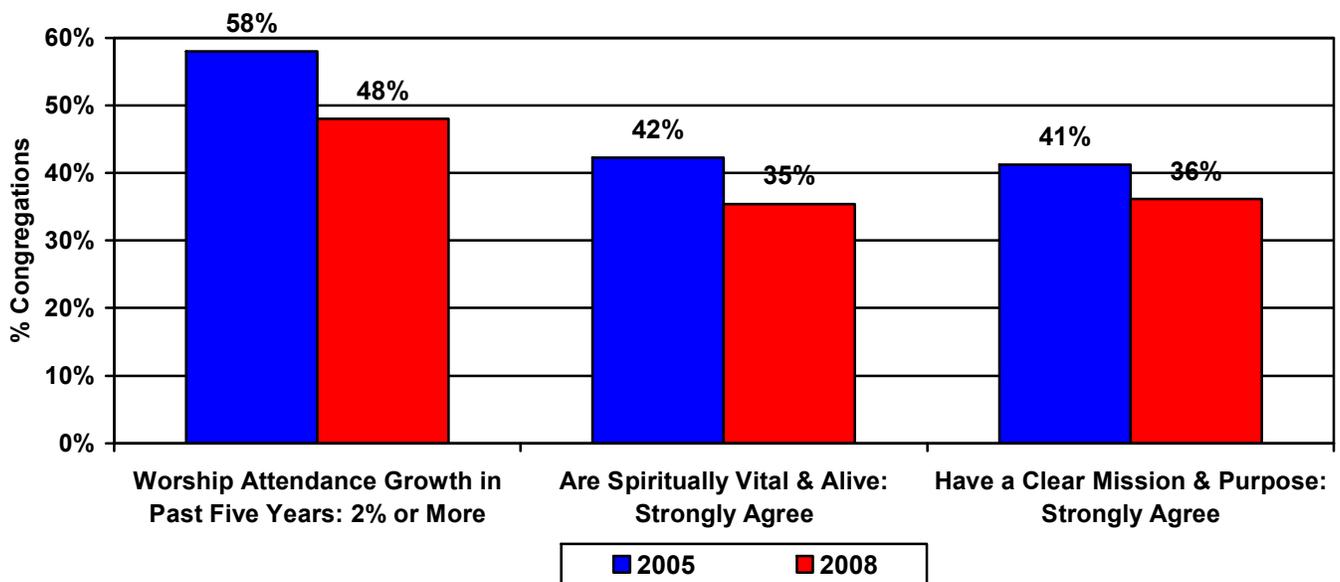
The FACT survey trend data for American congregations beginning at the turn of the new century has to be sobering, especially as new measures of vitality have been added. The clear and consistent short-term direction is negative – including worship attendance growth, spiritual vitality and sense of mission and purpose (Figure 1). And as suggested by the eight-year decline in financial health seen in Figure 2, it is a likely that the broader erosion of vitality dates to at least 2000. What makes this even more sobering is the fact that this pattern of decline, here shown for American congregations as a whole, also holds within each of FACT's four primary faith families – oldline Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, Catholic and Orthodox, and Other World Religions with few exceptions.

The cultural revolution carried by and within the baby boomers proved especially challenging for America's religious institutions as participation and membership rates dropped precipitously from the late 1960s through the late 1980s. The 90s brought an overall plateau, the result of slight increases among new immigrant groups and Evangelical Protestants that offset continued stagnation within old line Protestantism. In the absence of any true national sample of American congregations prior to 1999, it was presumed that these trends in membership and participation also accurately reflected the general state of our nation's faith communities. Long-term old line decline, slowing Evangelical growth, immigrant fueled Catholic stability, and a growing, but still small presence of other world religions. Clearly the new century has brought a new period for slow, but general retreat for America's congregations. There are good reasons for believing the same is also true for individual religiosity in our country.

**Fig 2: Current Financial Health Is Excellent**



**Fig 1: VITAL SIGNS**



# Not Everything Declined

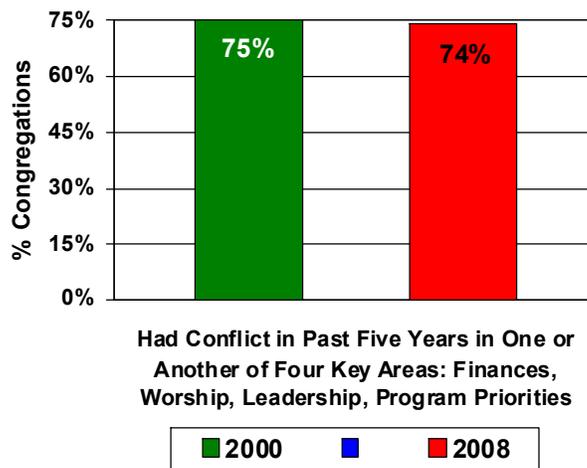
Between religion's prominence in international politics and the sexual politics that are invasive of so many of our country's national denominational meetings, one has to wonder why the sacred's pale of peace is so frequently riled with conflict. FACT<sup>2000</sup> confirmed that America's congregations were not exempt from such contestation and that, as one might expect, conflict sapped vitality. The more serious the conflict the more corrosive it was of vitality. There is, therefore, both good and bad news in Figure 3. The bad news is that conflict remains nearly as pervasive in 2008 as it was in 2000. The good news is that the reach of conflict into America's congregations has not increased across the last eight years.

One of the ironies of conflict is that in many instances, and especially if well managed, it is an essential ingredient and byproduct of vitality-enhancing change. Such was clearly the case for conflict and changes made in a congregation's worship and vitality in FACT<sup>2000</sup>. Congregations that changed their style of worship had greater levels of conflict than those that did not, but especially in those congregations in which the conflict never became serious, they also had higher levels of vitality.

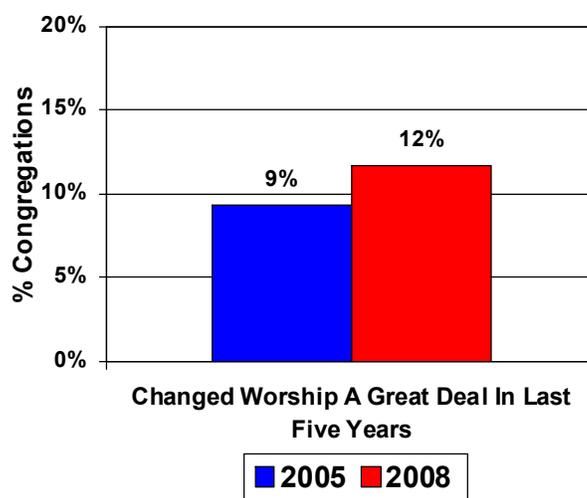
Changing one's style of worship has been a catalyst for vitality for many congregations, and as shown in Figure 4 it appears that the rate of this kind of change has ticked up slightly from 2005 to 2008.

However, not all worship changes provide a boost to vitality. Figure 5 shows the percentage of congregations that had a 2 percent or more growth in worship attendance from 2003 to 2008 for four types of congregations – those that say they have a traditional style of worship and haven't changed it in the previous five years; those that have a traditional style, but say there has been some change; those that say they have a contemporary style of worship and it hasn't changed in the past five years (early contemporary adaptors); and those that have changed in the past five years and currently have a contemporary style (recent adaptors). The affinity between contemporary worship and growth is clear. What is somewhat surprising is the very slight drop in change within a traditional style.

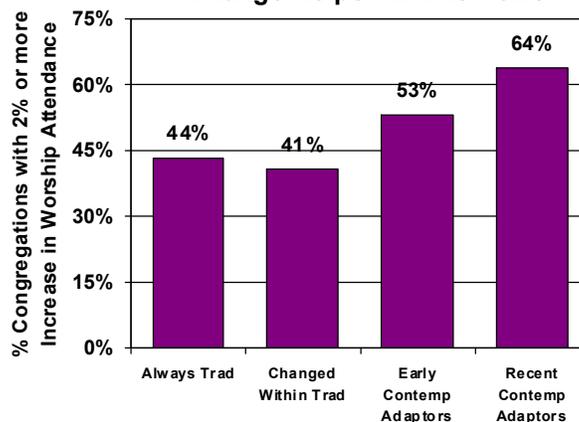
**Fig 3: Conflict Holds Steady**



**Fig 4: Worship Change Ticks Up**



**Fig 5: Contemporary Worship & Change Helps Fill The Pews**



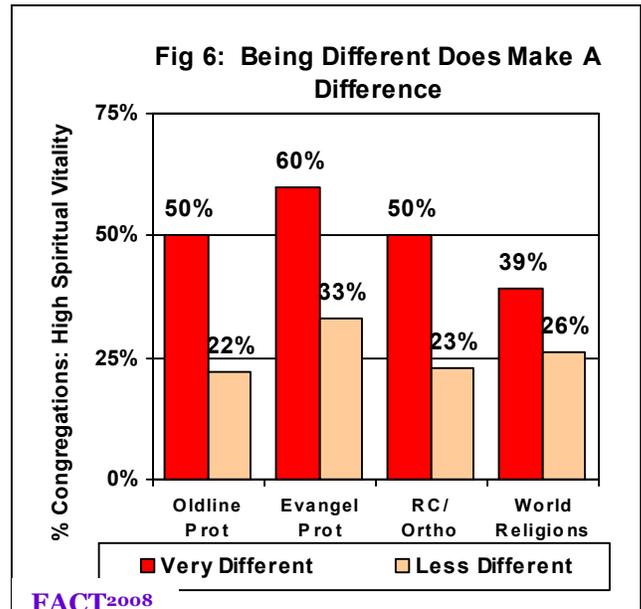
# Vitality & Congregational Identity

Most discussions of congregational identity focus on content. But what most organizational theorists say is that strength of identity or distinctiveness of identity is equally, if not more, important.

To test this insight, FACT<sup>2008</sup> asked congregations whether or not they were different than other congregations in their community. Just under a quarter felt they were very different than other congregations in their community (i.e., had a very distinct sense of self), another quarter felt they were somewhat different, just under a third felt they were somewhat or very much the same and nearly 20 percent were not sure.

More importantly, as shown in Figure 6, having a very distinct sense of self is dramatically related to spiritual vitality, this being true within each of FACT<sup>2008</sup>'s faith families. Similarly, although not quite as strong, there is also a significant positive relationship between strong sense of self and other measures of congregational vitality like financial health, worship attendance growth and lack of conflict.

This relationship between vitality and sense of self is consistent with other FACT findings that show a similar relationship between identity items and vitality. Perhaps most notable of these are the strong relationship between clarity of mission and purpose and vitality, and the fact that vitality peaks at both the conservative and the liberal extreme of theological orientation.



# The Challenge of Aging Memberships

It is typical to think about a congregation's identity in terms of beliefs and religious practices. But other distinguishing characteristics can be highly significant. The age profile of participants is one of these. Certainly the age structure of oldline Protestant congregations is distinctive as shown in Figure 7. Specifically the figure shows the percentage of congregations in which 26 – 50 percent and 50 percent or more adult participants are 65 years of age or older. What it finds is that in stark contrast to FACT's other faith families, nearly six of every 10 congregations within oldline Protestantism fall into one of these two categories (that is, in nearly six of every ten oldline congregations, a quarter or more of participants are seniors). This is nearly twice as great as for any other family and nearly three times as great as for Evangelical Protestant congregations.

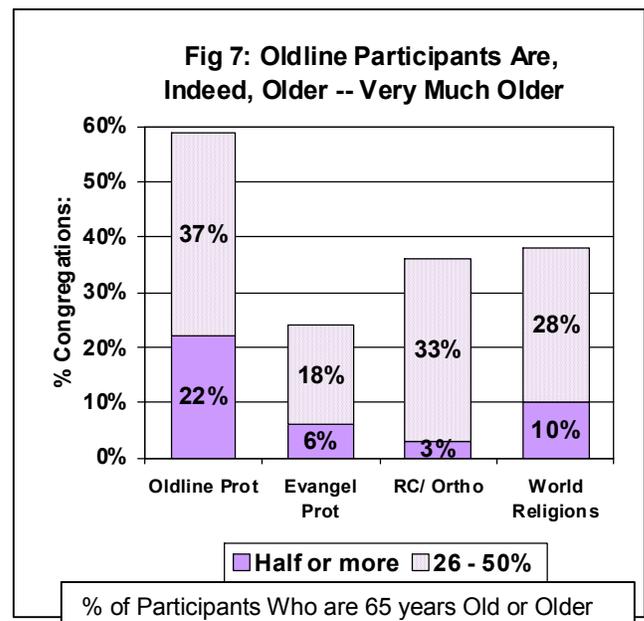
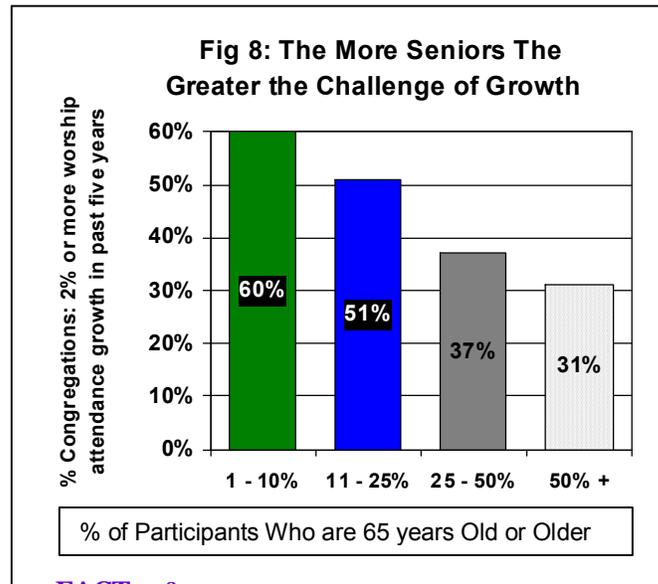


Figure 8 points to the significance of a congregation's age structure, again using percentage of seniors; the more seniors the greater the challenge of growth. This is true within each of FACT's faith families.

Equally important, the same is true for each of our other key indicators of congregational vitality – the more seniors the lower a congregation's spiritual vitality on average, the poorer it's financial health, the less clarity about purpose, the less openness to change and the more conflict. Obviously there are vital congregations with a predominance of senior adults. But the pattern of challenge is strong and consistent. One wonders, therefore, why this remains one of the least discussed but most practically significant aspects of congregational life and identity, especially within oldline Protestantism.

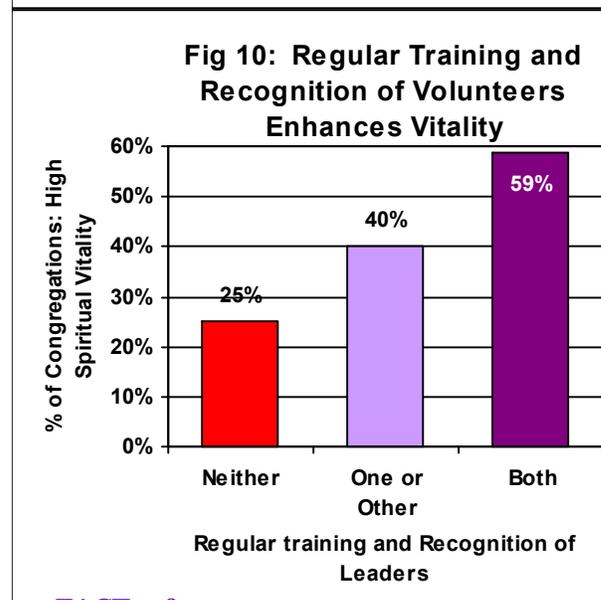
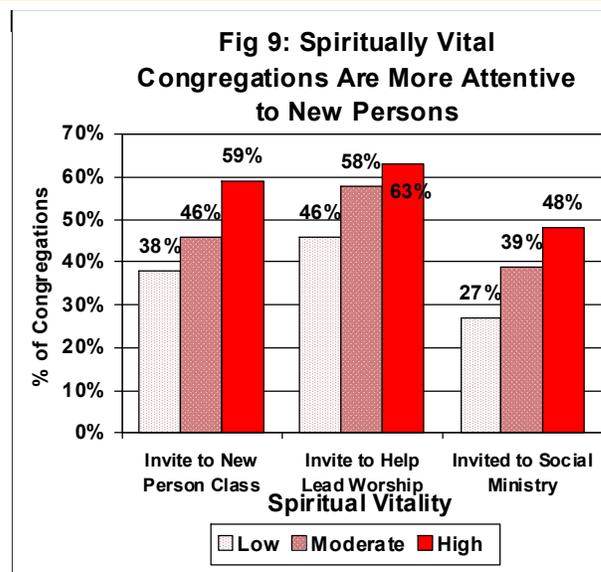


## Doing the Little Things

Clarity and distinctness of identity, vibrant worship, openness to change, ability to manage conflict and diversity and excellence in programming are some of the big challenges that stand along the path to congregational revitalization. But there also appear to be more mundane, almost commonsensical, things which vital congregations do extremely well. FACT<sup>2000</sup> found that members of vital congregations are much more involved in recruiting new people than in other kinds of congregations. We note here two other "little things" identified in FACT<sup>2008</sup>.

FACT<sup>2008</sup> asked what congregations did, if anything, to help new people become more integrated and accepted into the life of the congregation. Using just three examples, Figure 9 shows that for each of the three – inviting one to a new person class, inviting one to help lead worship (reading, singing, taking up offering, etc.), and inviting one to become involved in a social ministry – the higher a congregation's spiritual vitality the more likely it was to extend the invitation. Their greater likelihood of inviting new persons to worship seems especially telling because all congregations worship so that the only additional effort required is the invitation.

Figure 10 turns to the care and feeding of lay volunteers, who provide the primary labor force for the vast majority of congregations. FACT<sup>2008</sup> asked if a congregation provides regular training for its volunteers and then asked if volunteers regularly receive recognition for their service. Again the data is starkly clear, congregations that regularly do both are significantly more likely to be spiritually vital than those that only do one or the other, and more than twice as likely to be spiritually vital as those that don't do either.



# Leadership, Leadership, Leadership

FACT<sup>2008</sup> found three leadership keys to spiritually vital congregations. The FACT survey asked how much time and attention a congregation's clergy leader gives to a wide range of leadership and ministerial tasks. The three that stood out as most strongly related to a congregation's spiritual vitality were:

- Promoting vision (Figure 11),
- Evangelism (Figure 12), and
- Training lay leaders (Figure 13).

This was true regardless of denominational family.

FACT<sup>2008</sup> also found that giving more attention to leading small groups and to contacting inactives was related to spiritual vitality, although more moderately than for the above.

Attention to four other leadership task areas showed a slightly more complex pattern. For each of worship planning, pastoral care, teaching and dealing with conflict, there was no relationship between attention and spiritual vitality among oldline congregations, but a moderately strong relationship for each of the other three denominational families.

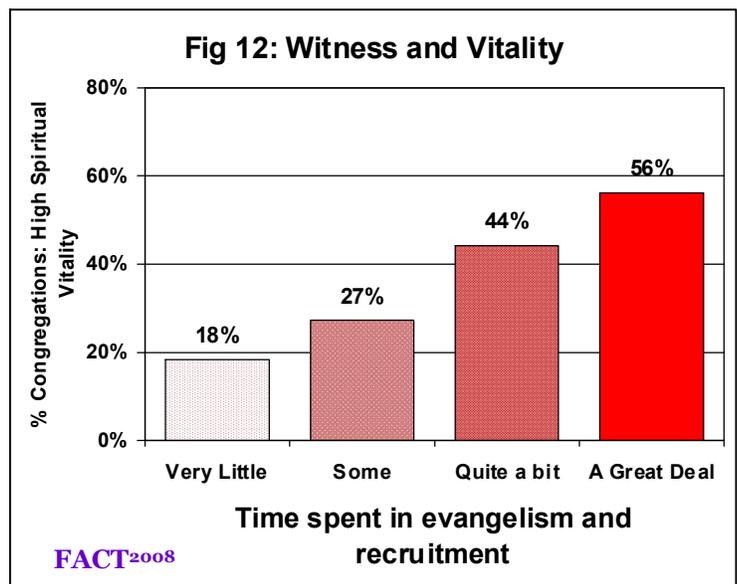
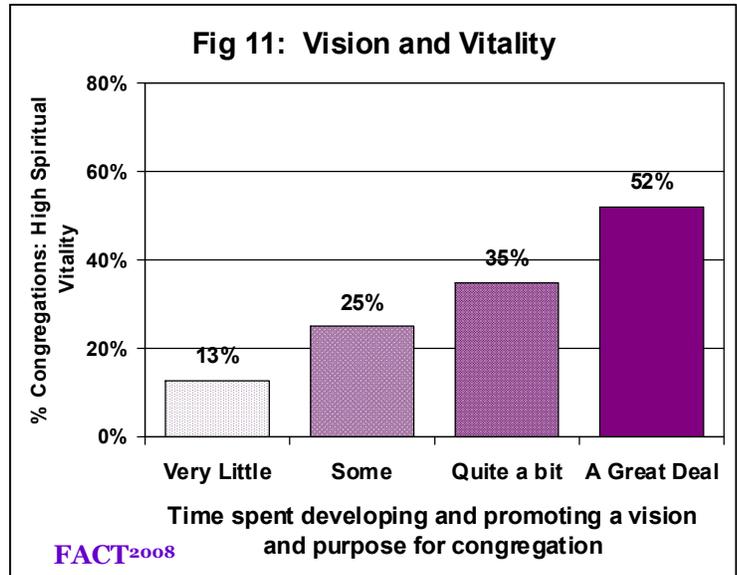
Only two areas had no significant relationship to spiritual vitality – administration and representing the congregation in the community.

The same general patterns of relationship were found between attention to tasks of ministry and attendance growth as were found for spiritual vitality, but considerably less pronounced. Relationships between attention to tasks of ministry and a congregation's financial health were generally insignificant when denominational family was controlled.

Wars, recession, change, angry partisan politics! These are unsettled times in America; no less so for our faith communities. But with the challenges comes opportunity. To help congregational leaders seeking that opportunity CCSP has produced the following resources:

- Insights Into: Financial Giving
- Insights Into: Congregational Conflict
- Insights Into: Numerical Growth
- Insights Into: Social Ministries of Compassion (forthcoming)

These publications are available for download at:  
<http://fact.hartsem.edu>



## Project Background

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The Faith Communities Today (*FACT*) series of national surveys of American congregations is sponsored by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (*CCSP*). The Partnership is a collaborative, multi faith coalition of American faith communities affiliated with Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Researchers, consultants and program staff representing 39 denominations and faith groups have contributed to the Faith Communities Today survey series. The series was launched in 2000 with the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States. The *FACT*<sup>2000</sup> study of 14,301 local churches, synagogues, parishes, temples and mosques provided a public profile of the organizational backbone of religion in American congregations at the beginning of a new millennium. It will be replicated in 2010, and like *FACT*<sup>2000</sup> the decadal replication will be a mega survey timed to coincide with the decadal U.S. Census. In combination with *FACT*<sup>2000</sup> it will provide 10-year trends on over 150 aspects of congregational life and organization. Its report will be released fall, 2011. Details will be available on the *FACT* Web site as they emerge (<http://fact.hartsem.edu>).

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts regular national surveys between its large-scale decadal enumerations, and similarly *CCSP* is committed to conducting more typically sized, national surveys of congregations in intervening years. *FACT*<sup>2005</sup> was the first of these. *FACT*<sup>2008</sup> is the second. The purpose of these interim surveys is to track short-term changes in a limited number of key areas of congregational life and structure.

## *FACT*<sup>2008</sup> Methodology

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The *CCSP* Research Taskforce designed the *FACT*<sup>2008</sup> survey questionnaire. A copy of the questionnaire is available on the *FACT* Web site (<http://fact.hartsem.edu>) and should be consulted for exact question and response category wordings. It is completed by a key informant in each surveyed congregation, most typically the senior or sole clergy leader. The survey sample is an aggregation of three different layers designed to represent the universe of American congregations. One layer is a mail and web survey of a random sample of 3,000 U.S. congregations conducted for *CCSP* by the research services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A second layer is a telephone survey of a random sample of 1,000 congregations conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry. The third layer is a set of mini surveys conducted by 12 of the *CCSP* partner denominations and faith groups. These mini surveys used the *FACT*<sup>2008</sup> questionnaire, but were conducted by the respective denomination or faith group as a supplement to the general samples. The general survey sample was generated by the *CCSP* Research Taskforce from a larger random national sample of congregations purchased from MCH at [www.mailings.com](http://www.mailings.com).

The final aggregated data set contains questionnaires from 2,527 congregations. To better represent national population parameters a two stage weighting procedure was used. To mitigate the over representation of those denominations and faith groups that contributed supplemental survey data, the total aggregated responses were weighted to the population parameters for faith families presented by Hadaway and Marler [C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, *How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measure*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2005) 44(3): 307-322, Table 2]. Then to further enhance national representation, the total aggregated dataset was also weighted to size of congregation and rural/city/suburban location parameters found in the *FACT*<sup>2000</sup> national survey of 14,301 congregations. This is the same weighting procedure used for *FACT*<sup>2005</sup> and therefore has the added benefit of making the report's trend comparisons more robust. The sampling error for *FACT*<sup>2008</sup> type samples is difficult to calculate with precision. We estimate it to be +/- 4 percent.

Links to denominational and faith group reports on *FACT*<sup>2000</sup> supplemental surveys will be posted on the *FACT* Web site as they become available. The *CCSP* partners that contributed supplemental survey data include: Baha'i Faith in the United States, Interdenominational Theological Center (representing seven historically Black denominations), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church of the Nazarene, Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Seventh-day Adventist Church, Synagogue 3000, United Methodist Church.

