



INSIGHTS INTO:

Attracting and Keeping Congregational Members

In all voluntary organizations, growth and vitality are a result of twin processes: recruitment and retention. This is especially true of religious congregations as both clergy and laity struggle to not only bring new participants/members in the door, but also to retain them as contributing participants in the life of the congregation. The question of church growth has been addressed from many perspectives, including previous Faith Communities Today (FACT) publications, and discussed briefly below (see www.faithcommunitiestoday.org). This publication offers research, insights and resources to help clergy, seminarians and congregational leaders deal constructively with integrating and energizing both new and old congregational participants, an often-forgotten aspect of maintaining healthy religious communities. Parallels with other organizational examples of retention and vitality are also presented.

Contents

I. Attracting New Members: A Review of Church Growth	2
II. Obstacles in Attracting New Members and Regular Participation	5
III. Integrating New Members Into the Life of the Congregation	7
IV. Contacting Lapsed Attendees	11
V. Impact of Leadership and Volunteers on Member Incorporation	12
VI. Activities Outside Worship that Strengthen Participation and Incorporation	15
VII. Summary Recommendations	16
VIII. Additional Resources	17

This publication is one in a series produced by Faith Communities Today (FACT), a collaboration of American faith communities. These periodic publications connect research with strategies for dealing with important issues facing congregations in the U.S. today. More information can be found at www.faithcommunitiestoday.org.

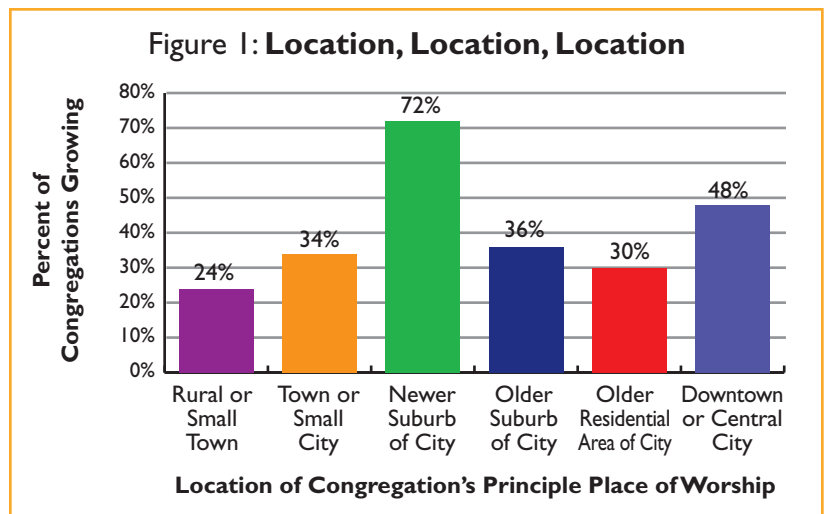
I. Attracting New Members: A Review of Church Growth

In the last 20 years, there has been a groundswell of popular and academic literature promoting and documenting church growth. National denominational offices map the growth and decline of local churches, and non-Christian faith traditions can cite the growth of mosques, temples, synagogues and other worship centers throughout American society. *FACTs on Growth*, a 2006 publication by Faith Communities Today (<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-based-products-congregational-leadership#factsongrowth>), reported that the religious groups most likely to experience growth were Evangelical Protestant congregations, “other Christians” (Latter Day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, Brethren, etc.) as well as “Non-Christian” (Muslim, Bahá’í, Jewish, etc.) congregations. The evangelical Christian growth is attributed to several factors, including higher birth rates, ability to foster higher levels of church commitment and involvement, and especially having a clear mission and purpose for their congregation. The non-Christian traditions are growing primarily through increasing levels of immigration, but also through conversion.

What other causes contribute to church growth? FACT research has found that several factors, both internal to the church and external in the wider society, help congregations grow:

1. Both urban renewal and suburban growth have led to church growth.

As Figure 1 shows, the areas which have the highest percentage of growing congregations are in newer suburbs of cities, or in the urban core. Related to this is the fact that younger congregations grow in part because they tend to be founded in newer suburbs (see Figure 2), and those congregations with the highest percentage of younger members are also most likely to grow (see Figure 3). This is also linked to the fact that newer churches must be more deliberate about their survival in the religious marketplace. This intentionality establishes a powerful motivation for establishing a plan for growth (see Figure 4). As religious organizations set out to create a “marketing plan,” they energize members to reflect on their collective identity and goals.



Background: The Faith Communities Today (FACT) 2008 survey of religious congregations included several questions about challenges clergy and laity face when attracting and retaining new members/participants as part of a vital and spiritually nurturing congregational environment. A previous FACT publication, “Insights Into Congregational Growth,” pointed out that expansion occurs in basically three major ways: 1) births, 2) transfers in, and 3) conversion. However, an equally important consideration for congregational leaders is the effort to retain new or current members/participants. Of course, congregational retention is inseparable from recruitment efforts, spiritual education, size of congregation and available resources, efforts to create a spiritually vital religious life with a strong identity, and good leadership. The following insights will focus on the results of FACT 2008, a survey of 10,000 religious congregations of all major faith backgrounds in the US.

Figure 2: Younger Congregations Grow

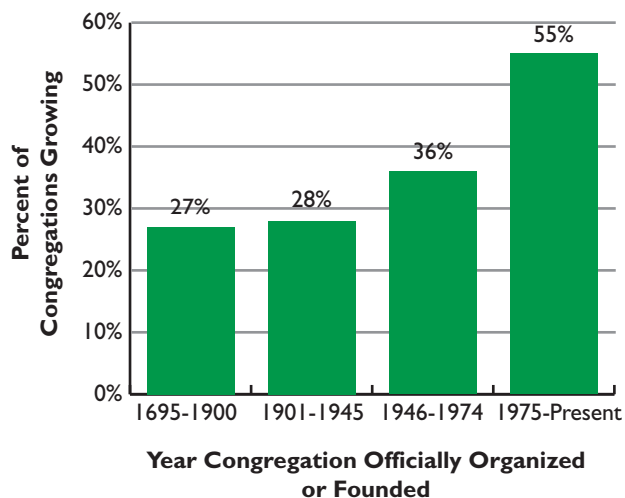


Figure 3: Younger Adults and Growth

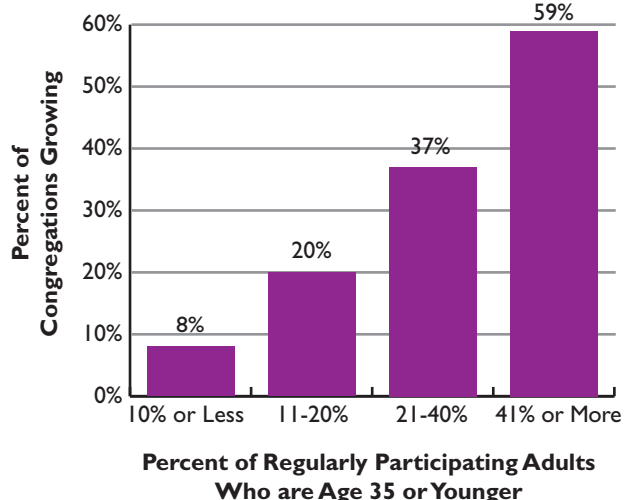
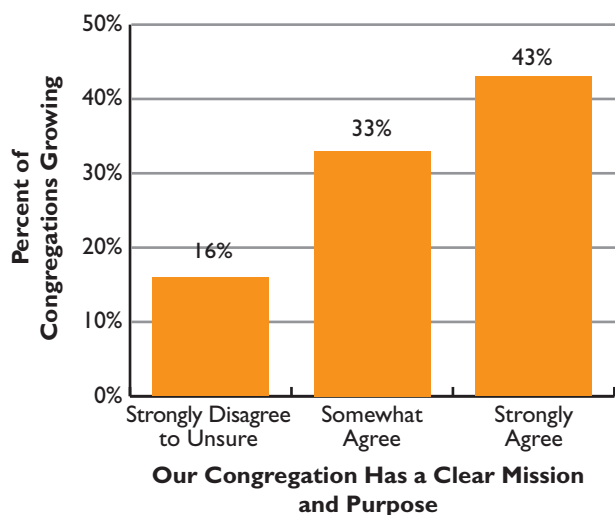


Figure 4: Purpose-Driven Growth



2. FACT research has also found that those congregations that are “spiritually vital and alive” are most likely to grow. This is related to the number of worship services a congregation is likely to have (especially if one or more has a more “contemporary” worship style with upbeat music, including electric guitars, drums, and selections from pop-Christian artists). Surprisingly, our analysis indicated that those respondents who said their congregations had “spiritual vitality” were more likely to report growing numbers than those who said their congregations conveyed “feelings of reverence.” When churches also plan for growth by developing a recruitment plan, this synergy of growth strategies coupled with multiple services, diverse programs, and younger members with families will also more likely encourage growth (see Figures 5, 6, 7, 8).

3. What is not conducive to growth, our research has found, is congregational conflict. As can be seen in Figure 9, 42% of congregations who report major conflict in the past two years also report declining attendance. Congregations frequently experience conflict over budgets, worship style, leadership methods, or theological issues. These conflicts not only create hurt feelings and ruptured friendships, but also divert attention away from the primary mission of the congregation.

Thus, FACT and other research has shown that church growth is primarily a result of two main factors: 1) demographic fortune and 2) intentional strategies. The first may be more difficult to engineer, but those congregations that find themselves in growing neighborhoods, with younger families who have higher birth rates, will most likely experience growth. Young people who are starting a family are more likely to seek out a church home, or increase their existing participation, in order to provide a religious or moral education for their children. This demographic spillover is true for all organizations geared toward

Figure 5: Spiritual Vitality and Growth

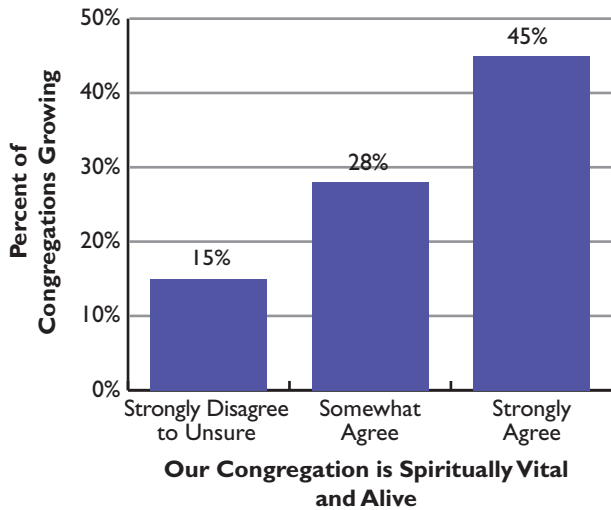


Figure 6: Worship Services and Growth

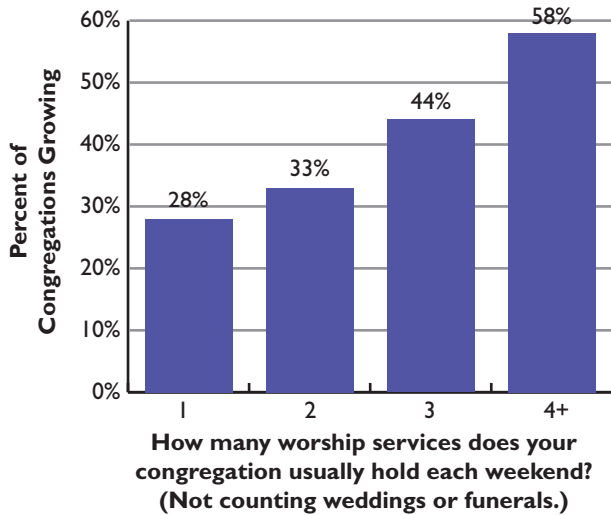
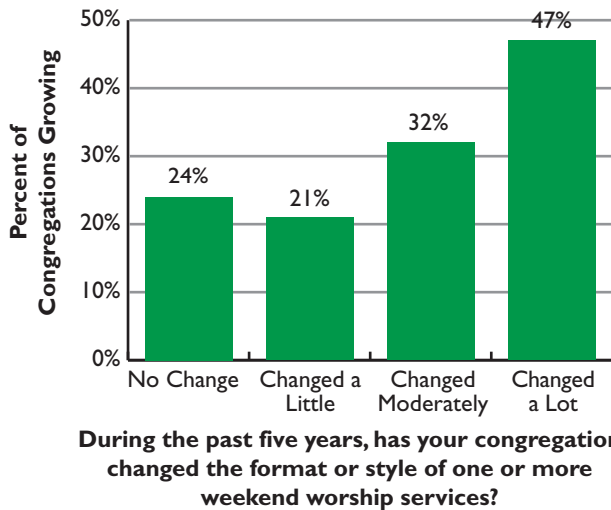


Figure 7: Changing Worship, Growing Congregations



young people (i.e., Big Brothers, Big Sisters), sports teams, and civic organizations in general, all of which benefit from the renewed commitment of growing numbers of families with young kids in suburbia. These demographic opportunities for growth are also true of neighborhoods that are undergoing rapid demographic transformation. But in these cases, it is rare for a church or other congregation to make the requisite changes to leadership, worship and music style, or denomi-

Figure 8: Recruitment Planning and Growth

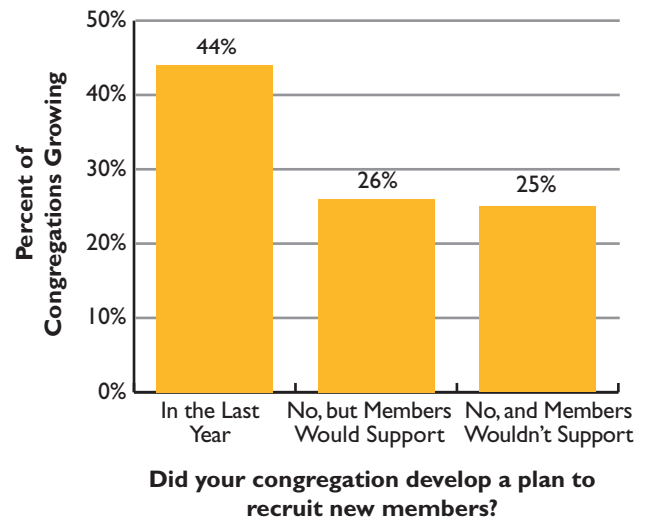
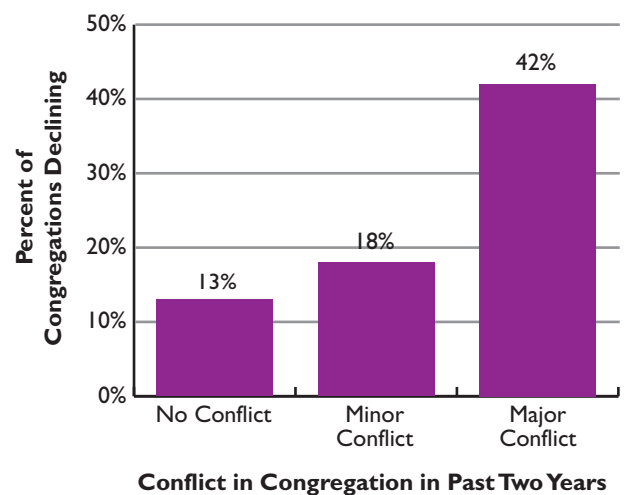


Figure 9: Conflict and Declining Attendance



national identity to capitalize on these neighborhood changes.¹

The second factor, intentional growth strategies, is more under the control of congregational leadership, although it must be recognized that any change to the status quo culture is difficult and even resisted at times by congregational members. However, congregations that are able to plan for growth, implement strategies to meet the needs of congregational members, and create a more diverse organizational culture (with “contemporary” worship services, for example) are also most likely to experience growth.

The question then is once religious congregations plan for growth, what strategies maintain the new members and energizes or integrates them into the life of the congregation? The rest of this publication will review the findings on these issues from the FACT 2008 survey.

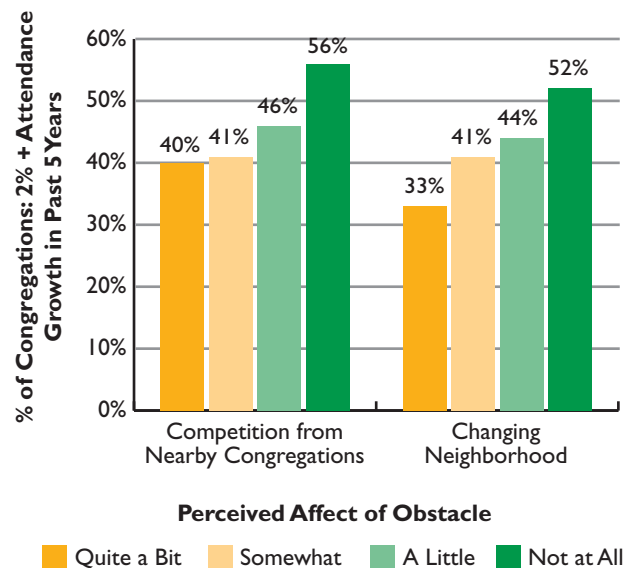
II. Obstacles in Attracting New Members and Regular Participation

FACT 2008 asked respondents about obstacles that make it more difficult to attract and retain new people in a congregation. These potential barriers included issues of changing neighborhood demographics, competition with nearby congregations, an area population that is mobile, stable or declining, and a general disinterest in religion among community members (only the

¹ See Penny Edgell Becker, 1999. *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, 2003. *United By Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press; Michael O. Emerson and Rodney M. Woo, 2006. *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

first two issues are discussed below). As can be seen in Figure 10, 56% of congregations who said competition from nearby congregations was “not at all” an obstacle for attracting new members had at least 2% attendance growth in the last five years, and 52% of congregations who said that a demographically changing neighborhood was “not at all” an obstacle had at least 2% attendance growth in the last five years. However, for those congregations which said they faced “quite a bit” of competition from nearby congregations, only 40% said they experienced a 2% growth in the last five years. For those congregation which said they had “quite a bit” of neighborhood change in the last 5 years, only 33% had a 2% growth. Given the relatively “free market” of religious competition in the US, it is not surprising that churches, synagogues, temples and mosques face competition from other providers. Competition can stimulate the development of new services to meet customer demand. However, a pure monopoly would deter religious leaders from being responsive to new demands. What the FACT 2008 study shows is that competition which does not present an obstacle is most likely to lead to higher levels of growth. Congregations which face greater competition are less likely to report growth. In addition, congregations which exist in neighborhoods undergoing greater

Figure 10: **Obstacles Are Obstacles, But Not Insurmountable**



social instability are also less likely to experience growth.

These challenges corroborate findings from other research which also found that the social context in which churches and other religious organizations find themselves can produce challenges in attracting and retaining members.² These researchers suggest that churches must make decisions about how to survive in a changing environment. Becker sees these conflicts that congregations have as mediated by their orientation to the wider community. She provides the models of *family*, *community*, and *house of worship* to represent ways religious congregations focus on emotional support, social change, and religious education respectively. Ammerman also finds that elements of a congregations’s culture (its activities, rituals and symbolic practices), its structure of authority, and its resources affect how it responds to changes in the wider community, and therefore impacts how it integrates new and old members.

FACT 2008 also asked our respondents about obstacles that make it more difficult for people to regularly participate in the life of the congregation. This included issues such as parking problems, driving distance to worship, fear of crime in the

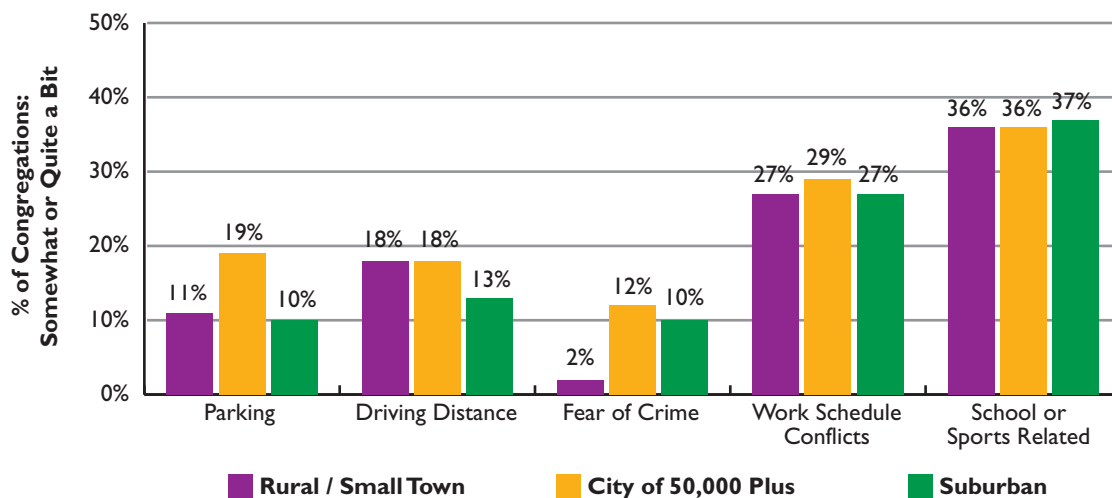
neighborhood, conflict with work schedules, and conflict with school-related or sports-related activities. As can be seen in Figure 11, by far the greatest obstacle for integrating people into the life of the congregation is school or sports-related activities among young children and teens. Just over one-third of all congregations reported this problem, and this was true for small or rural towns, for urban areas (of 50,000 population or higher), and for suburbs.

An obstacle mentioned by more than one-fourth of responding congregations was that of conflict with work schedules. This was statistically equally true across all three types of communities. Fear of crime was the least difficult obstacle in maintaining regular participation for church members in rural or small towns. Driving distance presented the smallest barrier for religious participation in the suburbs among the three types of communities (most likely because there are more houses of worship to choose from in suburbia); and parking was the greatest difficulty in generating regular participation in urban areas, not surprising given the space limitations in most cities.

When accounting for obstacles to regular participation between various denominational families, statistical tests indicated that differences in what creates obstacles to regular participation are either minimal or based on location (data not shown). The two major exceptions to this are: work schedules are especially challenging for

² Penny Edgell Becker, 1999. *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Figure 11: **Obstacles Making it Difficult for People to Regularly Participate in Congregation**



Catholic/orthodox church members; and Other Protestants (Latter-Day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, etc.) do not appear as affected by school and sports activities.

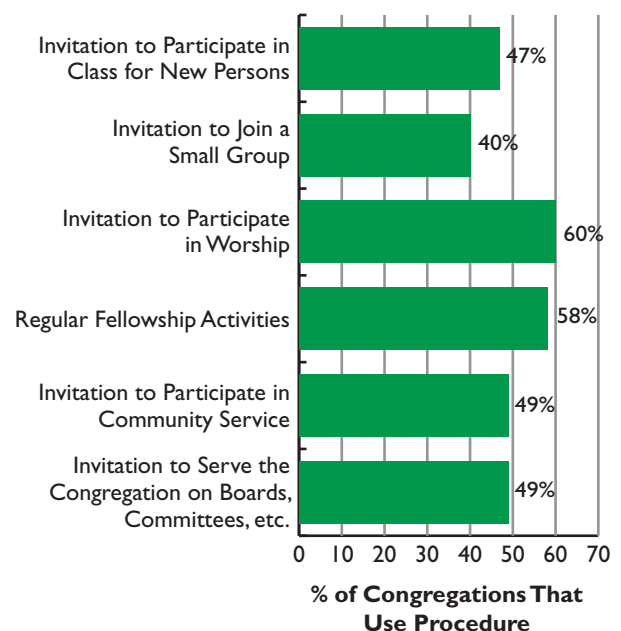
As can be seen in Figure 11, obstacles to regular, sustained participation is *least* affected by the nature of the congregation's location itself (parking issues, fear of crime in the neighborhood, or distance driven to worship). Rather, it is the challenge of Americans' busy lives that hinder the integration of participants into the spiritual life of their congregation. In the majority of two-parent families, both adults are working outside the home, so it is not surprising that work schedule conflicts represent a significant obstacle for ongoing congregational participation. This is especially true for the growing number of single-parent households as well. School and sports schedules pose the greatest difficulty for families with children (and this is equally true in rural, mid-sized cities as well as suburbs). Religious congregations would do well to provide lots of flexible scheduling for their programs to accommodate busy American lives, although this puts greater stress on limited church resources.

Thus, congregations face two essential obstacles in attracting new members and eliciting regular participation: 1) characteristics of the congregation itself (such as providing meaningful programs that energize participants); and 2) larger neighborhood and society-wide changes that are largely beyond the leadership's control. To address the first challenge, leaders would do well to stay in touch with the needs of their members and create a culture of "spiritual vitality" that accommodates busy schedules. To address the second challenge, religious leaders should learn to respond to environmental change not as a threat, but an opportunity to expand or transform their mission.

III. Integrating New Members into the Life of the Congregation

It is a challenge for a congregation to grow in membership; it is equally difficult for it to successfully incorporate new members into community life. The 2008 FACT survey asked several questions about how to assimilate and activate new members into the life of the congregation, as well as deepening the number and quality of lay leadership. One question asked "Once a person has begun attending your congregation, what procedures are used to help that person become integrated and accepted into the life of the congregation?" As can be seen in Figure 12, over half of congregations use an invitation to weekly worship and regular fellowship activities to incorporate new participants. Other frequently used methods are invitations to take part in other aspects of the life of the congregation, such as new member classes, small groups, or service on congregational boards or committees. Nearly half of responding congregations also indicated that they invited new attenders to participate in some

Figure 12: Procedures Used to Integrate New People Into Life of Congregation



form of community service. These community service activities can include literacy programs, litter pickup, canned food or clothing drives, or even homeless shelters. Protestants (especially Evangelicals) are significantly more likely to use invitation to fellowship activities as part of their integration efforts. Oldline Protestants are more likely to use invitation to small groups, as well as involvement in community service projects, to activate commitment among members.

The bottom line is that this research shows that deepening commitment among church members is not automatic, and religious groups that are best able to integrate new members have learned to extend an invitation for greater involvement, and do not assume it will just happen. What our FACT 2008 survey shows is that the majority of churches, mosques, temples and synagogues invite new participants to worship and fellowship activities—those events that showcase the full collective life of the congregation. However, between 40-50% of congregations also invite new members or participants to a host of small group activities (Bible studies, theology classes, committee work, community service groups, etc.). Data from FACT 2008 show that this is true for small congregations all the way up to mega-churches. The “small group movement” has been around for about 25 years in American congregations.³ FACT 2008 reaffirms the importance of small groups in consolidating a congregation’s growth. Spiritually vital and relevant worship and fellowship activities draw new participants in the door, but small group relationships keeps them coming back.⁴

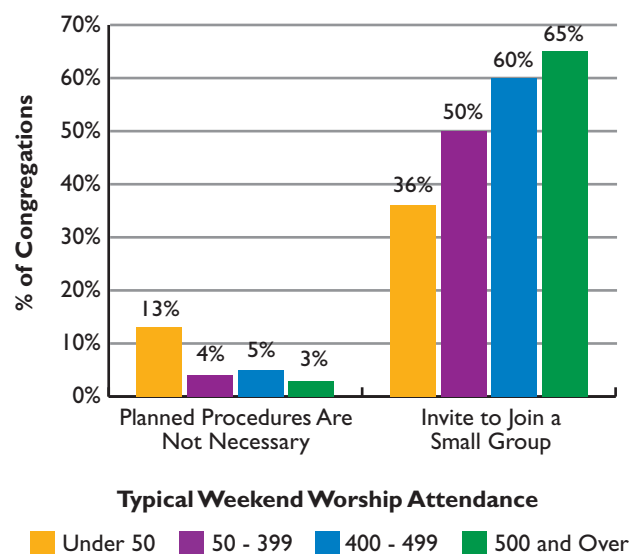
As other FACT publications have shown (see especially *Insights into Congregational Growth*, <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-based-products-congregational-leadership#churchgrowth>), size matters. Size of congregation has always

been a significant predictor of various aspects of congregational life, including spiritual vitality, conflict, resource levels and therefore available programs, and a host of other aspects of congregational life. This is also true of techniques used by congregations to integrate new members. As can be seen in Figure 13, large congregations (defined as having memberships of 500 or more weekly worship attendees) are nearly twice as likely to invite new attendees to a small group than small congregations (defined as having fewer than 50 weekly worship attendees; 65% versus 36% respectively). Concomitantly, FACT 2008 results indicate that small congregations are more than four times as likely than large congregations to report that no planned procedures are necessary to integrate new people into the congregation (13% vs. 3% respectively).

These data confirm much of the literature of congregational size (and in fact, size in general in organizational sociology). Large congregations, like bureaucracies, require more formal mechanisms such as small groups to integrate new members.⁵ Smaller congregations function more

⁵ See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Richard H. Hall, 1991. *Organizations: Structures, Processes and Outcomes*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Figure 13: Larger Congregations Need to Be, and Are, More Attentive



³ See Robert Wuthnow. 1994. *'I Come Away Stronger': How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans.

⁴ c.f., Alfredo Garcia. 2010. "Methodist Study Finds Four Marks of Church Vitality." *Christian Century*. August 24; John Dart. 2001. "'Close-knit' Megachurches." *Christian Century*. September 12-19.

like secondary groups or families that foster intimate ties, and thus are more adept at using informal mechanisms of social integration and retention.⁶

Large congregations may have the resources to draw people into worship and fellowship activities by using technologically sophisticated production capabilities (including large facilities with projection equipment for singing and video), paid musicians, soloists, choirs, and exciting lighting, etc.). However, FACT 2008 research indicates that the ability to have large entertaining worship experiences must be supplemented by utilizing small groups to facilitate the development of more intimate relationships in order to retain the ongoing commitment of new members. Small congregations have fewer resources and formal mechanisms of social integration, but are better able to welcome the few newcomers who appear on their doorstep through a more “family-like” intimacy for integrating them.

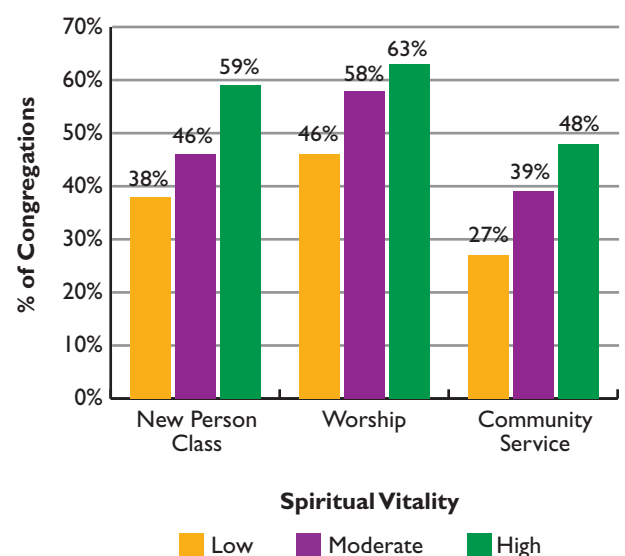
Other FACT publications have examined spiritual vitality as a key variable in understanding the dynamics of congregational life (e.g., *American Congregations 2005*, <http://faithcommunities.org/research-based-products-congregational-leadership>). This is also true of the ways in which spiritually vital congregations integrate new members. As can be seen in Figure 14, those congregations that are rated by survey respondents as highly “spiritually vital,” also said that their congregations would be more likely to invite new participants to community service opportunities, to worship, and/or to a new member/participant class. Specifically, 59% of congregations rated with “high” spiritual vitality used invitations to new member classes to incorporate new participants, while only 38% of “low” spiritually vital congregations did so. In addition, 63% of “high” spiritually vital congregations invited new participants to worship, while only 46% of “low” spiritually vital congregations did so. Finally, 48% of congregations with “high” levels of spiritual vitality invited

new attendees to community service opportunities as part of their integration strategy; approximately half (or 27%) of that proportion indicated they invited new-comers to community service among congregations rated as “low” in spiritual vitality.

Spiritually vital congregations are also much more likely than other congregations to say that an active participant that stopped attending would definitely be contacted to find out why. Surprisingly, such attention and follow-up with regard to lapsed attendees is only minimally related to growth in worship attendance.

Thus, it seems clear from FACT 2008 data that there is a connection between congregations that identify themselves as “spiritually vital” and those that make efforts to integrate new members into the life of the congregation. This spiritual vitality can manifest itself not only in dynamic worship and meaningful devotions, but also through programming that is responsive to the spiritual and social needs of the congregation. FACT research in 2000, 2005 and 2008 has found that this programming can range from contemporary music, scripture study, evangelism, and community service, to parenting, youth groups, and sports and marriage enrichment groups. In this sense, spiritual and organizational strength coincide when religious organizations

Figure 14: Spiritually Vital Congregations Are More Attentive to New Persons



⁶ See Rosebeth Moss Kanter, 1973. *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

actively integrate new members into the fold.⁷ And by fostering small groups, new member classes, and community service opportunities (all hallmarks of a “spiritually vital” groups), these religious congregations also provide dynamic activities to invite new recruits to.

In conclusion, facilitating new attendees’ integration into the life of the congregation is a key issue in recruiting and keeping new members. Figure 15 provides a summary of patterns of how various faith traditions use these techniques. Of the methods of integration studied, Oldline Protestants (such as Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, etc.) are more likely than other denominational families to invite new attendees to join a small group, invite them to participate in community service projects, and invite them to participate on congregational boards and committees. Other Protestants (defined as mostly evangelical and pentecostal denominations), were more likely to use new member/attendee classes and invitations to participate in congregational boards and committees. Non-Christian groups (Bahá’ís, Muslims, Jews, etc.) are more likely to invite newcomers to fellowship activities as their major assimilation technique, possibly due to their relatively smaller size and less-well

⁷ See Robert Wuthnow, 1994. “I Come Away Stronger”: How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion. Grand Rapids:W. B. Eerdmans. See also Robert Wuthnow, 2004. *Saving America?: Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁸ This insight was underscored by R. Stephen Warner’s article “Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States” in 1993, *American Journal of Sociology* 98: 1044-1093. Warner emphasized that religion in the US, with its unique separation of church and state, results in religious organizations that stress voluntary membership and attendance, that are structurally adaptable to social change, and responsive to energetic and entrepreneurial lay and clergy leadership for vitality and growth. Thus, weekly worship becomes a primary religious activity in American religious culture, even among non-Christian immigrant groups where weekly attendance is not the norm in their home countries. See also James E. Curtis, Douglas E. Baer, Edward G. Grabb. 2001. “Nations of Joiners: Explaining Voluntary Association Membership in Democratic Societies” *American Sociological Review* 66: 783-805, which explicitly examines the unique role of membership in religious organizations in making the US a “nation of joiners.”

developed programming that could incorporate new members. Finally, invitation to regular worship is used equally by all denominational and faith groups as a key integrative method—this is true regardless of size of congregation as well as denominational family. This is not surprising, since most religious congregations in the US use invitations to participate in worship as *the* primary way of energizing new participants.⁸

Thus, all religious traditions attempt to activate new members using some combination of worship attendance, organized structured activity, and informal fellowship to attract and retain new members. The lesson is that all religious congregations must leverage their current resources to provide the services that would attract new participants, and then keep inviting them to participate, thus integrating them into active membership.

Figure 15: Denominational Family Whose Congregations Are Most Likely to Use Integrative Method

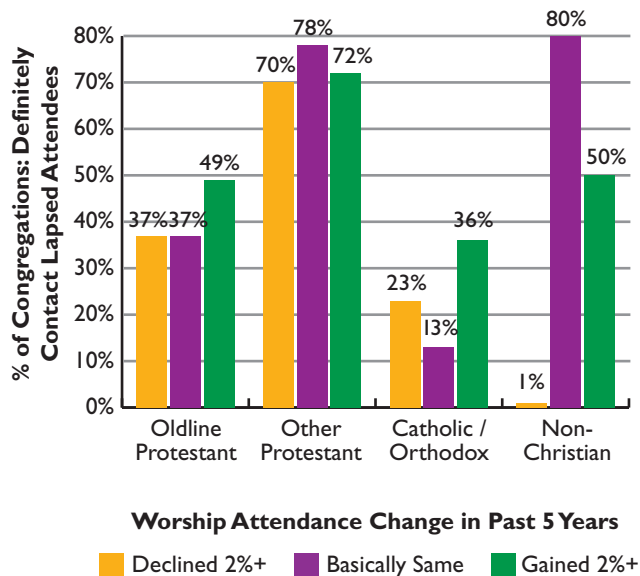
Invitation to Participate in Class for New Persons	Other Protestant
Invitation to Join a Small Group	Oldline Protestant
Invitation to Worship	All Families
Regular Fellowship Activities	Non-Christian
Invitation to Participate in Community Service	Oldline Protestant
Invitation to Serve the Congregation on Boards, Committees, etc.	Oldline & Other Protestant

IV. Contacting Lapsed Attendees

FACT 2008 asked respondents the question: if an active participant of the congregation stopped attending, would that person be contacted to find out why in an effort to retain their active participation? Figure 16 shows the likelihood of contacting lapsed attendees by denominational family and whether or not growth had taken place. Of the Oldline Protestants who gained 2% attendance in the past five years, 49% indicated that they would definitely contact lapsed attendees (compared to only 37% for both those who remained flat in attendance or even declined by 2%). Other Protestants definitely contact lapsed attendees regardless of growth patterns. For Catholic and Orthodox congregations, of those who experienced at least a 2% increase in attendance in the past five years, 36% said they would definitely contact lapsed attendees (compared to only 23% of declining congregations who said they would definitely contact lapsed attendees). For Non-Christian faith groups, of those who experienced at least a 2% increase in attendance in the past five years, 50% said they would definitely contact lapsed attendees (while 80% of those who experienced no growth would also do so). As can be seen from Figure 16, the results are mixed in terms of the correlation between growth and likelihood of contacting lapsed attendees as a way to integrate participants into the life of the congregation.

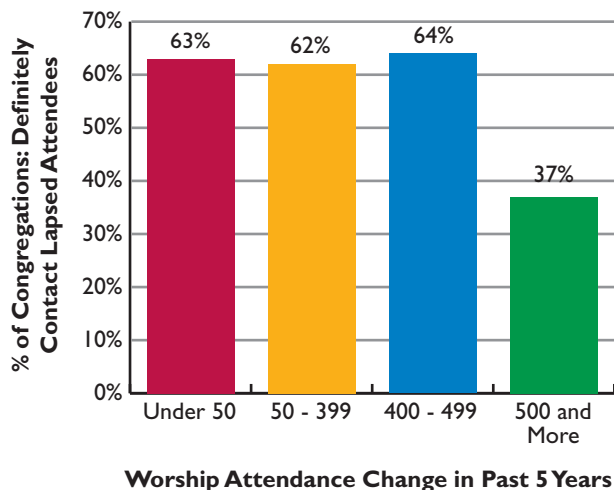
In general, however, those congregations who have declined in worship attendance in the last five years are also less likely to reach out to those no longer regularly attending. These efforts to contact lapsed attendees seem to represent a simple yet effective strategy to retain participants who in the past have been energetic contributors in the life of the congregation. But to be effective, it requires that congregations have a mechanism to notice when fellow congregants have not been attending over a prolonged time period—something potentially more difficult in larger organizations.

Figure 16: **Contacting Lapsed Attendees by Denominational Family**



According to FACT 2008 results, when one compares those religious organizations which would “definitely” contact lapsed attendees by size of congregation, there is no statistically significant difference among those congregations under 500 members (see Figure 17). Only those congregations larger than 500 weekly attendees reported a lower likelihood of definitely contacting lapsed attendees. This pattern was true across all denominational families and faith traditions.

Figure 17: **Something Large Congregations Could Do Better?**



V. Impact of Leadership and Volunteers on Member Incorporation

FACT 2008 asked several questions about congregational leadership. Leadership has always been a factor in understanding the vitality of an organization, and this is certainly true for religious organizations. Both clergy and lay leadership promote the goals of the organization, as well as impact recruitment and retention of members or volunteers.¹¹

FACT 2008 also asked how many committees each congregations had, and then asked a series of five questions related to that leadership:

- 1) How easy or difficult is it for your congregation to recruit people for volunteer leadership roles?
- 2) Do the same people tend to serve in volunteer leadership roles year after year or does your congregation rotate volunteer service among a larger number of people?
- 3) How well do the volunteer leaders of this congregation represent the diversity of your active participants in terms of age, race and gender?
- 4) Do volunteer leaders (including teachers) receive recognition for their service on a regular basis?
- 5) Do new volunteer leaders receive any training for their roles or assignments?

⁹ See Paula Beudean, 2009. "Employee Retention, Building Organizational Commitment, and Recommendations for Non-profit Organizations." *Review of Administrative Sciences* 25: 40-50.

¹⁰ See John Mayer and Natalie Allen, 1997. *Commitment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Application*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

¹¹ See Richard H. Hall, 1991. *Organizations: Structures, Processes and Outcomes*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall; James R. Wood, 1981. *Leadership in Voluntary Organizations*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

The lower likelihood of the largest congregations definitely contacting lapsed attendees (63% versus about 37% for those under 500 in size) may be due to the fact that larger congregations have a more difficult time keeping track of individual attendees (especially if weekly attendance is spread out over several services on the weekend and if there are fewer personal, intimate ties among these individuals), thus reducing the chance of accurate follow-through. On the other hand, small congregations (under 500 in weekly attendance) are more likely to facilitate personal ties and intimate friendships among their participants. These one-on-one relationships make it more likely to notice lapsed attendees in smaller congregations. Thus, as Figure 17 indicates, nearly two-thirds of small congregations say they call or write notes to lapsed attendees, while only about one-third of large congregations make this effort. The pattern below relating size to retention efforts of contacting lapsed attendees is true for all denominational families and faith traditions.

Contacting lapsed attendees is just one example of how religious congregations try to retain existing participants after getting them in the door. There is a vast literature on organizational efforts at both recruitment and retention. Much of this literature focuses on how organizations build commitment among their employees and/or volunteers.⁹ Participants in an organization are more likely to be retained if they utilize one or more of three types of commitment mechanisms: 1) affective commitment (emotional connections to other members of the group); 2) normative commitment (the degree to which one's own personal values and beliefs conform to organizational goals); and 3) continuance or calculative commitment which constitutes the perceived rewards for staying with or leaving an organization.¹⁰ Religious congregations utilize all three commitment mechanisms, with affective ties strengthened by the practice of contacting lapsed participants.

Figure 18 shows the breakdown in the number of committees, boards and taskforces the typical congregations has. The plurality of congregations has between 4 and 9 committees.

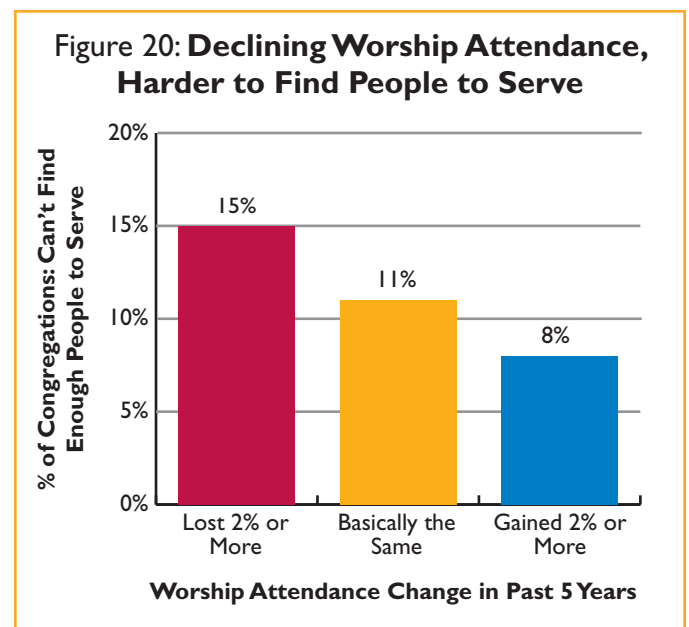
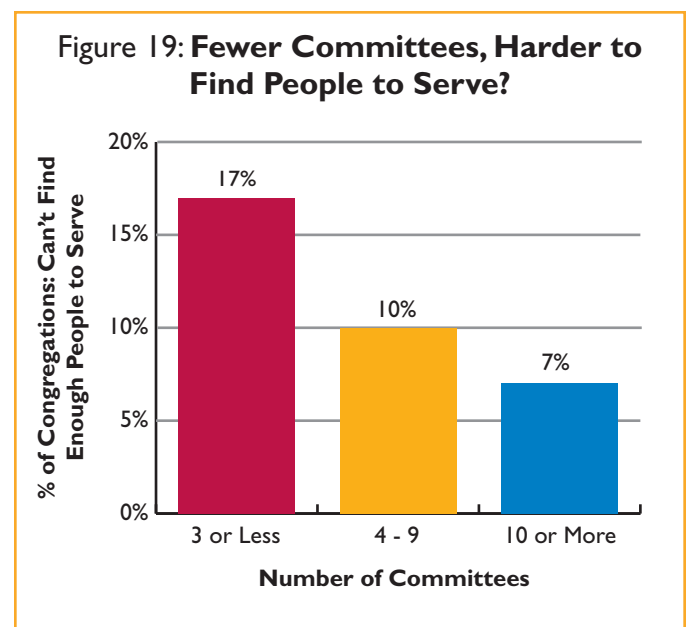
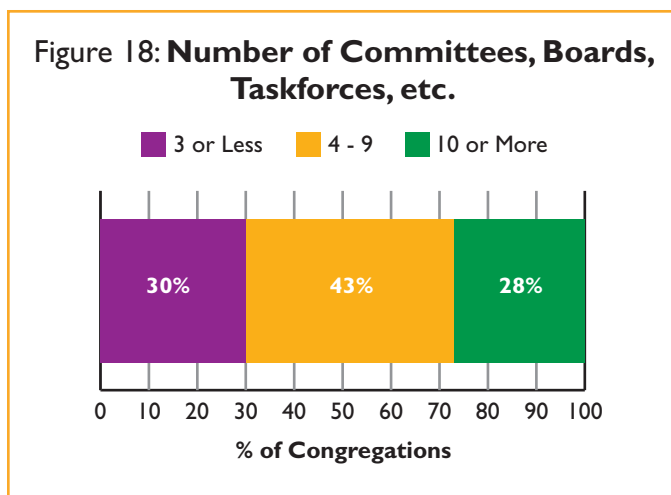
Despite the concerns of those who question the over-bureaucratization of religious organizations, statistical analysis shows that the number of committees, boards and task forces is unrelated to either spiritual vitality or attendance growth. While the number of formal committees, etc. does not appear to contribute to vitality, it is also true that it does not appear to inhibit it.

A frequently used indicator of organizational vitality, and therefore the ability of organizations to integrate new members/participants, is how easy or difficult it is for congregations to find persons to serve in leadership positions. The good news is that only one in ten respondents say their congregation often cannot find enough people to serve. Less encouraging is that only three in ten respondents say their congregation has no problem in getting members to volunteer their time for committees. For the remaining 60%, finding people to serve is a challenge, but they typically succeed.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, congregations with fewer committees are the most likely to struggle finding people to serve, and this is true regardless of size (see Figure 19). This may be because congregations with fewer committees require its members to do more work, and their tasks are more general and comprehensive. With more committees, their mission is more limited in scope, and being more narrowly focused,

takes up less time. Thus, organizationally, more committees would represent a more refined division of labor, allowing leaders to recruit volunteers with a specific skill set.

What is not surprising is that congregations with declining worship attendance also are most likely to struggle to find people to serve (see Figure 20). The latter is even truer for congregations with low spiritual vitality, and the negative relationship between vitality and finding volunteers for organizational tasks is true regardless of size. Struggling to find members to serve is not related to denominational family when number of committees, size and vitality are controlled.



The frustration of not being able to find enough persons to serve a congregation’s system of committees is further compounded by two other organizational challenges. First, congregations that struggle to find people to serve also are more likely to say they have the same people serving over and over again (see Figure 21). In fact, congregations that say they cannot find enough volunteers are three times more likely to say the same people serve repeatedly, than those congregations which say they have “no problem” recruiting volunteer leaders. Second, congregations that say they cannot find enough people to serve are less likely to have its lay leaders represent the diversity of the congregation’s participants in terms of age, race and gender (see Figure 22). Specifically, congregations that struggle the most to recruit volunteers are seven times more likely to also say that their leaders do not represent the diversity of the congregation. In other words, smaller congregations tend to recycle volunteer leadership, and therefore that leadership tends to not reflect the emerging diversity of the congregation. A great deal of recent research identifies congregational conflict as being exacerbated by the fact that church leadership does not mirror the diversity of its congregation.¹² Organizational sociology also demonstrates that groups are best able to utilize the human and social capital of its members when the leadership reflects the diversity of its members.¹³ Having the same people on the same committee for a long time also enforces the status quo and stifles innovation and change.

Although many congregations struggle to find enough people to serve on boards and committees, research in organizational sociology indicates that regular training opportunities and public recogni-

¹² See Michael O. Emerson and Karen Chai Kim, 2003. “Multiracial Congregations: An Analysis of Their Development and a Typology.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42: 217-227; and Penny Edgell Becker, 1998. “Making Inclusive Communities: Congregations and the ‘Problem’ of Race.” *Social Problems*, 45: 451-472.

¹³ See Robin Ely and David Thomas, 2001. “Cultural Diversity at Work.” *Admin. Science Quarterly*, 46(2): 229-273.

¹⁴ See Ciara O’Dwyer and Virpi Timonen, 2009. “Doomed to Extinction? The Nature and Future of Volunteering for Meals-on-Wheels Services.” *Voluntas* 20: 35-49.

tion of volunteers help maintain morale in a voluntary organization, and help with retaining and recruiting new volunteers.¹⁴ FACT 2008 results show that training and recognition appear to reduce the struggle to find enough volunteer leaders in the congregations we surveyed (see Figure 23). In fact, our results show that congregations that neither train volunteers for new committee leadership, nor recognize publicly the sacrifice in time and resources that congregational leaders provide, are twice as likely to report that they cannot find people to serve in voluntary leadership positions than congregations that provide one or the other or both types of support for volunteers.

Figure 21: Negatives Compound Each Other

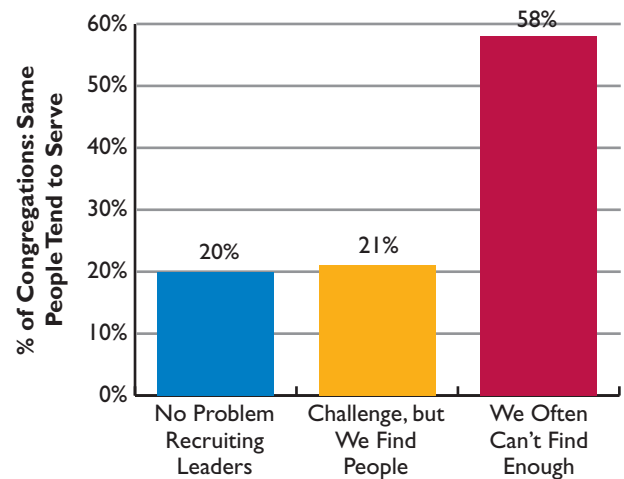


Figure 22: Negatives Compound Each Other

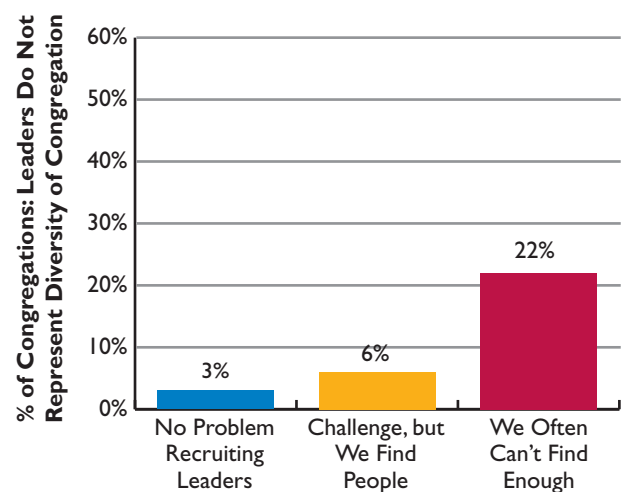
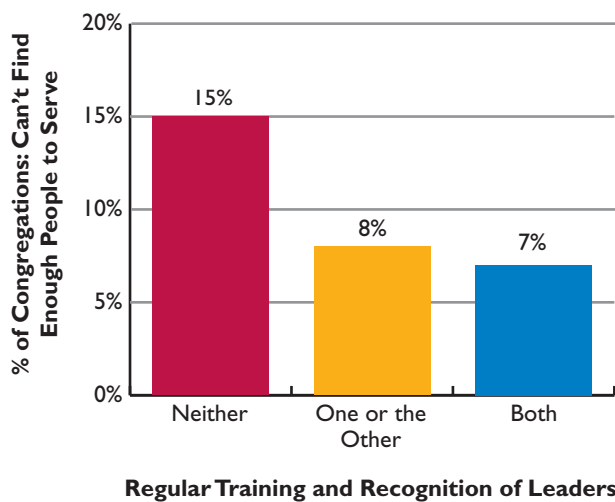


Figure 23: **Regular Training and Recognition of Volunteers Reduces Struggle to Find Enough Leaders**



VI. Activities Outside Worship that Strengthen Participation and Incorporation

The FACT 2008 survey asked whether or not one's congregation offered activities outside of worship that strengthened participants' faith and organizational commitment (examples include: choirs, small groups, Bible studies, youth meetings, or sports clubs). Statistical analysis found that Evangelical Protestants are somewhat more likely to say they have outside activities than Oldline Protestants. The number of adults who are involved in activities outside of worship that strengthen their faith is minimally related to size of congregation, but (as seen below in Figure 24) strongly related to spiritual vitality of the congregation. In fact, congregations that report high levels of spiritual vitality are seven times more likely to say that most or almost all of their adult participants are involved in activities outside of worship that strengthens their faith, than those congregations that report low spiritual vitality.

Data analysis revealed also that there is a moderate relationship between level of member oriented programming sponsored by the congregation, and number of adults who are involved in these activities outside of worship that strengthen the participants' faith (see Figure 25 below). However, this relationship is complex and uneven. For example:

- There is moderately positive relationship between activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith, and a congregation sponsoring: spiritual retreats, community service, parenting or marriage enrichment, performing arts groups, and sports teams. (e.g., thus, the interpretation would be that those congregations that offered spiritual retreats were more likely than those that did not to say that most or all most all of their adults were involved in activities outside of worship).
- There is small positive relationship between activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith, and a congregation sponsoring groups that discuss books or contemporary issues.
- There is small negative relationship between activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith, and a congregation sponsoring youth/teen activities or young adult/singles activities.
- There is no relationship between activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith, and a congregation sponsoring: theological or doctrinal study, choirs, self-help or personal growth groups, and exercise/fitness/weight loss groups.
- And surprisingly, there is a negative relationship between activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith, and a congregation sponsoring Bible/scripture study (other than Sunday School), and prayer or meditation groups.

The pattern of the relationship between congregational programs and activities outside of worship that strengthen participants' faith

remained basically the same regardless of the size of the membership or denominational family. As discussed above, our results confirm the affinity between spiritual vitality of the congregation as a whole, and incorporating members into small group activities.

Figure 24: Percent of Congregations That Say That Most or Almost All of Their Adult Participants are Involved in Activities Outside of Worship That Strengthen Their Faith

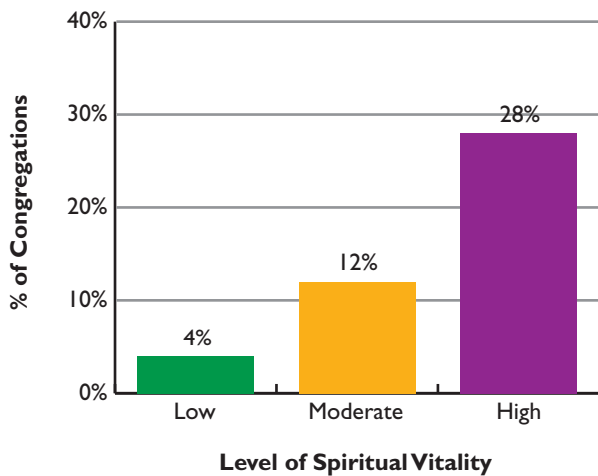
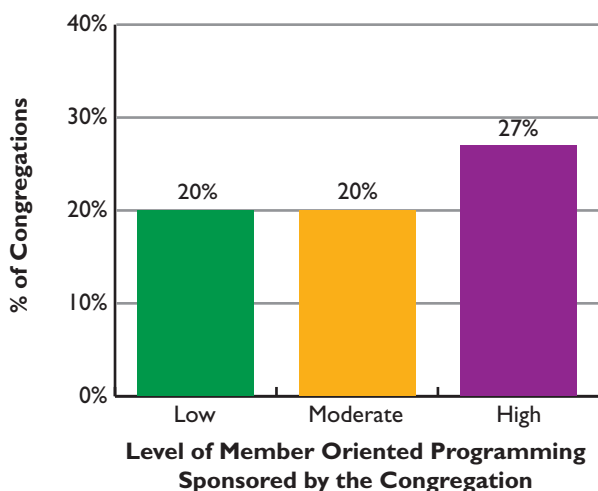


Figure 25: Percent of Congregations That Say That Most or Almost All of Their Adult Participants are Involved in Activities Outside of Worship That Strengthen Their Faith



VII. Summary Recommendations

Hopefully, the research findings presented here can be of use to clergy, lay leaders, and others who are interested in attracting and keeping new congregational members. All organizations face issues of recruiting and retention, but this is even more crucial in the competitive religious marketplace of American religion. Some of the lessons learned from the research findings of the FACT 2008 survey include:

- Numerically growth is most likely among those congregations that:
 - Capitalize on changing community demographics by incorporating new leadership positions, worship styles, or music that reflect the culture of the changing neighborhood.
 - Clergy and lay leaders who consult with congregational members in developing a systematic plan for growth that not only reflects their needs, but stimulates their leadership opportunities.
- Congregations that provide worship and small group activities at multiple times throughout the week will help retain active participation for families with harried schedules trying to juggle work, school, and extracurricular sports schedules.
- Actively invite new participants to worship, fellowship activities, and small group events to keep potential and new recruits returning to the congregation.
- Congregations that have “spiritually vital” programming as part of their outreach are more likely to actively invite newcomers to worship and small group activities. In other words, a synergy is developed between actively inviting community members to join in the life of the congregation, and having exciting and relevant activities to invite new recruits to attend.

- Dynamic worship remains the primary vehicle that all denominations and faith traditions use to attract and integrate new members and participants. Clergy and lay leaders need to remember that captivating worship is the main attraction for renewal. Often this means incorporating a “contemporary” style worship service.
- Develop a system to recognize new, regular, and lapsed attendees since the data show that those congregations which are more likely to “definitely contact” lapsed attendees are also more likely to have experienced growth in recent years.
- The majority of religious groups struggle to find volunteer leaders to serve on the various committees, boards and task-forces of the congregation. Clergy and lay leaders should expand the number of committees to provide more opportunities to recruit volunteers and capitalize on the human resources and division of labor in the congregation.
- Congregational leaders should recruit a diverse spectrum of volunteers to committee posts, since recruiting committee members and leaders is made easier if their members reflect the diversity of the wider congregation.
- Congregational leaders should also provide training opportunities and public recognition of volunteers to maintain the steady recruitment and retention of active participants.

VIII. Additional Resources

Aron, Isa. 2000. *The Self-Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Laubach, David. 2006. *12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.

Oswald, Roy M. 1992. *Making Your Church More Inviting: A Step-by-Step Guide for In-Church Training*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute.

Oswald, Roy M., and Speed B. Leas. 1987. *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute.

Owen-Towle, Tom. 2004. *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Boston, MA: Skinner Books.

Schwartz, Christian A. 1996. *Natural Church Development: A Guide to the Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*. St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources.

Smith, Daniel P., and Mary K. Sellon. 2008. *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute.

Woolever, Cynthia, and Deborah Bruce. 2004. *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of US Congregations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

<http://www.congregationalresources.org>