
News from Faith Communities Today

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The identity and mission of a congregation and its vitality and growth are clearly intertwined. This relationship may be the most critical factor in developing a healthy, vigorous religious group. Despite the long-held notion that "conservative churches are growing" and liberal congregations are in decline, in fact very conservative and very liberal congregations are more likely to be spiritually vital and alive with a slight edge to the "liberal" groups.

Research from the largest, ongoing study of American congregations demonstrates that this is generally true across all faiths, and is particularly true for Protestant local churches. Intangible in many ways, indicators have been developed over a decade of research that provide a clear profile of the thriving congregation.



writes David Roozen, author of *American Congregations 2008* and coordinator of the interfaith group that conducted the research.

Mission and Spiritual Vitality

Congregations that see themselves as very different from the other congregations in their local community (whether the most conservative or the most liberal) also have a much stronger sense of mission or purpose. "A strong sense of self is related to spiritual vitality," reports Roozen. Among Christian churches "twice as many congregations with a strong sense of self have high spiritual vitality." There are also data that "suggests that a congregation's awareness of its distinctiveness is perhaps more important than the mere fact of being different." The percentage of young adult participants may also be a significant factor related to spiritual vitality and growth, although the type of community a congregation is located in has no significant influence.

[You can download a copy of this research here.](#)

Resources on Identity & Mission

Leading Ideas, the newsletter of the Lewis Center published in November "Ten Misconceptions about Church Vitality and Growth." [Get a copy here.](#)

Ed Stetzer, researcher for the Southern Baptist Convention and participant in the FACT network, comments [here](#).

"Rethinking church: Measuring growth and vitality" provides a perspective from the United Church of Christ. [Connect with it here.](#)

The Mennonite Church USA has published a congregational Bible study on identity. Together with other materials it is available at www.Mennoniteusa.org/identity.

Mark Bender from Northway Christian Church has written a congregational leader's view of "Hallmarks of a Vital Congregation" and it can be read [here](#).

What is a vital congregation in the context of small congregations? This is the focus of an Episcopal blog [here](#).

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research has published two important research papers related to this topic. "[Brand Name Identity in a Post-denominational Age](#)" by Adair Lummis, a Muslim scholar, and "[Oldline Protestantism: Pockets of Vitality](#)" by David Roozen.

An Orthodox Jewish rabbi has written on "Identity" [here](#).

The Alban Institute has published two articles on this topic [Imagining Congregational Identity](#) in 2006 and [Myths about Communicating Congregational Identity](#) in 2008.

The well-known church consultant, Lyle E. Schaller, has written a piece entitled "What is Your Self-identity?" which has been [published on line](#).

Tools to Develop Vital Churches is a [web site](#) web site with many resources on this topic maintained by the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida.

"Reclaiming church identity" is the title of an article by Bruce Manners in a 2009 issue of *Ministry*. [Access it here.](#)

Synagogue 3000 Reports on Outreach to Gen X

Another research report from the Synagogue Studies Institute was published in the November issue of *S3K Report*. It reviews a project called NITA which is reaching out to Generation X adults who are not members of a Jewish organization although they have some family background in Judaism. This new report and others in the series can be downloaded at www.synagogue3000.org/s3k-reports.

FACT 2010 Data Collection Will End December 31

Researchers in more than 40 national faith communities are in the final stages of data collection for the Faith Communities Today (FACT) 2010 survey. Some are already done. This is the largest study of local religious congregations ever attempted by any research enterprise and is particularly interesting because it marks a full decade since the first FACT survey in 2000. Parallel to the census, there will be good information about trends in American religious life when these data are published. Much work remains in 2011 to do the analysis, write reports, etc. We will keep you posted on progress.

For further information about FACT, or to learn how to join the Cooperative Congregations Studies Partnership (CCSP), contact David Roozen at roozen@hartsem.edu.

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