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Teaching and Learning in American Congregations

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www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org

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Introduction

"Teaching and Learning in American Congregations" is a part of the Faith Communities Today 2015 (FACT2015) series of reports that focuses on the state and work of congregations' educational ministries in the United States. Religious education involves many components and features. This account explores characteristics of congregations, their priorities, and vitality in relationship to their teaching, learning, and faith formation practices. Underlying this investigation and conversation is the belief that individuals' learning, development, and religious formation involves both what learners bring to the educational situation and how they interact within the various environments in which they live. In addition to the classroom, those environments include the congregation, home, and communities in which learners participate.

Religious education plays a critical role in the life and effectiveness of congregations even though, like the membership of congregations, participation in traditional delivery settings is declining. The Sunday school or its equivalent for other faith traditions, such as religious education, Sabbath school or Quranic training, is still a key avenue for congregations to transmit their teachings and beliefs and provides a stable means for participants to experience nurture and fellowship.[1]

The 2015 Faith Communities Today survey is the fifth national project in a series beginning in 2000 and includes surveys in 2005, 2008, and 2010. The survey series totals over 32,000 responses from randomly sampled congregations of all denominations and faith traditions in the United States. The 2015 study contains responses from 4,436 congregations. The survey addresses the characteristics, programs and vital signs of congregations as reported by a key informant in the congregation, typically the senior clergy leader. Sample and survey methodology are described in more detail in the appendix, as is the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership, which conducts the survey series. Previous reports in this year's series, "American Congregations 2015" and "Engaging Young Adults," along with all FACT publications, are available online at: www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org.

1 To the extent there is a consensual generic name for educational ministries held in conjunction with a religious tradition's Sabbath it has become "Sunday school," even though not all traditions' Sabbath fall on Sunday. We follow that tradition here, but the reader must bear in mind that the data is from American congregations of all religious traditions, some of which do not use this term.

Yet, congregations have identified and developed other settings to encourage and carry out their teaching, learning, and faith formation. The prioritization of educational objectives is a key feature related to congregational vitality. These and other issues are taken up in this report, organized in four sections:

Section 1: Matters of Congregations' Sunday Schools, pp. 3-8

This section explores Sunday school attendance, and several congregational characteristics: race/ethnicity; regional and local settings; size; theological orientation; views on Internet technologies; learning and fellowship with other Christians and faith traditions; and leadership.

Section 2: Congregations' Priorities Matter, pp. 8-12

This section examines the extent to which congregations prioritize six religious educational objectives and the degree to which those educational objectives contribute to congregational vitality.

Section 3: Educating Beyond the Classroom, pp. 12-14

The Sunday school is just one of the settings in which congregational teaching, learning, and religious formation take place. Section 3 reports on congregational learning in settings beyond the Sunday school hour. A look at congregational emphases on learning in the home through personal and family devotions and faith formation practices is also discussed.

Section 4: What Was Learned, What Congregations Can Do, pp. 15-16

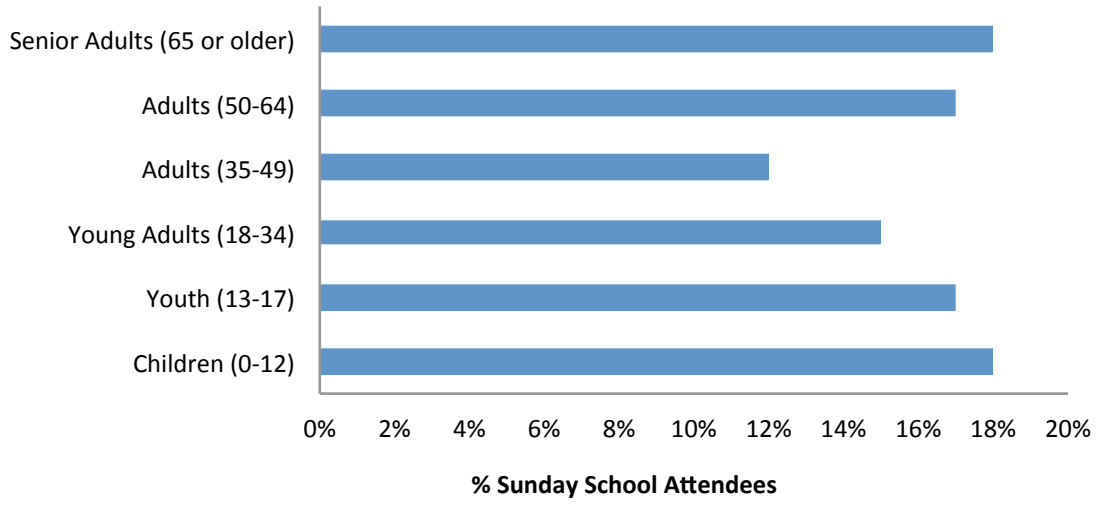
Section 4 provides a review of the research in terms of ten key insights that the study either uncovered or affirmed. The report concludes by identifying seven actions that congregations can take to support and strengthen their educational ministries.

Section 1: Matters of Sunday Schools and Their Learners

While most congregations have some form of educational ministry during the Sunday school hour, the majority of Sunday schools are small. The average size is 100, but half of all Sunday schools have 40 or fewer members (median) and 30 attendees is the most frequent size (mode). Almost two-thirds (64%) of congregations have an average Sunday school size of 30 or more. In the rest of this report, we use this "30 regular attendees" as our baseline for a Sunday school size that is sufficient to become self-sustaining and to constructively interact with other congregational characteristics. **All the following figures are based on congregations with an average Sunday school attendance of 30 or more, unless otherwise noted.**

In congregations with Sunday schools of 30 or more regular attendees, the average age distribution of learners is what might be expected. **The vast majority are adults.** Half of all Sunday school attendees are adults 35 year-old and older (Figure 1). Children and preteens make up the largest percent of age-level classrooms (24%).

Figure 1: Age Level Distribution of Congregations Sunday School Attendees



The FACT 2015 survey finds that, overall, the majority of participants are white, in 76% of congregations, and the majority are of other racial/ethnic groups (American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, Biracial or multiracial group) in 24% of congregations. Examining Sunday school attendance alone, Figure 2 shows a slightly higher percentage of racial/ethnic majority (28%) and a slightly lower percentage of majority white Sunday schools (72%). Racial ethnic congregations are slightly more likely than white congregations to have Sunday schools.

The survey results and Figure 3 suggest why this might be the case. As reported in American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving, majority racial/ethnic congregations have younger memberships; correspondingly, Figure 3 shows that these majority racial/ethnic Sunday schools have a significantly larger percent of children in attendance than do majority white congregations. Conversely, majority white congregations have a disproportionately large percent of senior adult attendees.

Figure 2: Sunday Schools by Majority Racial/Ethnic Group

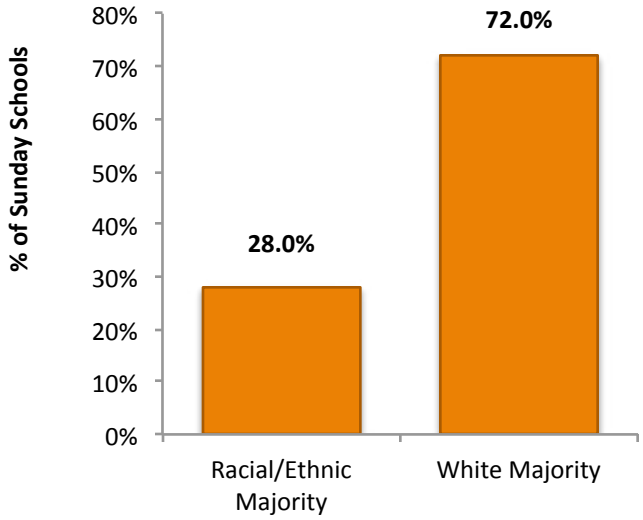
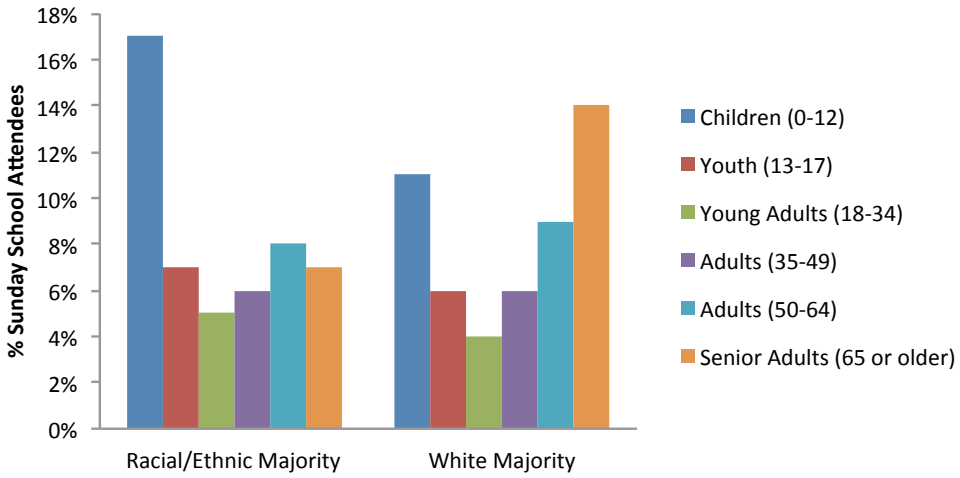


Figure 3 also suggests that congregational leaders should be aware of the age diversity that exists among learners and learning situations. For example, children and preteens are the largest group of constituents among majority racial/ethnic Sunday schools, while seniors, age 65 or older, lead in attendance in majority white congregations. Even though the mid-range age-level groups for both racial/ethnic groups are closer in percentages of attendance, as we will see below, a congregation's location, theological orientation, and other factors are more likely to contribute to educational distinctions. A range of conditions across a variety of situations influence learners' religious development. Their learning expresses a variety of religious experiences across the landscape of congregations.

Figure 3: Sunday School in Majority Racial/Ethnic Congregations' Are Younger



More than half (52%) of congregations with Sunday schools with 30 or more attendees are located in the South region (Figure 4). Less than 20% of the total number of Sunday school attendees actively participate in Sunday schools in any of the other three geographic regions. Almost 4 in 10 (38%) of Sunday school attendees participate in Sunday schools located either in rural areas, open country, or villages and towns with populations less than 10,000 residents (Figure 5)[1]. Yet, the locale with the largest percent of Sunday school attendees is

1 Rounding of percentages may not equal 100.

small cities and towns of 10, 000 to 50,000 residents. Newer suburbs in large cities of 50,000 or more residents have the lowest attendance participation (6%).

Figure 4: The South Leads the Way

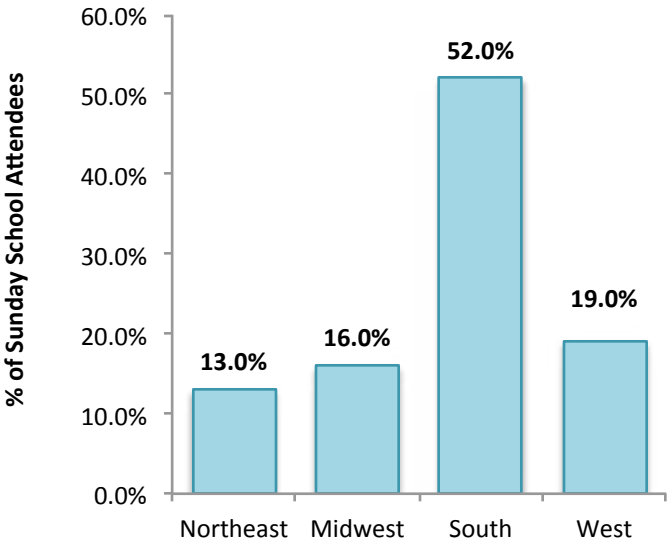
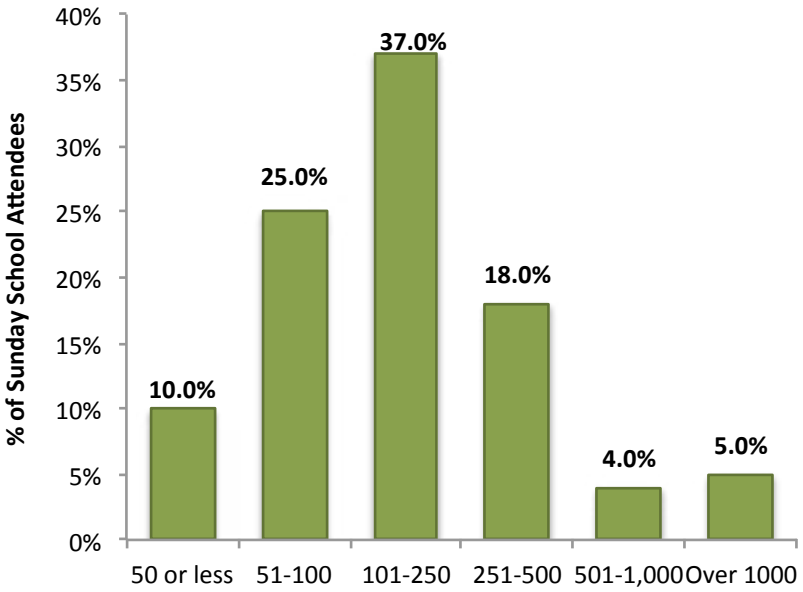


Figure 5: Where Smallness Makes a Positive Difference

Congregational size also makes a difference related to congregations with Sunday schools, but the difference that size makes is surprising (Figure 6). The highest percentage of Sunday school attendees are not found in the largest congregations as measured by average worship attendance. Rather, they are found in congregations whose worship attendance ranged between 101 and 250 attendees (37%).

Figure 6: Where Size Matters



In spite of differences by age-level groups, location, and size of Sunday schools, two characteristics are notable for their consistency. First, Sunday school participants overwhelmingly attend congregations with a conservative theological orientation (Figure 7), hosting almost three-fourths (74%) of Sunday school attendees. What is more, 60 percent (60%) of Sunday schools are part of theologically conservative congregations (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Theologically Conservative Congregations Host More Learners

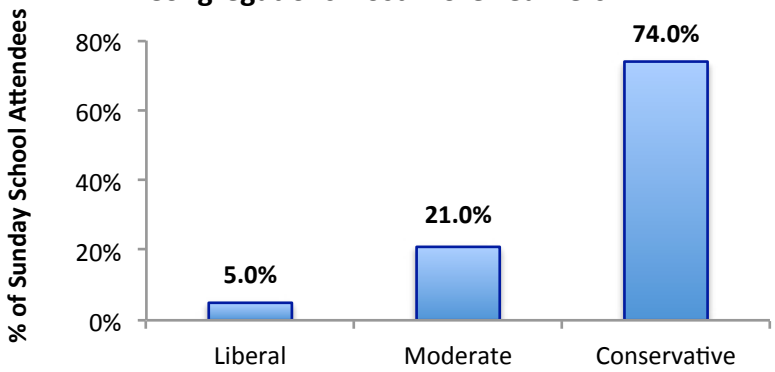
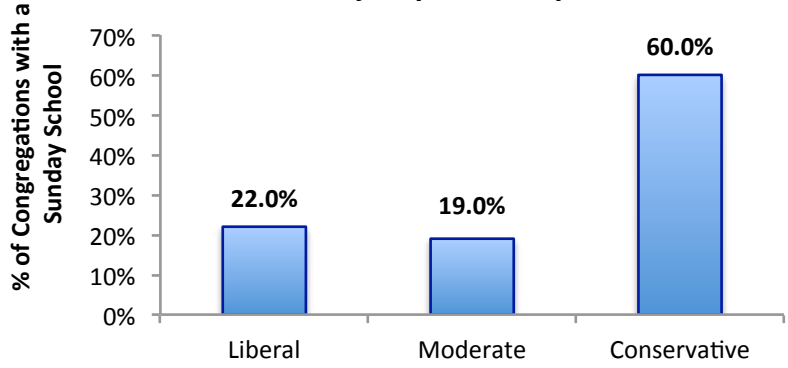


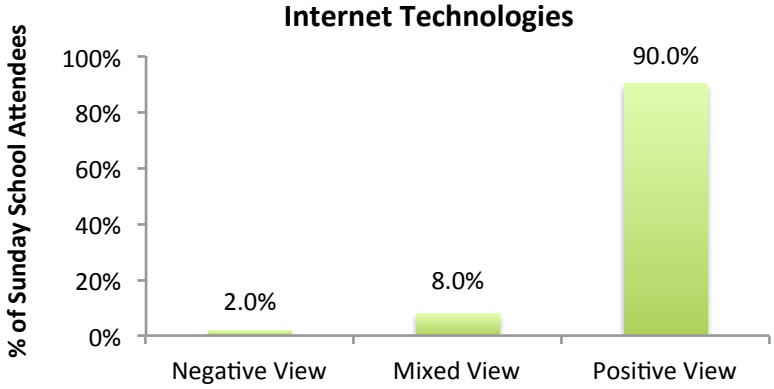
Figure 8: Conservative Congregations Also Have the Majority of Sunday Schools



The second point of consistency is that the vast majority of Sunday school participants attend congregations that are positively open to the use of electronic and Internet technologies as tools for content delivery (90%). Nine in 10 congregations see Internet technologies as quite helpful and could be widely used in Sunday schools.

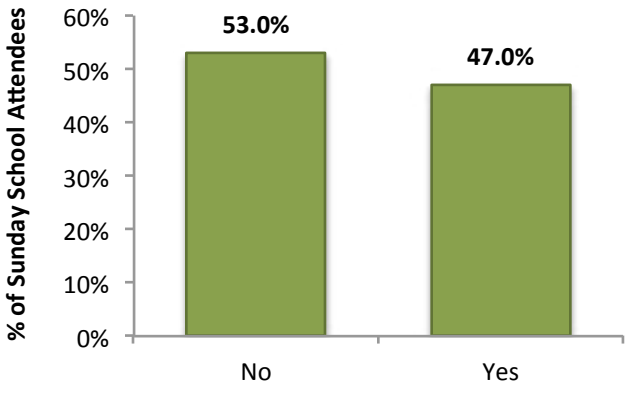
Sunday schools are, in many ways, conserving agents of congregations. They transmit generational memories, promote centuries-old worldviews, and encourage adoption, if not an adaptation, of ancient practices. The openness to electronic and Internet technologies of congregations with Sunday schools can place these beliefs and practices in conversation with contemporary ideas and experiences. It may be beneficial for religious educators to intentionally use Internet technologies to bring these elements into conversation with each other as a pathway to adaptation and change. While the fingertip information that Internet technology makes accessible has its challenges, it may assist educators and learners in examining past beliefs and traditions that can be toxic to interfaith understandings needed for repair of the global community (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Sunday School Attendees Embrace Internet Technologies



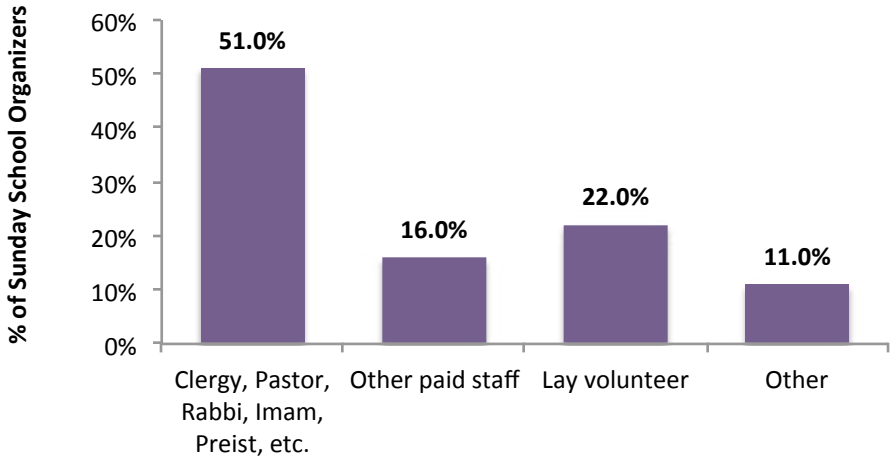
A congregation's relationship with faith communities from other Christian or non-Christian traditions is one area where Sunday schools may provide guidance in view of the changing demographics of American society. While more than 4 of 10 (47%) of Sunday schools attendees are found in congregations that do learn about or engage with other Christian communities or faith traditions, a slight majority of Sunday schools (53%) are not (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Spilt Decision on Learning with Congregations From Other Traditions



Overall, by a 2:1 ratio (51%), clergy, rabbis, imams, and priests outnumber all other categories of the "organizers" of congregational teaching and learning ministries. The next largest group is lay volunteers (22%). Together, more than 70% of congregational educational leaders either have multiple congregational responsibilities or, as lay volunteers, may not have professional training in religious education. As curriculum developers and other educational professionals make a curriculum for these leaders to implement, they should consider the other responsibilities already being attended to by the majority of Sunday school leaders – clergy and lay volunteers.

Figure 11: Pastoral Leaders Still Play Key Role



The characteristics of congregations and their Sunday schools, as we have now seen, interact with the teaching of religious educators and the learning of students in distinct and diverse ways. Such complexity creates a challenging reality for effectively structuring and resourcing the processes and practice of religious education.

Section 2: Congregations' Priorities Matter

Six religious education objectives, adapted from the 1990 Search Institute study on "Effective Christian Education," were investigated as part of 2015 Faith Communities Today study. The six objectives included:

1. To nurture belief and trust in Jesus Christ (asked only of congregations of a Christian tradition)
2. To acquire knowledge of Scripture (sacred text of any religious tradition)
3. To teach about love and justice toward others
4. To relate one's faith, beliefs, and practices to each age-level
5. To engage members in nurture and fellowship
6. To inspire members to express their faith in life

The six educational objectives were rated on a five-point priority scale. Congregations were asked to indicate the degree to which each objective was a priority for their congregation's educational ministries. The responses were then collapsed into three categories, "No/Low Priority," "Moderate Priority," and "High/ Highest Priority."

As a whole, these objectives represent beliefs, behaviors, values, and commitments believed to inculcate and express religious faithfulness. We now turn to the extent to which congregations gave priority to these objectives and the relation of their prioritization to other features of congregational vitality. High or highest priority ratings ranged from almost 90 percent (89%) for "inspiring members to express their faith in life" to nearly 7 of 10 (70%) of congregations affirming the priority of "teaching about love and justice toward others," as seen in Table 1.

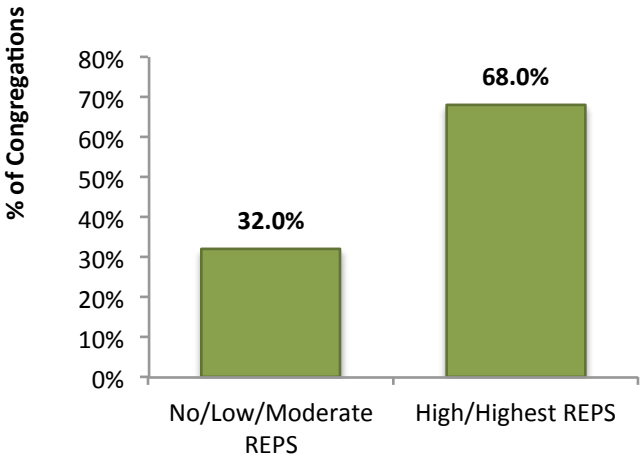
Table 1: Congregations' Priorities of Religious Education Objectives

Religious Education Priority Objectives	Congregations' Rating by High or Highest %
Inspire expressions of faith	89%
Acquire scripture knowledge	84%
Relate faith to each age-level group	83%
If Christian, nuture trust in Jesus Christ	77%
Engage members in nurture and fellowship	76%
Teach about the love and justice towards others	70%

Congregations prioritize and uphold a rich variety of religious education objectives that express their beliefs, behaviors, values, and commitments of faithfulness. Positive alignments among what members believe, what they uphold, and what they teach and learn are powerful means for strengthening the effectiveness of religious bodies.

In the following analysis, we omit the objective specifically related to Christian traditions to see if the remaining five were of importance for religious education ministries across all of the faith traditions participating in the study. The short answer is, yes they were. More than two-thirds of congregations (68%) ranked all five objectives as either a "high priority," or "highest priority" for their congregation's educational ministries (Figure 12). Accordingly, a 5-part

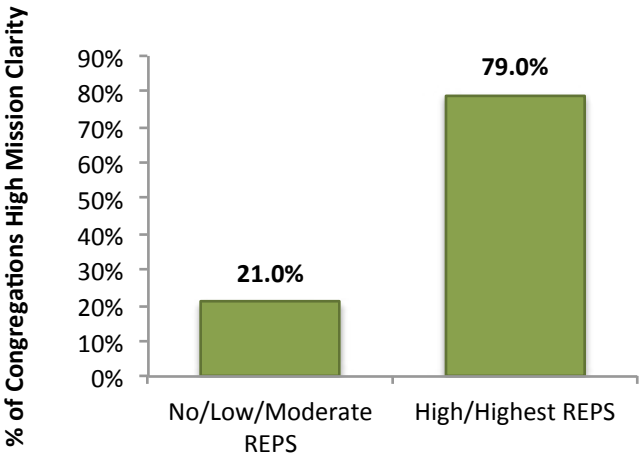
Figure 12: Embracing a Religious Education Priority Scale (REPS)



religious education priority scale was then developed and used as a single measure to explore the relationship between congregational prioritization of educational objectives for Sunday schools and characteristics of vital congregations. A congregation was scored high/highest on the scale if it scored high/highest on all five scale items. As one would hope, this religious education priority scale (**REPS**) is related to decisions and actions for being a vital congregation, as we now elaborate.

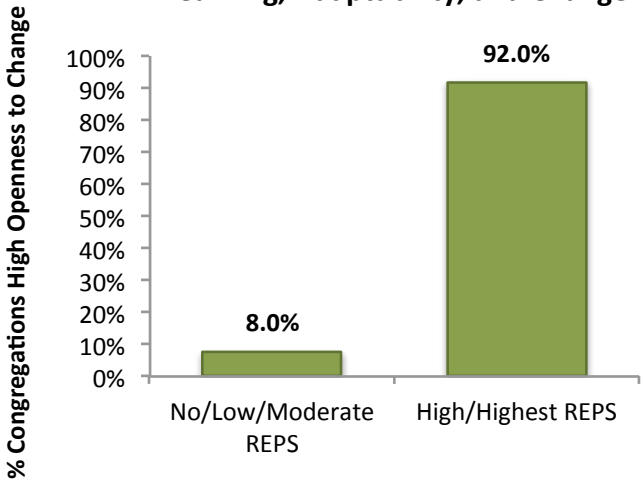
The FACT2015 survey shows that mission is a key driver of congregational vitality. Effective mission helps focus a congregation's goals, unify its efforts, and inspire its members to act. The degree to which congregations are clear about their mission contributes to their thriving. As shown in Figure 13, congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are nearly four times more likely to strongly agree that they have high mission clarity (79%) than those who give **REPS** no, low, or moderate priority (21%).

Figure 13: Congregational Mission Clarity Goes Hand-in-Hand With REPS



Adaptability and willingness to change is another important indicator of congregational vitality. As shown in Figure 14, congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are more than ten times as likely to strongly agree that their congregations are highly willing to change (92%) than those that give **REPS** no, low, or moderate priority (8%). Religious education seems to be a strong catalyst for change.

Figure 14: A Good Fit: Teaching and Learning, Adaptability, and Change



Involvement of new persons in the life of a congregation is essential for its continuation. Congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are almost four times more likely to strongly agree that they are good at incorporating newcomers into their congregations (79%) than those that give the educational priority scale no, low, or moderate priority (21%, Figure 15). The **REPS** score had nearly the identical relationship with a congregation's high spiritual vitality as just seen for incorporating new members and clarity of vision. Most congregations strive to be spiritually vital and alive. Congregations that give high/highest priority to **REPS** were four times more likely (80%) than those that give it no, low, or moderate priority (20%) to be spiritual vital (Figure 16). Can it be surprising that growing in wisdom is related to growing in the spirit?

Figure 15: Come Together, Learn Together

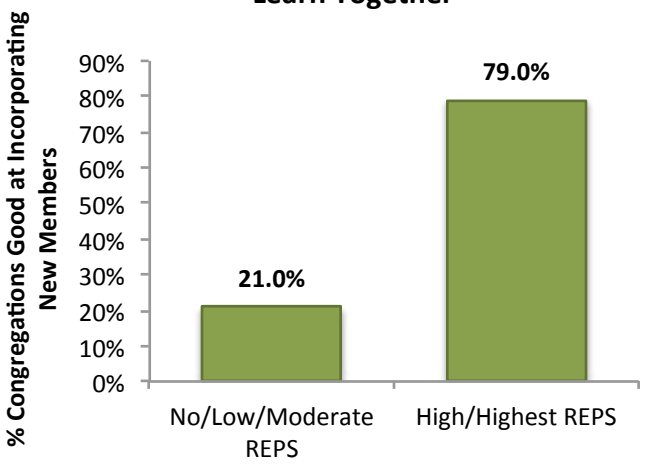


Figure 16: Spiritual Vitality Correlates with High REPS

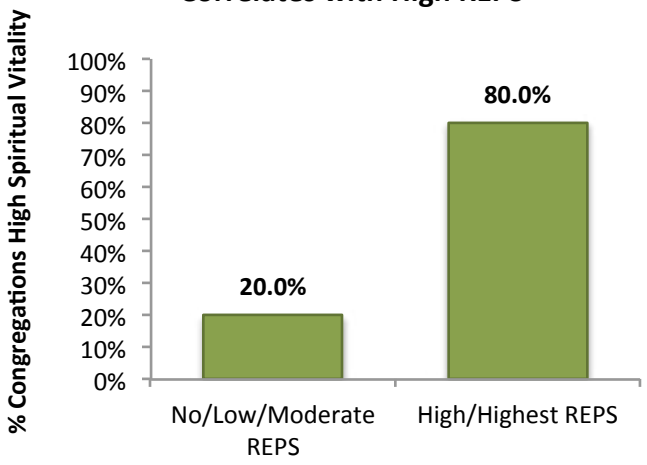
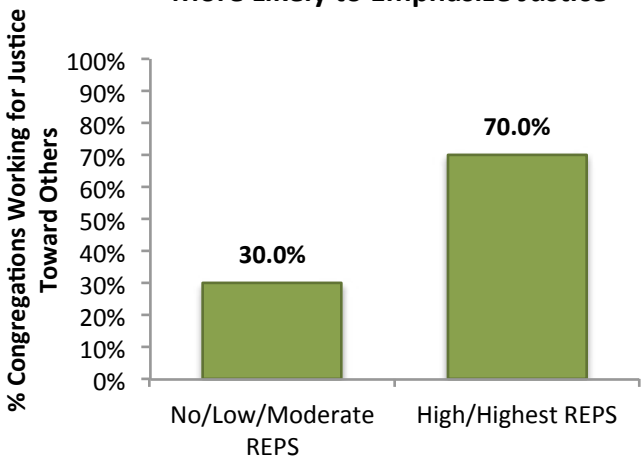


Figure 17: Congregations with High REPS More Likely to Emphasize Justice



All faith traditions advocate some version of "The Golden Rule" – to treat others, as you desire that they treat you. Working for social justice is one expression of this value. Congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are over two times more likely to strongly agree that they are working for social justice (70%) than those that give the **REPS** no, low, or moderate priority (30%, Figure 17). This is significant, but not as strong as for the other drivers of vitality we have examined.

The Faith Communities Today survey also asked congregations about the importance and practice of holding members accountable for active participation and faithful living. Accountability practices help

congregations affirm what they want to be and at the same time assess their current reality. Congregations that recognize the importance and need for accountability practices are better able to manage the tension between vision and current realities than congregations that don't have a system of holding members accountable. Congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are more than three times likely to hold each other accountable for their active participation and faithful living as an important and regular practice (77%) than congregations that give the teaching/learning objective no, low, or moderate priority (23%, Figure 18).

Figure 18: REPS Increases Prospect of Accountability Practices

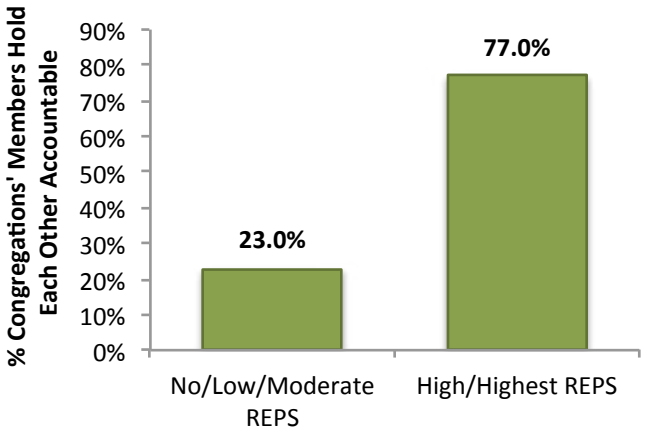
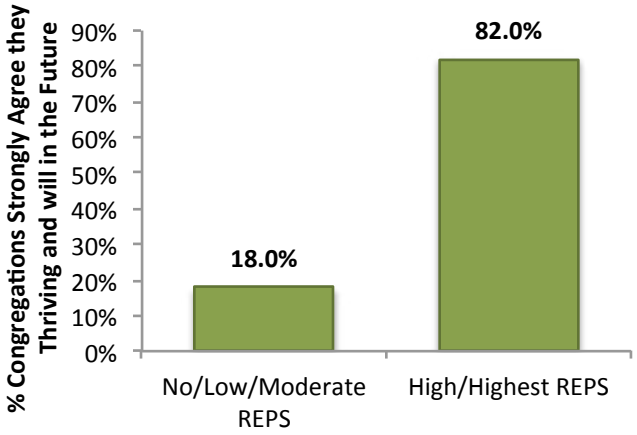


Figure 19: More Favorable Outlook on Their Congregation's Future



Finally, congregations that give **REPS** high/highest priority are more than four times more likely to strongly agree that they are thriving and this thriving is likely to continue into the future (82%) than those that give the scale no, low, or moderate priority (18%, Figure 19).

In a sense, all of the issues we just explored could be considered markers of a vital, thriving congregation – purposefulness, openness, spiritual growth, mission-mindedness, and willingness to own responsibility. The priority of religious education fits hand-in-glove with all of these markers of a thriving congregation.

Section 3: Educating Beyond the Classroom

Congregations were asked to describe the degree of emphasis they placed on Bible, Scripture or theological studies in settings other than Sunday schools. As shown in Figure 20, more than two-thirds (68%) of congregations place either "a lot" of emphasis on teaching and learning beyond the Sunday school hour, or consider it to be a specialty of the congregation.

Almost 8 out of 10 (78%) of congregations that affirm the religious education priority scale also reported a strong emphasis on Bible, Scripture, and theological study beyond the Sunday school settings (Figure 21).

Figure 22 shows virtually the same liberal, moderate/conservative split for emphasizing Bible, Scripture or theology study beyond Sunday school settings. That is almost three times as many congregations hold a conservative as compared to a liberal or moderate theological orientation emphasize Bible, Scripture, and theological study.

Many faith traditions and congregations emphasize faith formation practices in the home as well as in their buildings. Table 2 presents results from several such practices included in the 2015 study in order of congregations' promotion of them.

Figure 20: Lots of Education Beyond Sunday Schools

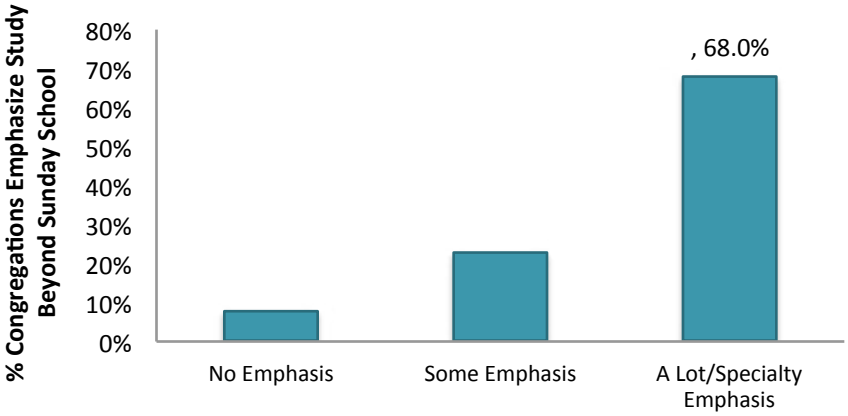


Figure 21: REPS Related to Emphasizing More Study

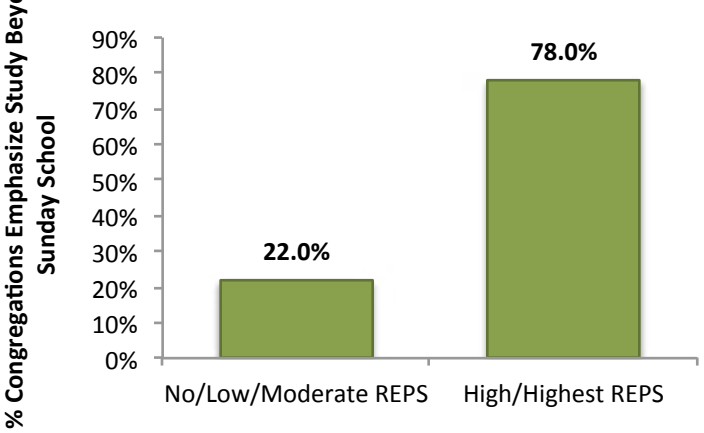


Figure 22: Emphasizing Other Studies and Congregations' Theological Orientation

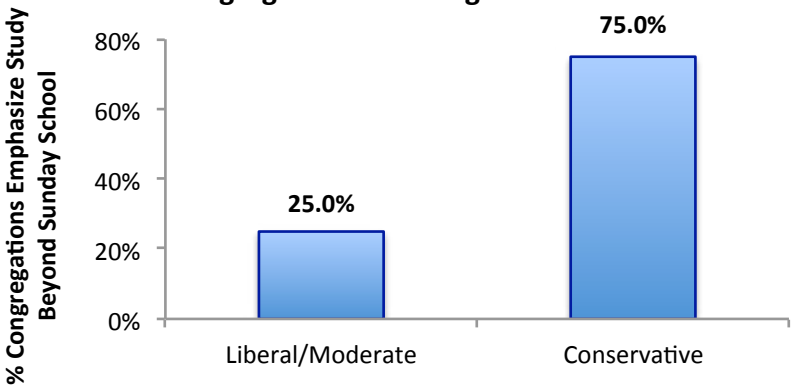


Table 2: Congregations Emphasize Personal and Family Religious Practices

Personal and Family Faith Practice	Percent of Congregations Emphasizing Practive (% Quite a bit of A Lot)
Living one's faith always and everywhere	89%
Personal prayer and other family devotional practices	78%
Conversations on faith, beliefs, values and commitments	64%
Parents and children talk about faith	64%

The degree to which congregations supported the overall religious education priority scale (**REPS**) was not related to congregations' emphasis on personal and family faith formation practices. Living one's faith in all aspects of one's daily life – work, family or other public settings – is perhaps the true mark of discipleship and, as seen in Table 2, is an aspiration of the vast majority of congregations. The family and home are also seen as opportunities for teaching, learning, and faith formation practices by a majority of congregations.

Section 4: What Was Learned, What Congregations Can Do

10 Insights Reached or Affirmed by the Study

1. Congregational ownership of religious education ministries, expressed through a variety of priorities, practices, and emphases, is a viable means of strengthening its life and mission.
2. Sunday schools and their equivalents across faith traditions continue to function as an effective means of educating members about the beliefs, practices, values and commitments of religious faith.
3. There are many matters of Sunday schools that contribute to or inhibit the effectiveness of congregational religious educational ministries, such as attendance, attention to and awareness of learners racial/ethnic similarities and differences, regional and local settings, congregational size, theological orientation, views on Internet technologies, openness to learn and fellowship with persons of other faith traditions, and who has the primary responsibility for an education ministry.
4. Small Sunday schools can be as effective as large ones if congregations commit to focused planning, intentional implementation, and continuous monitoring and evaluation of their educational objectives and activities.
5. While the default of religious education is the transmission of religious information, congregations, as indicated by their prioritization, also yearn for spiritual inspiration in their learning.
6. Priorities matter. Identifying and upholding educational objectives that express the aspirations, beliefs, commitments and values of the congregation is important to its vitality.
7. Congregations understand the importance of teaching, learning, and faith formation practices in settings beyond the Sunday school hour. They distribute and integrate their beliefs, values, and commitments in a variety of educational contexts and through an emphasis on formational opportunities in personal and family settings.
8. Pastoral leadership continues to be a major part of religious educational ministries.
9. While congregations have begun to learn about and to fellowship with other Christians and faith traditions, there is a lot of room for further engagement to enhance understandings and foster better relationships.
10. There is a readiness on the part of learners to the use and application of Internet technology in the congregations' delivery of its educational ministries.

8 Action Steps

1. Encourage and support the spiritual growth of those responsible for organizing the educational ministries of the congregation as well as individual members who you desire to teach.
2. Leverage pastoral leadership to identify, discuss, prioritize and promote with congregants the educational objectives of the congregation for all its educational ministries.
3. Be intentional about identifying, recruiting, training and providing ongoing support of the congregation's primary educational organizer, if not the pastoral leader, as well as those selected to teach various age-level groups in the variety of settings.
4. Remember that half of all Sunday schools have 40 or fewer regular attendees. Keep the structure simple, the planning practical, and support of teachers and leaders constant and relevant.
5. Be aware of and informed by your congregation's ministry context and the backgrounds and viewpoints of learners.
6. Work to establish and maintain a critical mass of learners and educational leaders. Our study shows the significant difference 30 regular Sunday school attendees can contribute to the life and vitality of a congregation.
7. As you consider the teaching ministries of congregations, simultaneously keep before you the task of transmitting the traditions of generations past and the prophetic demand to assess, critique, and transcend those traditions as time, situations and the Spirit urges.
8. Celebrate that learning, faith formation and development happen, not only through formal instruction but also across the dynamic interplay congregations take up as they prioritize, emphasize and live their faith in all aspects of life.

The Faith Communities Today Surveys

The Faith Communities Today national surveys of American congregations are aggregations of several national sample surveys conducted by denominations and faith traditions that are members of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP—see below). These are supplemented by a random, national "church list" sample of non-participating member congregations and non-member congregations. The aggregated national sample includes all faith groups that have congregations in the United States. The decadal 2000 and 2010 surveys include surveys from all CCSP partners, plus the non-partners sample, in each case totaling over 10,000 responding congregations. The 2005, 2008 and 2015 surveys have fewer partner-contributed surveys, and therefore smaller numbers of responding congregations—884 responding congregations in 2005, 2,527 congregations in 2008 and 4,436 in 2015.

The surveys in any given year are combined in such a way that, through the use of statistical weights, each partner denomination and faith group, and each non-partner cluster of congregations are represented in the data set proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States. The 2005 through 2015 survey data is further weighted to best estimates of national parameters for denominational family and census region, thereby improving the data's representation as true national samples of American congregations.

CCSP partners develop a common questionnaire for each survey, ranging from 150 to 200 questions. The questionnaires contain about an equal mix of continuing trend questions and items unique to a particular survey. The surveys are typically conducted by mail and/or online, although in a few instances are supplemented by telephone interviews. Questionnaires are completed by a key informant reporting on his or her congregation. The key informant is typically a congregation's senior clergy leader. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/

FACT2015 includes surveys from:

- Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Megachurches
- Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod
- National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is of the U.S.
- Presbyterian Church, USA
- Random "Church Lists" Supplement provided by FaithStreet
- Seventh-day Adventist
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church

The aggregated dataset is double-weighted, as noted above. First it is weighted proportionate to the national representation of contributing denominations/groups. It is then weighted to represent denominational family by census region parameters attained from a combination of the National Congregations surveys and the 2010 U.S. Religious Census.

The Faith Communities Today Project

The FACT series of national surveys of American Congregations is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. CCSP is a multifaith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The primary purposes of CCSP are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of American congregations. More information about CCSP, its partners, its publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to its monthly newsletter is available at: http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/

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