What do joyful worship, clear purpose, multiple weekend services, and plans for growth have in common? To find out, keep reading; but here’s a hint—they are among those aspects of congregational life that deserve careful attention when thinking about the challenges of numerical growth. Indeed, what follows is a quick and initial survey of things to consider as you prepare for a more formal and thorough examination. We begin by highlighting the findings from the latest research. Then we move to a few questions and conceptual distinctions to help frame your reflection; followed by an outline of possible steps to follow and resources to use as a congregational taskforce or committee moves deeper into a study and strategizing process.

The FACTs On Growth

In 2000, the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership conducted the largest interfaith study of congregations ever undertaken. Published as Faith Communities Today 2000¹, the project discovered many interesting aspects of congregational growth.

- Congregations grow in locations where they find like-minded people. New suburban communities especially are favorable to growth of faith communities, where religious participation is supported by family composition, higher educational levels and income, available teenagers and young adults, and a higher percentage of male participants. It is hardly surprising that location and related demographic factors are important. What may be surprising is that they are less important today than 20 years ago, and that many other aspects of a congregation’s ministry and intentionality are more important.

- Growing congregations reflect a combination of factors that include denominational loyalty, congregational vitality, confidence in the future, and serving as a moral beacon to the community.

¹ See http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/index.html
• A clear sense of mission and a crisp organizational style have a powerful, positive influence on the capacity of congregations to attract and sustain new members. Add to this an emphasis on discipline and personal relationship, as well the bonding of members into a group.

• Uplifting joyful worship and spiritual nurture make a genuine contribution to congregational growth in every denominational group. Protestant groups that have emphasized contemporary worship, rather than traditional forms, show a dramatic increase in their appeal to new members.

• Contrary to some published experts, congregations with a strong commitment to social justice and with direct participation in community outreach ministries are more likely to be growing than other congregations. This pattern of social involvement contributing to congregational growth is true across all denominational groups.

• Of the ten promotional programs listed in the FACT2005 survey, none are more than marginally effective for growth. However, participation in promotional programs often impacts congregational vitality more than growth. For example, the use of several promotional programs—radio advertising, evangelistic campaigns, personal witness, revivals and big events—is directly associated with congregations reporting high vitality.

Source: FACTs On Growth. FACT2005 Data.
During 2005, Faith Communities Today again commissioned a survey of congregations. FACT2005 confirmed the findings of FACT2000 and, in addition, found that:

- The more weekend worship services a congregation has, the more likely it is to be a growing congregation.
- The more a congregation has a plan for growth, the more participants are involved in recruiting new members, and the more ways of contacting visitors a congregation employs the greater the growth.
- Having a congregational website is strongly related to growth.
- The younger the average age of congregational participants, the better the growth.
- Newer congregations are more likely to be growing than older congregations.
- Even though congregations can grow in every type of location, congregations in newer suburbs are more likely to be growing than congregations in other locations. Perhaps surprisingly, “downtown” locations were the next most promising.

2005 findings should be catalysts for growth?
Getting Started on Your Numbers

There are some universal ways in which congregations grow that may seem self-evident, but looked at individually they can help focus your thinking.

Congregations grow by:

- **Births**—even if children are not “counted” as members, they are more likely to become members or participants than most other people. On the other side of the equation, deaths diminish a congregation’s size.

- **Transfers in**—members who come into a congregation from the same or similar faith group. Of course, transfers out have the opposite effect as do people who move away and no longer participate.

- **Conversion**—members who have a radical change of heart from no religious affiliation to a new birth of faith. These numbers are diminished by people who simply drop out.

- **Immigration**—some congregations grow because new immigrants join with them or because they start either a new worship experience or an entirely new congregation for these new arrivals.

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U.S. Congregations Project

The U.S. Congregation project surveyed worship attenders in a national sample of congregations. The final results highlighted important findings for congregations that want to grow. Check out these “Myths and Facts about Evangelism and Church Growth” at

[www.uscongregations.org/growth.htm](http://www.uscongregations.org/growth.htm)

and

[www.uscongregations.org/what-growing-churches-do.htm](http://www.uscongregations.org/what-growing-churches-do.htm)

These websites will also tell you how you can use the U.S. Congregational Life questionnaire with your members.

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Congregational Graph

*It is often useful to go back five years or even ten years in a congregation’s history and tally the gains and losses according to the above categories. What does that show about your congregation? What can you learn from that?*

After you construct a simple graph, look up

[http://home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/analysis.htm](http://home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/analysis.htm)

as well as

[http://home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/unite.htm](http://home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/unite.htm)

and ponder the questions asked there.
A Critical Distinction

Before thinking about specific programs or emphases that may help your congregation to grow, take a step back and consider that in most cases, two things must be examined: the external factors of the “world” around the congregation, and the internal institutional factors of the congregation itself.

- External factors include such things as location, demographics, ethnicity, language, economic conditions, receptivity to religion, and so on.
- Internal institutional factors include the theological tradition, facilities, age and ageing of the congregation, the readiness of leadership to set and pursue vision and purpose, a willingness to live with change, the capacity to start new activities, and openness to new people.

The interplay between external and internal factors can be a delicate dance and call for considerable creativity and risk. Happily, analysis of FACT2000 shows that in spite of unfavorable external factors, congregations can grow especially if they are characterized by high intentionality, regular use of contemporary worship, and a strong emphasis on personal and family spiritual practices. At the same time, the data show that an absence of serious conflict is a pre-condition of growth.

Another critical interplay to consider is that between numerical growth in membership and participation, and growth in other critical dimensions of congregational vitality such as spirituality, commitment, discipleship, service, and financial giving. All are important! In fact all are typically interrelated in a spiral of mutually building ascent (or descent). The challenge is deciding the strategic priority among them given your congregation’s theology and situation.

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2 Population information is available at http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en. A commercial firm for churches is at www.perceptnet.com/pacific/start.asp. For an example of how some national faith groups help their congregations, see http://map.nazarene.org/
3 See an article by Rick Warren on this topic at www.pastors.com/RWMT/?id=253&artid=93022&expand=1
4 For an in-depth analysis of these and other matters, see an article by David Roozen at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozrn_article5.html
5 John Jackson has published a booklet that describes what has come to be known as the “200 barrier.” Download a free copy of his booklet, Development Barriers to Church Growth at http://pastorpreneur.typepad.com/pastorpreneur/2006/04/breaking_growth.html
6 www.leadnet.org/LC_ExternallyFocusedChurches.asp
The Bottom Line

When it comes to growing a congregation there is no single “bottom line” or magic bullet that applies to all situations and circumstances. More than ever, growth requires a strategic understanding of and complex negotiation between a congregation’s internal life and its external environment. No one formula fits all. Congregational growth may come easy for a few, but for most it is hard work that requires excellent leadership, creativity, willingness to change, go beyond your comfort zone and fail, conflict management skills, passion and compassion for people, and, yes, the capacity to laugh at yourself occasionally.

Still, there are some things that are useful to name:

• **Learn to ask hard questions.** Congregational leaders often find themselves in a promotional mode that sees success and vitality but overlooks challenges. Some of the FACT research reflects this promotional mode. Instead, also adopt a diagnostic attitude that is not afraid to ask questions about participant attrition, effective programming, spiritual vitality, participant retention and similar areas.

• **Be purposeful.** Congregations rarely grow unless there is vision and purpose that is held not only by the leadership, but also by the membership. Do not be afraid to set goals and do frequent evaluations.

• **New groups for new people.** Instead of expecting new people to join with existing groups, start new groups that meet people’s needs. This may involve educational classes, youth groups, small groups, and support groups. It may even involve starting a new weekend worship experience, or a second location, or an entirely new congregation.

• **Take a hard look at your weekend worship.** Such elements as a warm welcome, joyfulness, laughter, informality, and contemporary music can help many visitors to return for subsequent visits. And remember that no matter how attractive your worship time is, people are not likely to come back if the sermon, message, homily—whatever it is called in your tradition—does not engage them and capture their attention.

• **Your members are your best promoters.** Every congregation will want at least one and, depending on your capacity, several activities that focus on the needs of people not now in your congregation. But the single best and most effective way to bring in new people is to have your participants invite them and bring them. Reward your participants by never embarrassing the guests they bring and giving them an experience they will want to return to.

How to Use This Insights With Your Congregation

• **Appoint a task force to examine the future of the congregation**—include both younger and older people as well as long-time and newer participants. Let the congregation know what the task force mandate is.

• **Systematically move through this resource,** including some of the materials in the footnotes and web links. Keep asking what is appropriate for your situation and should be explored further. Keep a list of all possible emphases, changes, and additions and toward the end of your meetings, prioritize this list.

• **Issue a preliminary report with your ideas and recommendations and hold “hearings” or congregational meetings for discussion.** See some key leaders one on one and discuss your report with them.
• Finalize your report to the congregation and its governing board. A few key recommendations is better than a long list of ideas. Include implementation steps and recommended completion dates. Try to build in a review process.

• Continue to deepen your understanding of congregational growth and vitality by becoming familiar with some of the following resources:

1. A listing of the contemporary literature on growth is found here (www.allbookstores.com/Religion/Christianity/Church_Administration/Church_Growth.html) and here (www.congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84 and here http://congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84&SCN=178)

2. An essential resource for Jewish congregations: www.synagogue3000.org/

3. For Roman Catholic research and resources, consult http://cara.georgetown.edu/

4. Information on the growth of mosques based on FACT2000 is found here (www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/index.html)

5. Resources for rural congregations: (www.congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84&SCN=107)

6. There are numerous outreach/evangelism type programs such as servant evangelism, natural church growth, and Alpha. Check with other local faith groups like yours and see what outreach emphases are working for them.

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**A Few Concluding Observations**

In conclusion, here are some generalizations that may help you put your own congregation in context:

• It is well known but worth repeating that the mainline or oldline Protestant denominations have been declining in overall membership since the late 1960s. The decline moderated somewhat in the late 1970s and 1980s, but especially in the last decade has accelerated again. More interesting, from the perspective of growth is that a near majority of congregations have a stable to growing membership, with a quarter or so showing significant growth.7

• Growth continues within most of the larger evangelical Protestant denominations, but overall this growth has been slowing ever since the mid-1980s. Holiness, Pentecostal, and independent groups tend to be the most vital streams within American evangelicalism today.

• The U.S.A. has seen a tremendous increase in the number of non-Christian worshipers. According to Diana Eck, “The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world.”8

• The American Religious Survey Identification Survey 2001 found that, “One of the most striking 1990-2001 comparisons is the more than doubling of the adult population identifying with no religion, from 14.3 million (8 per cent) in 1990 to the current 29.4 million (14.1 per cent).” The same study found that nearly 40% of respondents who identified with a religion indicated that they did not belong to a church or similar institution.9

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7 For a summary of this phenomenon, see an evaluation of denominational studies by James, W. Lewis at www.resourcingchristianity.org/downloads/essays/Lewis_essay.pdf
8 For more on this and Diana Eck's book *A New Religious America*, see www.pluralism.org/publications/new_religious_america/index.php
9 See www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/arispdf#search=%22american%20religious%20identification%20survey%22
• Even though there has been a significant increase of mega churches (those with a weekend attendance of at least 2000 people),\textsuperscript{10} America remains a nation of smaller congregations whose weekend attendance numbers less than 100.\textsuperscript{11}

• The largest faith group in America is the Roman Catholic Church. Research indicates that approximately one-third of 60 million Roman Catholic members attend mass every week.\textsuperscript{12} Roman Catholic numbers continue to grow, largely because of a surge in recent immigration, particularly Hispanic.

\textsuperscript{10} See http://hirt.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTSummary.html
\textsuperscript{11} See, for example, Lyle E. Schaller, \textit{Small Congregation: Big Potential: Ministry in the Small Membership Church}. Abingdon Press, 2003.
\textsuperscript{12} See http://cara.georgetown.edu/AttendPR.pdf