

Q&A Follow Up - Facing the FACTs Webinar

Q: The split into Mega and tiny is seen across society today. It's true in media, in stores, in law firms, in chocolate, etc. Today it's either HUGE or specialized...

A: This is very true. You can check out an article Scott Thumma wrote on the subject at: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/organizationalchangechapter.doc>

Q: From Dave Roozen (the co-founder of the Faith Communities Today Partnership and research project): Here's a hypothesis rather than a question for any of the presenters to comment on and for FACT to possibly test with its COVID studies to help explain why vitality appears to have ticked up but not growth: 1) The pandemic (a crisis) forced the necessity to change which more congregations did and did with less conflict (conflict being an obstacle to change/vitality/growth). 2) Actually, changing leads to more change to and to more openness to change, which leads to an increased feeling of hopefulness, which leads to a higher sense of spiritual vitality (but not necessarily more growth).

A: We suspect that Dave is absolutely correct about both these points! We are noticing the same thing. In our Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations project, we will track about 300 churches for 5 years to see if we can establish this reality with data. Please volunteer your church for this longitudinal study at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/get-involved/congregational-denominational-leaders/>

Q: How are we learning from the growing congregations?

A: We will be doing further analysis of the data to target what variables correlate with growth. While the 2020 FACT report focuses on that somewhat, we plan to follow a large number of spiritually vital and thriving churches with our Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study to learn better from what they are doing.

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Q: I too believe that there is a shift from worship to services. Please give me examples of religious services especially for those over 50+.

Q: Can you direct me to information about growing worship communities for people over 55+? We are targeting this age group and trying to align with successful services, programs and worship.

A: We intend to watch for any transition of focus as we track churches in the coming 5 years. Our 100 case studies scattered around the country that are being undertaken this year should find a number of age targeted services and ministries. One aspect that we have found in the data, was that almost no congregation offers enough explicit programming intentionally targeted for older members especially considering that in the Mainline churches in our sample on average 46% of attendees were aged 65 or older.

Q: Many religious groups are experiencing a decline in those opting for the ministry. Since so many of our faith communities are smaller, what is the future of religion in America when we are faced with insufficient numbers of ordained clergy to meet the need. As a Lutheran serving an Episcopal church, are these pressures leading to a large number of joint or merged churches?

A: See a later answer below, but we are also seeing a significant increase in bi-vocational clergy in the Mainline. This has always been true in more Evangelical traditions and is quite workable. Seminaries need to create more training for this and paths for clergy with dual ministerial roles that allow for a joint appointment with a church and other ministry profession. Also, multiple point charges, networked and multisite congregations, video venues, etc. -- the creative ideas are out there. The challenge is getting existing "stuck" churches to adopt some of these. But now is the time to act.

Q: Any comments on trends for lay leaders vs. ordained ministers? Financial pressures? Supply of clergy - some places short of demand, others it exceeds demands?

A: Too many good questions in one. As full-time ordained leadership positions diminish, congregations need to intentionally create greater lay leadership training and mentoring programs. The largest churches in the country only work because of intentional lay leadership efforts. Also, several of the other items above like bi-vocational, chaplaincy, networking and multi-site combinations.

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Q: Can you recommend examples of great Facebook sites?

A: Sorry, we can't exactly point to a particular one, but our opinion about what a good engaging Facebook page should have includes contact info, service times, a link to your website for more info, and hints at what makes the congregation distinctive. It should also have regular/frequent posts about:

- Sermon content and advertise upcoming sermon series
- Activities and ministries the group is doing with pictures that capture ministry in action
- Spiritual quotes and encouragements
- Images of fellowship and interpersonal engagement that include a diverse range of participants
- Posts that speak to your religious commitments and the mission and vision of your congregation

Hope these help.

Q: The ecosystem of congregations does seem to be dramatically out of sync with which churches people actually attend. What suggestions do you have to help judicatories address these (probably dangerous) imbalances?

A: This sounds like a size imbalance question. It is tough to come up with a solution since our society and social dynamics are partly driving this, but a few suggestions for judicatories: Perhaps encourage more networking between small churches, hold joint events, 4 church youth gatherings, shared clergy, mergers of multiple churches, partnering with local agencies for ministry and service, greater use of the near empty buildings by social service agencies, government, schools, etc. and help churches consider when it is time to close and plan a strategy for doing this intelligently, intentionally and spiritually. Use data to help figure out strategies of closures, mergers, and other partnerships. Create partnerships between large more successful churches and smaller struggling ones, but re-planting, revitalizing them if in a promising location with a few members, strong leadership, etc. There is no "one size fits all" solution with this but there are creative ways to address the issue. Remember that about 30% of churches under 50 attenders are thriving... there is strength at every size but in some locations, there are just too many church buildings for the remaining population.

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Q: What is the potential impact of an increase in community service?

A: Momentous! Congregations need to increase the use of their buildings and property significantly. It is already such that churches support much of the social safety network in the US but there is so much more that could be done. Congregations have a treasure of locations and building that they could share with a needy community if there didn't treat the building as a priceless artifact but instead a tool for ministry. The visual difference and symbolic message of a church building sitting empty 6 days a week compared to open daily with social service activities, community gatherings and other activities is priceless – and of huge benefit to a community.

Q: In New England, the ELCA is dealing with a number of churches that are declining in membership and are faced with closure. The New England Synod is working with congregations that are faced with either closing or merging, either with other ELCA churches or across denominational lines. Could we use hybrid services and programs (in person and on ZOOM or online) now being used during Covid to address this?

A: Yes absolutely. We often say this, but learn from what the most creative congregations are doing. Some churches (especially in New England) must and will close, but others can strategically be merged or turned into multi-point charges, or even video/Zoom venues. Now is the time to be creative. Solutions should not come once the congregations are too weak and on their death bed. They should happen when they need the hospital, not the hospice.

Q: Given recent comments, it seems the breakdown in trust in religious institutions reflects a sense of finding God more clearly outside of the limitations and witness of these institutions.

A: Indeed, this hearkens back to the challenge of changing that narrative by actually changing how churches do business, using the tools they have to get out into the community, and spreading the gospel by every means possible.

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Q: Growing congregations innovated more quickly during the pandemic, found ways to engage with the virtual congregation, and went back live sooner with safety standards. They now count engagement rather than live participation. Growing congregations I see in NYC are engaged with their communities, hands on support for people in congregation and neighborhood, and providing community services including affordable housing or a shopping center in food desert in their urban neighborhood.

A: Well not really a question, but yes and yes! A good comment to end on. Check out our second Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations report on the interesting ways congregations have responded to the current needs:

<https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis/>

We invite you to follow both [Faith Communities Today](#) and Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) for continued research updates.