



Congregations' Largest Sources of Concern & Pride

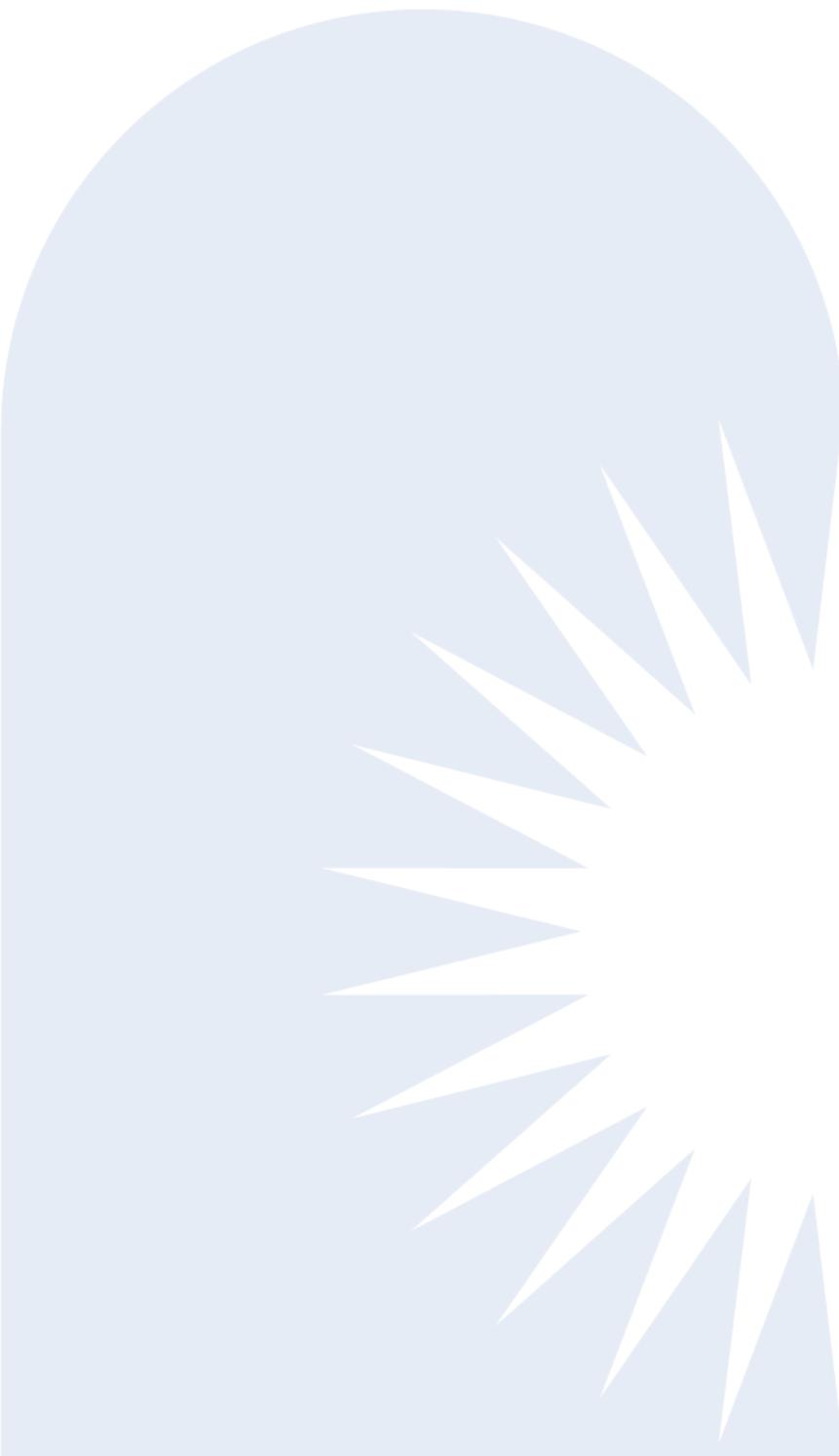
FACT 2020 National Survey of
Congregations

**Faith
Communities
Today**

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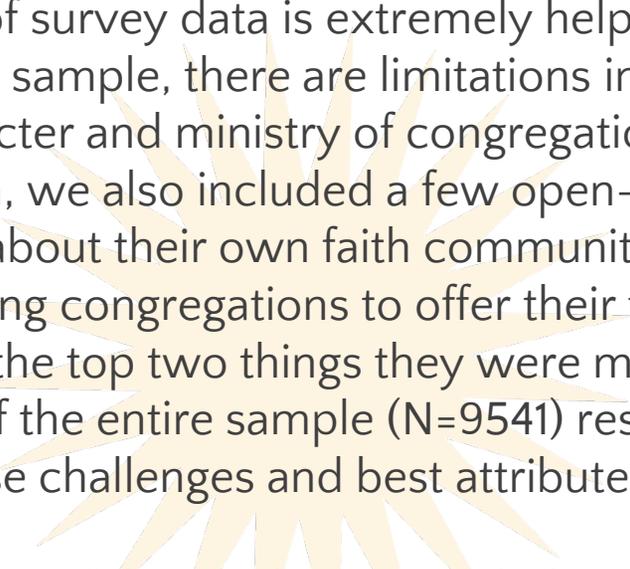
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Note on How the Covid-19 Pandemic Affected the 2020 FACT Survey

The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) national survey of congregations took place as the pandemic arrived in the United States. As such, some congregations responded to the survey before restrictions on public worship and other pandemic-related measures were put into effect; others responded in full lockdown mode. As such, the data here reflects both the sources of concern and pride that were significant before the pandemic as well as those that emerged during it.



With more than 15,000 respondents, the 2020 Faith Communities Today survey of congregations offers a sweeping portrait of the religious life of the United States. While traditional quantitative analysis of survey data is extremely helpful in providing an overall portrait of the ins and outs of the sample, there are limitations in terms of what can be conveyed surrounding the character and ministry of congregational life through tallies around forced choice questions. As such, we also included a few open-ended survey questions, giving the respondents room to tell us about their own faith communities—in their own words. Specifically, we asked participating congregations to offer their top two concerns about the future of their congregation and the top two things they were most proud of about their faith community. Nearly two-thirds of the entire sample (N=9541) responded to these prompts, sharing their thoughts about these challenges and best attributes of their congregations.

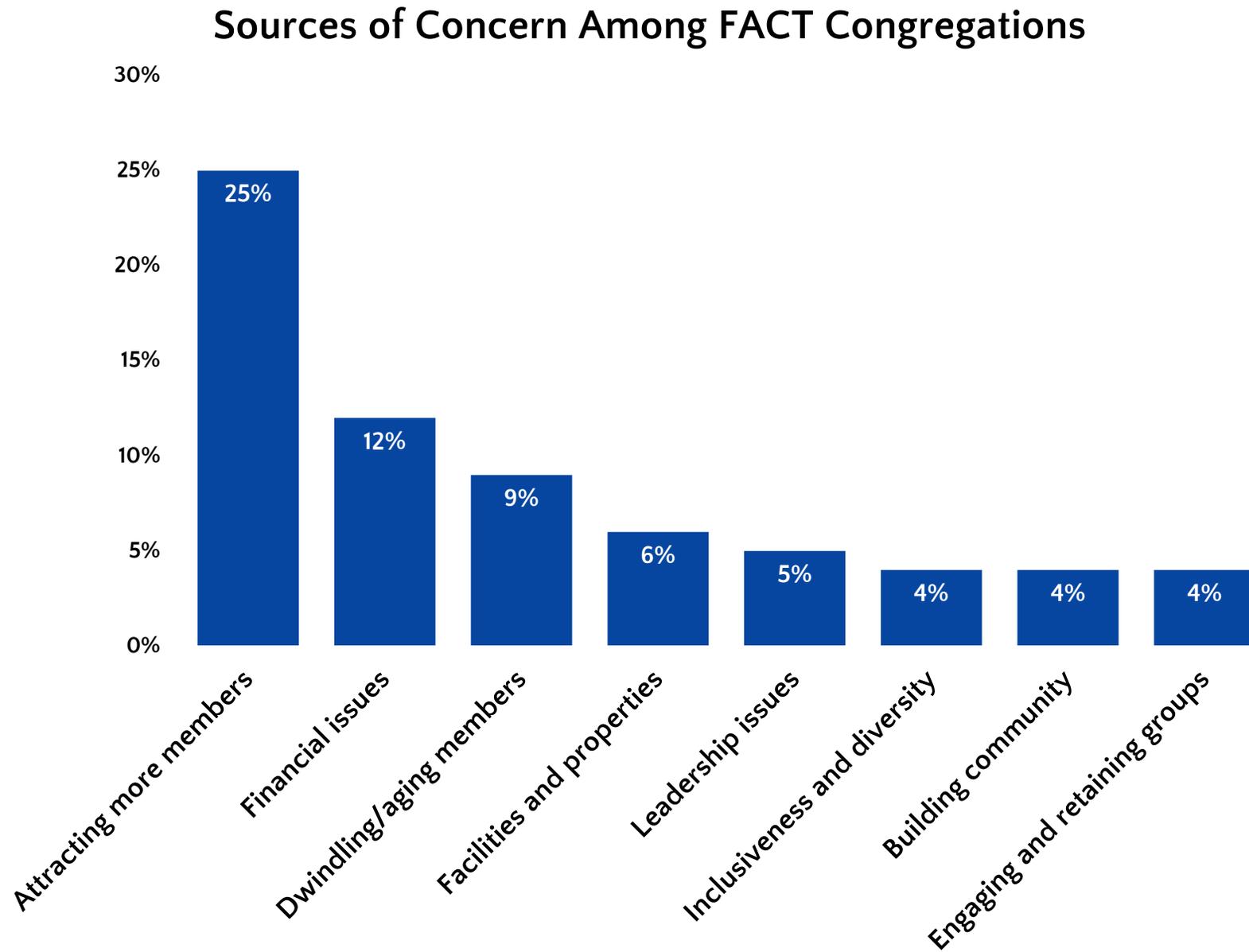
A random sample of 1,500 surveys of those who responded to these open-ended questions was selected for systematic qualitative analysis. In doing so, we uncovered a number of important themes and topics, which greatly add to the richness in terms of the understanding of congregational life. We first present our findings surrounding the most pressing areas of concern among congregations before moving onto the reported sources of pride.

¹ The 2020 Faith Communities Today national survey of congregations took place just prior to and at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, two-thirds of congregations responded to the survey before restrictions on public worship and other pandemic-related measures were put into effect; the remainder responded while in lockdown mode. As such, the data here reflects both the sources of concern and pride that were significant before the pandemic as well as those aspects of congregational life that emerged during it. Further analysis on these pandemic related comments has been done and can be found at

<https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/congregations-adapted-pandemic/>

Congregations' Greatest Sources of Concern

Figure 2: Most Frequent Sources of Concern Among FACT Congregations 2020



Congregations' Greatest Sources of Concern

By far, the most commonly expressed concern across responding congregations deals with the problem of membership and growth (25%). That is, many congregations are concerned about the prospect of gaining new attenders and maintaining their participation. Some respondents articulated this concern very broadly, saying things such as “membership,” “adding new members,” “growing our congregation,” and “participation.” Other respondents also indicated their worries about engaging and growing their membership, albeit a bit more specifically. A respondent wrote, “[we are concerned about] reaching a younger generation that is growing more secular, anti-Christian, anti-American, and socialist.” Likewise, another congregation noted, “[there is a] need for more young people for future viable ministry.”

A related concern that was expressed by 9% of respondents also touched on the nature of attendance and membership. But rather than mentioning growth, this concern highlighted demographic change and decline. Namely, their congregational members tend to be older than the average population. As they inevitably age and pass away, the number of participating members declines. With an underrepresentation of young people in congregations, the natural form of generational replacement will not take place. Simply stated, one congregation noted that their concern was “elderly congregation” and another said, “aging congregation in small town.” Jointly, these concerns speak to the dynamics surrounding the rise of the “Nones.” Not only are young people less likely to currently affiliate with a religious institution themselves, but they are not likely to return to the pews or to raise the next generation with strong religious institutional ties.

Congregations' Greatest Sources of Concern

Another common source of concern stated by respondents revolved around the theme of financial difficulty. Indeed, more than 1 in 10 churches (12%) mentioned monetary issues in their answers. Examples of these issue include: “becoming financially stable after conflict,” “finding additional sources of income,” “reducing debt,” and “funding new and existing ministry.” Further, in many cases, financial concerns were sometimes also related to the two concerns discussed above, regarding membership growth and demographic decline. Notably, one respondent stated their worry about, “The transition from Baby Boomers to Millennials financially,” while another stated, “Financial uncertainty and stewardship education among younger generations.”

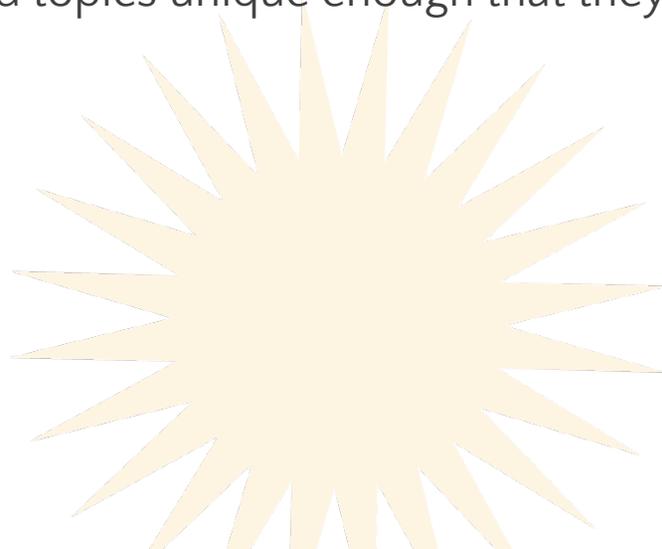
A fourth substantive concern articulated by many congregations—6% in the sample—regarded congregational facilities and properties. Some congregations also mentioned these concern in lieu of the cost associated with maintenance. For instance, one respondent wrote, “Cost of building repairs.” Another noted, “The building is old and needs to be renovated.” On the other hand, some concerns about facilities indicated otherwise positive things for the congregations in question. Multiple respondents indicated that they were “outgrowing” their current space. Examples to this end include the following statements: “*to start building a new facility on the land we purchased*” and “we are growing and we need a bigger building but the cost and process is large.”

Congregations' Greatest Sources of Concern

Five percent of responses referenced leadership issues in the concerns that they raised. Many referenced leadership with regards to the future, such as the following statements: “grooming the youth for masjid leadership,” leadership transitions over the next 5-10 years,” and “growth and new leadership.” Others referenced a lack of current leadership or worries about retaining staff. One respondent wrote that their concerns centered on “retaining our pastor” and another said, “securing and supporting a full-time pastor.”

Of course, the above descriptions are not exhaustive of all the concerns noted by respondents. Other clear themes included concerns about community and unity (4% of congregations), worries about inclusivity and diversity—especially regarding LGBTQIA persons and around race and ethnicity (4%), and concerns about engagement and combating apathy (4%).

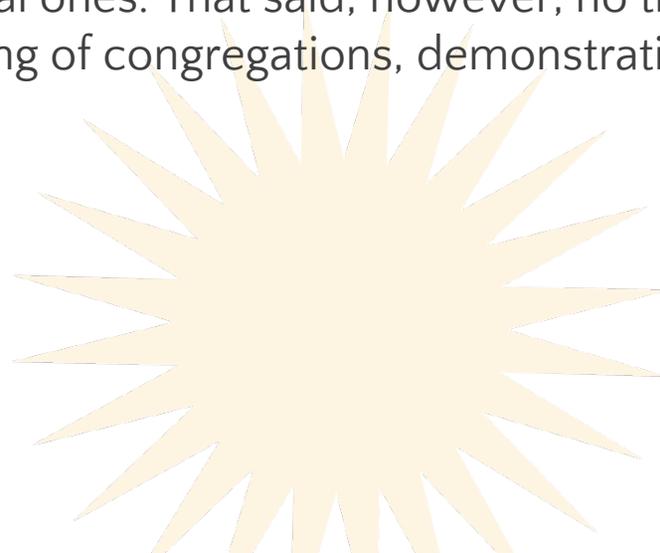
In addition, 3 in 10 mentioned topics unique enough that they were categorized as “other concerns” (31%).



Congregations' Greatest Sources of Pride

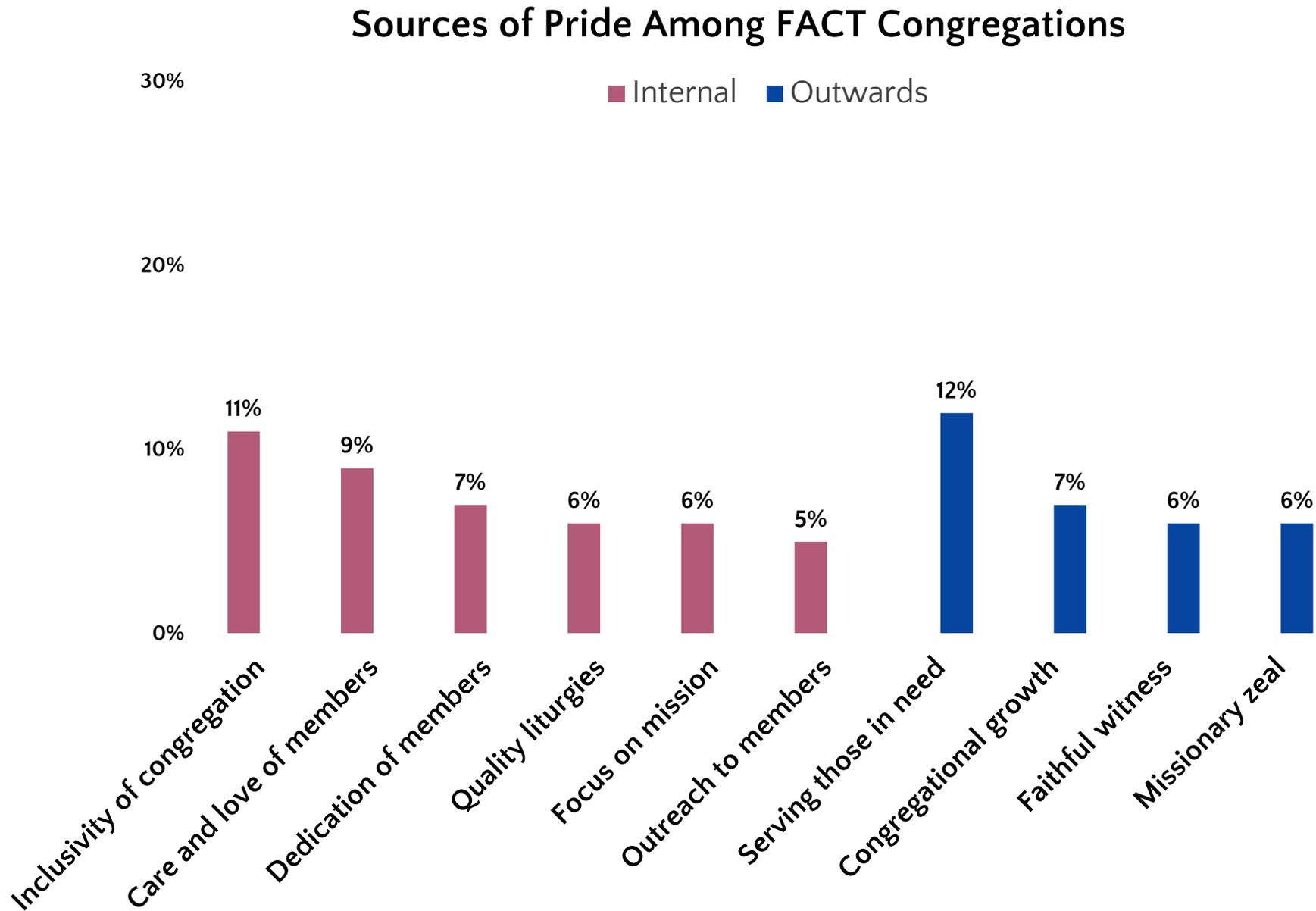
While congregations have many causes for concern, as discussed above, there is also great reason for hope and pride among faith communities. When asked what they were most proud of, congregations had a great deal to report. Indeed, compared to the description of their concerns, descriptions of their positive characteristics were more robust and had greater description. Broadly speaking, we can describe these sources of pride as being internally or externally focused. That is, some topics that congregations were satisfied with reflect the dynamics within the congregation, amongst members while others described gratification with aspects of congregational life that are more outwardly oriented in nature.

Figure 3 displays the Word Cloud from the responses about their sources of pride, with “Communal,” “Mission,” “Welcome” and “Church” especially standing out. Figure 4 follows, presenting the most common internal sources of pride (in maroon) and external sources of pride (in blue). As the graph indicates, internal sources of pride are more common than external ones. That said, however, no theme was mentioned by more than 12% of responding of congregations, demonstrating how varied the sources of pride are.

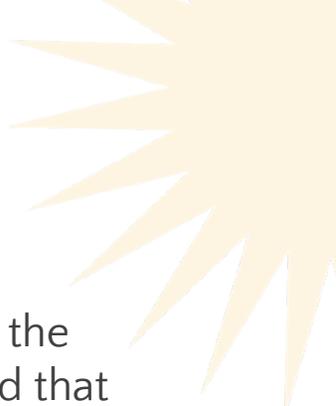


Congregations' Greatest Sources of Pride

Figure 4: Most Frequent Sources of Pride Among FACT Congregations 2020



Congregations' Greatest Sources of Pride



Internal Sources of Pride

The most commonly cited theme for internally focused pride was the inclusivity of the congregation, named by 11% of respondents. That is, these congregations expressed that they are proud of being a congregation that welcomes and celebrates diversity. Words they used to describe this include: “Welcoming and loving,” “Ecumenical,” “love and accept everyone,” and “accepting all regardless of differences.” While these are generalities, some respondents also offered more specific examples in terms of diversity, noting demographic and social identities. For instance, one respondent wrote that they were proud “[that the congregation had become] open and affirming in 2017” while another mentioned “hiring a new co-pastor of color to mainly all white church.”

Nine percent of respondents described congregants’ caring for and loving one another as another source of internal pride. This sense of unity and charity was described in a variety of ways, such as: “loving toward one another,” “deep abiding care,” and “fellowship, warmth, and acceptance come naturally.”

The third most common source of internal pride cited by congregation is the level of dedication of their members (7%). To this end, one respondent explained, “Members share all areas of responsibility - no job is 'too small or insignificant' for anyone.” Another explained, “members remain committed to church regardless of conflicts.”

Other internally focused sources of pride were also noted, including the congregation’s quality of liturgies (6%), focus on their mission (6%), and outreach to members (5%). In addition, the themes of 25% of responses were unique enough to be categorized as “other sources of pride.”

Congregations' Greatest Sources of Pride



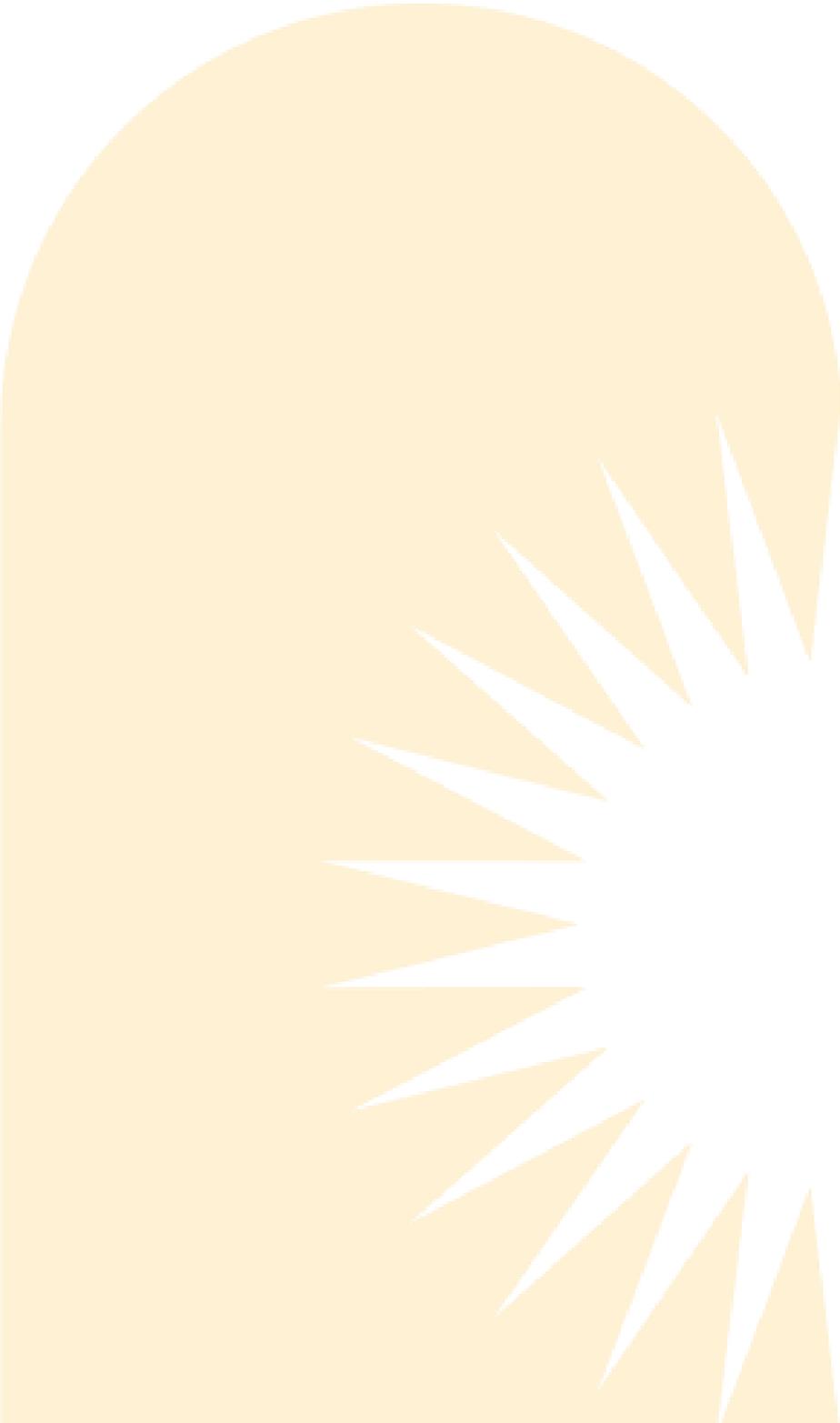
External Sources of Pride

Among the external sources of pride, four themes emerged. First, 12% of participants noted that they were proud of service to the local community and those in need. In their responses, congregations noted both general and specific examples of their outreach. For instance, one participant noted “community Christmas dinner and food baskets” while another referred their “community food bank.” These needs were understood as both material and emotional in nature, such as a respondent who said, “Most of our people are fearless to talk with people with mental illness or who are homeless.”

Another source of pride for 7% congregations was the growth experienced by their congregation, especially in terms of attracting youth and young family members. Indeed, this is notable given that this very demographic was an area of concern for many faith communities (as described above). Respondents explained this outreach with statements such as the following: “Consistent success of the church in terms of new members and salvations/baptisms; online success,” “young families in membership,” and “the percentage of youth and their participation.”

Six percent of congregations cited their faithful witness to the community as a source of pride for the congregation. As one congregation explained, “We serve our community without proselytizing, demonstrating progressive Christian values through actions” while another explained, “Reaching out to share Jesus with the community.”

Additionally, another 6% of congregations were proud of their zeal for missions and charity. Examples of statements to this end include the following: “generosity to missions,” “missional engagement,” and “The most giving to missions and charities.”



Conclusion

By systematically exploring the open-ended survey question responses, we were able to draw out common themes relating to congregations' greatest sources of pride and their most pressing concerns. By and large, religious congregations worried about their aging members and the associated troubles that came along with this—dwindling attendance and financial concerns, among other things. However, congregations also felt great pride in their members. Among the most common sentiments were the beliefs that congregation members were inclusive, loving and caring, and dedicated towards one another and their congregation.

Indeed, it seems that a congregation's most precious resource is its members. Moving forward, congregations should capitalize on the strength and quality of their current members. By demonstrating the care and dedication that members display towards one another and their religious homes, this enthusiasm can grow and attract more and younger persons to these communities.