

The Other Half of Health: Patterns in Declining Churches

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Abstract

Congregational research often considers factors related to their numerical growth and vitality. For example, previous research by Bruce and Woolever (2004) demonstrated that measures based on the input of worshipers in congregations were significant predictors of health in congregations. However, less is known about the least vital congregations—those falling in the 20th percentile or lower on congregational vitality measures. Based on a national random sample of worshipers in 409 congregations in the U.S., this analysis demonstrated that patterns of lay participation and experience differ significantly between Catholic parishes, mainline Protestant churches, and conservative Protestant churches. Catholic parishes score the lowest on congregational vitality, conservative Protestant churches the highest, while mainline Protestant churches' scores fall in between. What is associated with low congregational vitality in each faith group? The model presented here included three sets of factors: (1) congregational demography—the average age and income of worshipers; race and gender of worshipers; (2) congregational characteristics—the size and growth in worship attendance; and (3) institutional measures—conflict in the previous five years and the congregation's financial situation. Logistic regression showed that these three sets of factors are not helpful in distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy Catholic and conservative Protestant congregations. However, several of these factors are significantly associated with unhealthy mainline Protestant congregations. Mainline Protestant congregations with older worshipers, fewer women (i.e., lower than the national average of 60%), stable or declining worship attendance, no conflict, and a poor financial situation were more likely to score in the bottom one-fifth of all mainline congregations. These findings for mainline Protestant churches support previous work that identifies (a) the positive relationship between vitality and some congregational conflict; and (b) the detrimental effect of young worshipers' absence. Further, the results contradict the perception that greater participation by women negatively affects congregational vitality. Finally, the set of factors related to congregational vitality or growth (e.g., size) are not necessarily related to unhealthy congregational life.

Other Congregational Measures

Congregational Demography

The four measures were calculated by aggregating across worshiper responses within each congregation. Average income of worshipers was also aggregated to the congregational level. However, since worshipers reported his or her total household income on a scale from 1 (“less than \$10,000”) to 6 (“\$100,000 or more”), their responses were first recoded to the mid-point of each income range.

Congregational Characteristics

Size: One person in each congregation completed a congregational profile survey and reported the average worship attendance for the current year and each of the last five years. Because the survey was given in April 2001, worship attendance figures for that year were incomplete, and a number of congregations did not report the figure. Congregational size was based on average worship attendance in 2001, if available, or 2000 if not.

Congregational growth in worship attendance: Numerical growth was measured as the percentage of growth or decline in worship attendance between 1996 and 2000 (attendance in 2000 minus attendance in 1996, the difference divided by attendance in 1996) or as a percentage of growth or decline between 1996 and 2001. Some congregations did not report attendance figures for 1996 and/or 2000. In such cases, growth was calculated based on the earliest and latest reported attendance figures. A log transformation of the congregational growth variable was used to correct for skewness and kurtosis.

Institutional Measures

Conflict in previous 5 years: This measure was a discreet variable coded 1 if the key informant indicated there had been conflict in the previous five years serious enough such that a congregational split occurred, members left, or the pastor left. Responses were coded 0 if no such conflict was reported.

Financial situation: This measure was a categorical variable based on key informant responses where 0=financial situation is a serious threat to continued existence, 1=declining financial base, 2=stable financial base, and 3=increasing financial base.

Congregational Vitality Measure

Subscales	Survey Items in the Measure
Growing Spiritually	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Growing in faith through participation in activities of their church 2. Spend time at least a few times a week in private devotional activities 3. Feel their spiritual needs are being met in the congregation 4. Report Bible study and prayer groups as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation 5. Report prayer ministry of the congregation as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation
Meaningful Worship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Always or usually experience God's presence during services 2. Always or usually experience inspiration during services 3. Always or usually experience joy during services 4. Always or usually experience awe during services 5. Rarely experience boredom during services 6. Rarely experience frustration during services 7. Report sermons, preaching, or homilies as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation 8. Report worship services/activities of the congregation help them with everyday living to a great extent
Participating in the Congregation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attend worship services usually every week or more often 2. Involved in one or more small groups (e.g., Sunday school, prayer or Bible study, discussion groups, fellowships) 3. Hold one or more leadership roles in the congregation 4. Often participate in decision-making in the congregation 5. Give 5% or more of their net income to the congregation
Having a Sense of Belonging	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participate more in the activities of the church than 2 years ago 2. Most of closest friends are part of same congregation 3. Have a strong sense of belonging to the church that is growing
Caring for Children and Youth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are satisfied with what is offered for children and youth 2. Report ministry for children or youth as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation 3. Percentage of children and youth (living at home) who worship in same congregation

Focusing on the Community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Involved in social service/advocacy groups through the church 2. Involved in social service/advocacy groups in their community 3. Contribute to charitable community organizations 4. Report wider community care or social justice emphasis as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation 5. Report openness to social diversity as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation 6. Worked with others to try to solve a community problem 7. Voted in the last presidential election
Sharing Faith	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Involved in evangelistic activities in the congregation 2. Feel at ease talking about their faith; seek opportunities to do so 3. Invited to worship in the last year a friend or relative who does not currently attend 4. Report reaching those who do not attend church as one of three most valued aspect of their congregation
Welcoming New Worshipers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Percentage of worshipers who began attending this congregation in the last 5 years
Empowering Leadership	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feel the congregation's leaders encourage them to find and use their gifts and skills to a great extent 2. Feel the minister, pastor, or priest takes into account the ideas of worshipers to a great extent 3. Describe the leadership style of the pastor, minister, or priest as one that inspires people to take action 4. Strongly feel there is a good match between the congregation and the minister, pastor, or priest
Looking to the Future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feel the congregation has a clear vision, goals, or direction for its ministry and mission and they are strongly committed to them 2. Have a sense of excitement about their congregation's future 3. Feel the congregation is currently moving in new directions 4. Feel the congregation is always ready to try something new

Source: C. Woolever and D. Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004)

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Source: The U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org)

Table 1
Mean Scores by Faith Group:
Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant Congregations

	Catholic Parishes (n=100)	Mainline Protestant Churches (n=180)	Conservative Protestant Churches (N=129)	F (df =1/408)	Sig.
Congregational Demography Measures:					
Average age of worshipers	52.51	55.62	51.08	14.22	***
Average income of worshipers	\$43,316	\$48,100	\$37,254	41.19	***
Percent of worshipers who are white	65.54 %	86.47 %	79.75 %	11.49	***
Percent of worshipers who are female	65.02 %	63.98 %	60.67 %	10.48	***
Congregational Characteristics:					
Size of the congregation	716	125	123	72.97	***
Congregational Growth	4.71	4.67	4.68	.23	n.s.
Local Institutional Measures – Key informant:					
Conflict in previous 5 years	8.50 %	35.09 %	32.52 %	6.06	**
Financial situation	2.13	2.34	2.49	1.92	n.s.
Dependent Variable:					
Congregational Vitality	36.44	39.93	49.00	122.88	***

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 2

**Logistic Regression by Faith Group:
Dependent Variable = 20th Percentile or Lower on Congregational Vitality**

	Catholic		Mainline Protestant		Conservative Protestant	
	Logit (Exp (B))	Sig.	Logit (Exp (B))	Sig.	Logit (Exp (B))	Sig.
Congregational Demography Measures:						
Average age of worshipers	.167 (1.181)	n.s.	.144 (1.155)	*	.052 (1.053)	n.s.
Average income of worshipers	.603 (1.828)	n.s.	.564 (1.757)	n.s.	-.171 (.843)	n.s.
Percent of worshipers who are white	.002 (1.002)	n.s.	.003 (1.003)	n.s.	.029 (1.030)	n.s.
Percent of worshipers who are female	-.221 (.801)	n.s.	-.110 (.896)	*	.029 (1.030)	n.s.
Congregational Characteristics:						
Size of the congregation	-.001 (.999)	n.s.	.000 (1.000)	n.s.	.001 (1.001)	n.s.
Log of congregational growth	2.541 (12.698)	n.s.	-4.761 (.009)	**	.255 (1.291)	n.s.
Institutional Measures—Key Informant:						
Conflict in previous 5 years	.700 (2.014)	n.s.	-1.602 (.201)	*	-.551 (.576)	n.s.
Financial situation	-.380 (.684)	n.s.	-2.288 (.102)	***	-.340 (.712)	n.s.
Nagelkerke R ²	.338		.622		.174	
Model Chi-Square (df)	9.483 (8)	n.s.	77.035 (8)	***	18.636 (8)	*
Percent of cases classified correctly	86.3%		87.7%		81.1%	

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001