



Frequently Asked Questions about the *Strengths Report*

What level of analysis was used for the *Strengths Report*?

Most of the information presented in your *Connections Report* and in the first book, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, was based on surveys completed by worshipers (individual-level analyses). That is, we examined the responses of individual worshipers. We discussed who worshipers are, what they are doing in their congregations, how they're involved in the community, and what they see for the future of the congregation.

To prepare the *Strengths Report*, we've aggregated the responses of individual worshipers to the congregational level (congregational-level analyses). That is, responses from all worshipers in each congregation have been combined to allow us to see what they say as a group about the congregation and their experiences there. Here we investigate what makes congregations strong. We also weighted the congregational level data to account for size and non-response biases.

Because of these differences, unweighted worshiper-level figures presented in the your *Connections Report* and in the first book may not match exactly the weighted congregational-level data presented in the *Strengths Report* and in the book, *Beyond the Ordinary*. Most differences should be small.

How were the ten strengths identified?

In your *Connections Report*, we described your congregation and worshipers in four inter-related areas—Spiritual Connections, Inside Connections, Outside Connections, and Identity Connections. The ten strengths in this report flow from those four areas and tap the essential strengths of congregations. (We're indebted to many congregational and denominational leaders, church consultants, and religious researchers for their insights as we identified the strengths). We believe that all congregations possess strengths, and this multi-faceted approach allows congregations to find the areas in which they excel.

How were the questions that make up each strength selected?

We used a systematic method to determine the specific questions that make up each strength. First, we listed all survey questions that were designed to measure each strength. Second, we selected for inclusion in the measure the specific answers to each question that were most important. For example, when using the question about worshipers' private devotions, two answers were chosen because they are most reflective of growth in faith—spending time in private devotional activities either "every day or most days" or "a few times a week." Third, we subjected this pool of questions and specific answers for each strength to statistical analyses that allowed us to determine those combinations that do the best job of measuring that strength. We used Cronbach's coefficient alpha statistic (a measure of the reliability of a scale) to make this determination. Sometimes, questions that we thought would be important in measuring a particular strength turned out to be relatively unimportant and were not used. Cronbach's alpha for each strength is shown below. (Higher scores here indicate more reliable measures.)

Strength	Cronbach's Alpha
Growing Spiritually Index77
Meaningful Worship Index86
Participating in the Congregation Index82
Sense of Belonging Index74
Caring for Young People Index65
Focusing on the Community Index81
Sharing Faith Index90
Welcoming New People	**
Empowering Leadership Index84
Looking to the Future Index.....	.82

**A Cronbach's alpha could not be calculated on Welcoming New People because this index was based on a single survey item (i.e., the percentage of worshipers who began participating in the last five years).

How are overall scores calculated?

The overall score for each strength is calculated as the average (mean) of the questions that comprise that strength. We calculated an overall score for each congregation using the answers of all worshipers who completed surveys there. We also calculated overall scores for congregations in various size groups and in different denominations and faith groups.

Can I compare our scores across strengths?

No. Because the questions that comprise each index use widely different scales, they cannot be compared. That is, just because the average score on the *Growing Spiritually Index* is higher than the average score on the *Meaningful Worship Index* does **not** mean that congregations in general are doing better in the area of spirituality than in the area of worship. It *is* appropriate to compare the scores of different types of congregations on one index—for example, comparing large congregations to small ones on the *Growing Spiritually Index*. Using percentile scores (see below), your congregation can see how its scores on each index compare to the national average for each index.

How did you decide which denomination or faith group to use as a comparison for my congregation?

In addition to worshiper surveys, most congregations also completed a Congregational Profile describing the congregation including its denominational affiliation, if any. Using what your congregation reported, we selected the best comparison group. (You can choose other comparison groups using the online reporting system.)

What is a percentile?

A percentile score describes your congregation's position within a rank-order distribution of all congregations. It indicates the percentage of cases falling below your score. When a pediatrician tells you that your 2-week old infant weighs 10 pounds and 6 ounces and falls in the 92nd percentile for weight, you know that your child weighs more than 92% of all other 2-week old children.

Similarly, your **Strengths Report** shows where your congregation falls in the distribution of all congregations that took the survey on each strength and on each question that is used to measure that strength. Your percentile scores show how your congregation compares to other congregations. If your report shows a percentile score of 85, you know that your congregation scored higher than 85% of all congregations on that strength.

We focus on congregations in the 80th percentile or above on each strength because they go beyond the ordinary. They score above 80% of other congregations on a particular strength and are particularly worthy of our interest. Congregations above the 50th percentile are above average on that strength as well.

How big of a difference is needed to indicate that my congregation is different from the comparison groups?

In general, differences of 3% to 5% are considered statistically significant differences. That means that any difference less than that amount may be due entirely to random variation in the measures.

Can my congregation's scores change?

Yes. Although it is unlikely that your scores will change rapidly, as your congregation changes—for example, adds new worshipers, programs, and staff; loses former members (whether due to death, mobility, or other factors); discontinues ineffective or outdated programs; or experiences a changing financial situation—your scores will change, too. Unless there has been considerable change in your congregation, we don't recommend re-assessing your scores (by retaking the survey) more often than every three to five years.

How quickly does the national picture of American congregations change?

Researchers and other experts agree that congregational change at the national level is much slower than in an individual congregation. The portrait of U.S. congregations overall changes incrementally. Most trends are long-term, lasting for 10 to 20 years, or more. We believe a snapshot of a national random sample of congregations should detect most significant shifts in religious life among worshipers and their congregations. Our assumption is based on studies by other U.S. sociologists (e.g., Mark Chaves, Duke University, www.soc.duke.edu/natcong) and by our research colleagues in Australia—The National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The NCLS has conducted four national surveys of Australian worshipers since 1986. In their numerous publications (see www.ncls.org.au) they carefully document steady but modest change at the national level. When results are compiled for congregations taking the survey in Wave 2 of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, we will be able to assess such change more accurately.