

Fast Growing Presbyterian Churches: What Makes them Different from the Rest

**Deborah A. Bruce
Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

Over 300,000 worshipers in more than 2,000 congregations across America recently participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, the largest survey of worshipers in America ever conducted. These congregations were selected to be representative of congregations and worshipers across the country. Three types of surveys were completed in each participating congregation: (a) an attendee survey completed by all worshipers age 15 and older who attended worship services during the weekend of April 29, 2001; (b) a Congregational Profile describing the congregation's facilities, staff, programs, and worship services, completed by one person in the congregation; and (c) a Leader Survey completed by the pastor, priest, minister, rabbi, or other leader. Together the information collected provides a unique three-dimensional look at religious life in America. (Visit the project Web site www.USCongregations.org for more information.)

To learn more about congregations that have been successful growing, we subsequently invited the 400 fastest-growing churches within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to take part in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. To identify these churches, we examined the percentage change in average worship attendance in each congregation over the previous five-year period. Congregations with missing or inaccurate data were excluded. (On average, these congregations reported 42% growth in the previous five years.) Of those invited to participate, 104 agreed to do so and 93 returned completed survey forms after giving the survey in April or May of 2002.

Responses from these growing churches are compared here to those of a random sample of Presbyterian churches that completed the same survey forms in April 2001 (47,431 worshipers in 523 congregations). While the random sample also includes some congregations that experienced growth (50% reported some growth in the previous five years; only 13% grew by at least 40%), for convenience this sample will be referred to here as "other Presbyterian churches."

Compared to worshipers in other PC(USA) congregations, those in fast growing churches are more likely to be less than 65 years of age, employed, married, and well-educated; more likely to have children living at home; and less likely to be retired. They are less likely to be members of the congregation and less likely to believe all religions represent truth.

Compared to other PC(USA) congregations, fast growing ones are larger and younger, have a more positive financial outlook, offer more varieties of small groups and prayer groups, have longer worship services, and use more methods to integrate newcomers.

Compared to pastors of other PC(USA) congregations, those in fast growing ones have served their current congregations longer (but are no more experienced as pastors overall), work more hours per week, are more satisfied with their ministries, have fewer doubts about their ministries, are more conservative politically, and are more likely to describe themselves as "evangelical."

Table 1
Demographic Differences: Worshipers' Responses

	Worshippers in Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Worshippers in Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Gender:			.000
Female.....	59%	62%	
Male.....	41%	38%	
Age:			.000
15-24 years.....	6%	6%	
25-44 years.....	27%	20%	
45-64 years.....	36%	35%	
65 or older.....	30%	40%	
Education:			.000
Not a college graduate.....	35%	42%	
College graduate.....	43%	38%	
Graduate degree.....	22%	20%	
Employment Status (mark all that apply):			
Employed full time, part time, self-employed.....	53%	48%	.000
Retired.....	30%	38%	.000
Marital Status:			.000
Currently married.....	75%	70%	
Not married.....	25%	30%	
Children at home:			.000
Some.....	47%	38%	
None.....	53%	62%	
Race-ethnicity (mark all that apply):			
White.....	96%	97%	ns
Hispanic.....	1%	1%	
Black.....	1%	1%	
Asian.....	1%	1%	
American Indian or Alaska Native.....	1%	1%	
Some other race.....	11%	1%	
Household income:			.000
less than \$25,000.....	14%	21%	
\$24,000 to \$74,999.....	44%	50%	
\$75,000 or above.....	41%	29%	

Table 2
Other Differences: Worshipers' Responses

	Worshippers in Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Worshippers in Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Specific moment of faith commitment:			.000
Yes, one or more moments	29%	23%	
Came to faith gradually	30%	30%	
Had faith for as long as I can remember	36%	42%	
Member of congregation:			.000
No	23%	16%	
In process of joining	3%	2%	
Yes	75%	82%	
All religions are equally good ways of helping ways of helping a person find ultimate truth			.000
Agree	40%	51%	
Neutral or unsure	19%	19%	
Disagree	41%	30%	

Table 3
**Differences Among New People (Attending 5 years or Less)
in Fast Growing and Other PC(USA) Congregations**

	New People in Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	New People in Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Female	58%	60%	.024
Under 45	40%	42%	.041
College degree	56%	52%	.000
Household income \$75,000 or above	43%	32%	.000
Involved in small group	53%	54%	ns
Hold leadership position in congregation	40%	45%	.000
Agree "All religions are equally good"	41%	49%	.000

Table 4
Differences on Ten Congregational Strengths Calculated Using Worshipers' Responses

	# Items in Scale	Coefficient Alpha	Mean Score:		Sign.
			Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches	
1. Growing Spiritually	5	.77	44.12	41.81	.000
2. Meaningful Worship	8	.86	56.53	55.80	.411
3. Participating in the Congregation	5	.82	52.91	56.90	.000
4. Having a Sense of Belonging	3	.74	32.94	30.26	.000
5. Caring for Children and Youth	3	.65	57.37	48.70	.000
6. Focusing on the Community	7	.81	38.52	39.04	.455
7. Sharing Faith	4	.90	22.79	21.78	.096
8. Welcoming New People	1	**	45.89	25.81	.000
9. Empowering Leadership	4	.84	52.98	42.73	.000
10. Looking to the Future	4	.82	43.53	31.69	.000

** Single-item measure

Table 5
Differences in Congregational Characteristics

	Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Size:			
Average weekly worship attendance.....	277	128	.000
Number of regularly participating youth	139	57	.000
Children and youth number participating in church school/religious education classes.....	84	41	.000
Adults number participating in church school/religious education classes	50	29	.001
Seating capacity	324	260	.002
Number of weekly worship services.....	1.9	1.4	.000
Growth in past five years	43%	8%	.000
Age:			
Year founded.....	1922	1885	.000
Financial situation:			
Increasing financial base.....	74%	25%	.000
Essentially stable.....	24%	48%	
Decreasing financial base	2%	25%	
Small groups (mark all that apply):			
Groups that are part of strategy to involve people here	53%	36%	.002
Groups that are part of strategy to involve people in service/mission	31%	13%	.000
None or only groups not central to congregational life.....	42%	64%	.000
Prayer groups (mark all that apply):			
Groups at certain times of year (e.g., Lent)	20%	12%	.025
Groups as part of small group/cell program.....	36%	19%	.000
Groups attached to classes or ministries	40%	23%	.001
Other prayer groups	48%	38%	.045
None or infrequent prayer groups	22%	40%	.000
Methods for integrating new people (mark all that apply):			
Group or course for new members.....	70%	46%	.000
Invitation to join small group.....	67%	44%	.000
Invitation to take on task or role	66%	58%	ns
Follow-up visits by clergy or members.....	41%	46%	ns
Designated people extend hospitality	33%	20%	.005
No planned procedures	3%	18%	.000
Length of largest worship service:			
Up to 1 hour	46%	62%	.005
1 hour or more.....	54%	38%	
Length of sermon in largest worship service:			
Up to 20 minutes.....	71%	83%	ns
More than 20 minutes	29%	17%	
Theological orientation:			
More on the liberal side	10%	13%	ns
Right in the middle	42%	42%	
More on the conservative side	48%	44%	
Political orientation:			
More on the liberal side	11%	9%	ns
Right in the middle	43%	40%	
More on the conservative side	46%	51%	
Use email/internet to communicate with worshipers	86%	57%	.000
Congregation has been involved in starting a new church.....	14%	6%	.008
Congregation is a result of "church planting"	13%	4%	.001

Table 6
Differences in Pastoral Leaders

	Pastors of Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Pastors of Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Pastor's background:			
Years in paid ministry	19.9	20.7	ns
Number of ministry positions held.....	4.4	4.0	ns
Years in current congregation	9.6	7.1	.002
Pastor's work hours per week:			
Total hours	55.6	46.6	.000
Administering the work of the congregation.....	11.5	9.2	.008
Preaching/sermon preparation.....	11.4	10.7	ns
Visiting members/families	5.1	5.2	ns
Attending congregational/committee meetings.....	4.3	3.9	ns
Pastoral counseling/spiritual direction	4.1	3.4	ns
Worship leadership.....	3.8	3.6	ns
Teaching people about the faith	3.5	3.0	ns
Promoting a vision for congregation's future	2.8	3.3	ns
Denominational/interfaith activities.....	2.4	2.9	ns
Training people for ministry and mission	2.2	2.0	ns
Visiting prospective members.....	2.0	2.0	ns
Involvement in community organizations/activities	1.9	2.6	ns
One-on-one time working to convert others	1.0	1.2	ns

Table 7
Differences in Pastoral Perceptions and Opinions

	Pastors of Fast Growing PC(USA) Churches	Pastors of Other PC(USA) Churches	Sign.
Satisfaction:			
“Very satisfied” with effectiveness as pastoral leader.....	62%	43%	.003
“Very satisfied” with current ministry position.....	70%	56%	.022
“Very satisfied” with relations with lay leaders in congregation.....	74%	57%	.007
Doubts about ministry:			
“Never” doubted you are called to the ministry by God	71%	52%	.005
“Very often” or “fairly often” thought of leaving pastoral ministry for other ministry	6%	15%	.015
“Very often” or “fairly often” thought of leaving pastoral ministry for a secular job.....	3%	7%	ns
Stress:			
“Very often” or “fairly often” experience stress as a result of dealing with members	19%	24%	ns
“Very often” or “fairly often” experience stress due to challenges in congregation	68%	44%	.000
Change vs. status quo (pick one):			
I enjoy keeping things stirred up and challenging my lay leaders with new ideas and programs.....	47%	24%	.000
I prefer to keep things functioning smoothly by introducing changes gradually	53%	76%	.039
Innovation vs. tradition (pick one):			
It is essential that congregational leaders should seek to be innovative in such things as worship and music styles	76%	65%	.002
It is essential that leaders keep their congregation focused on the inherited traditions and practices of the church.....	24%	35%	.001
Political orientation:			
Liberal	21%	42%	.002
Moderate.....	46%	36%	
Conservative.....	33%	22%	
Describe the type of Protestant you are:			
Mainline	40%	42%	.001
Evangelical	45%	25%	
Liberal	10%	26%	
Other or none.....	2%	3%	