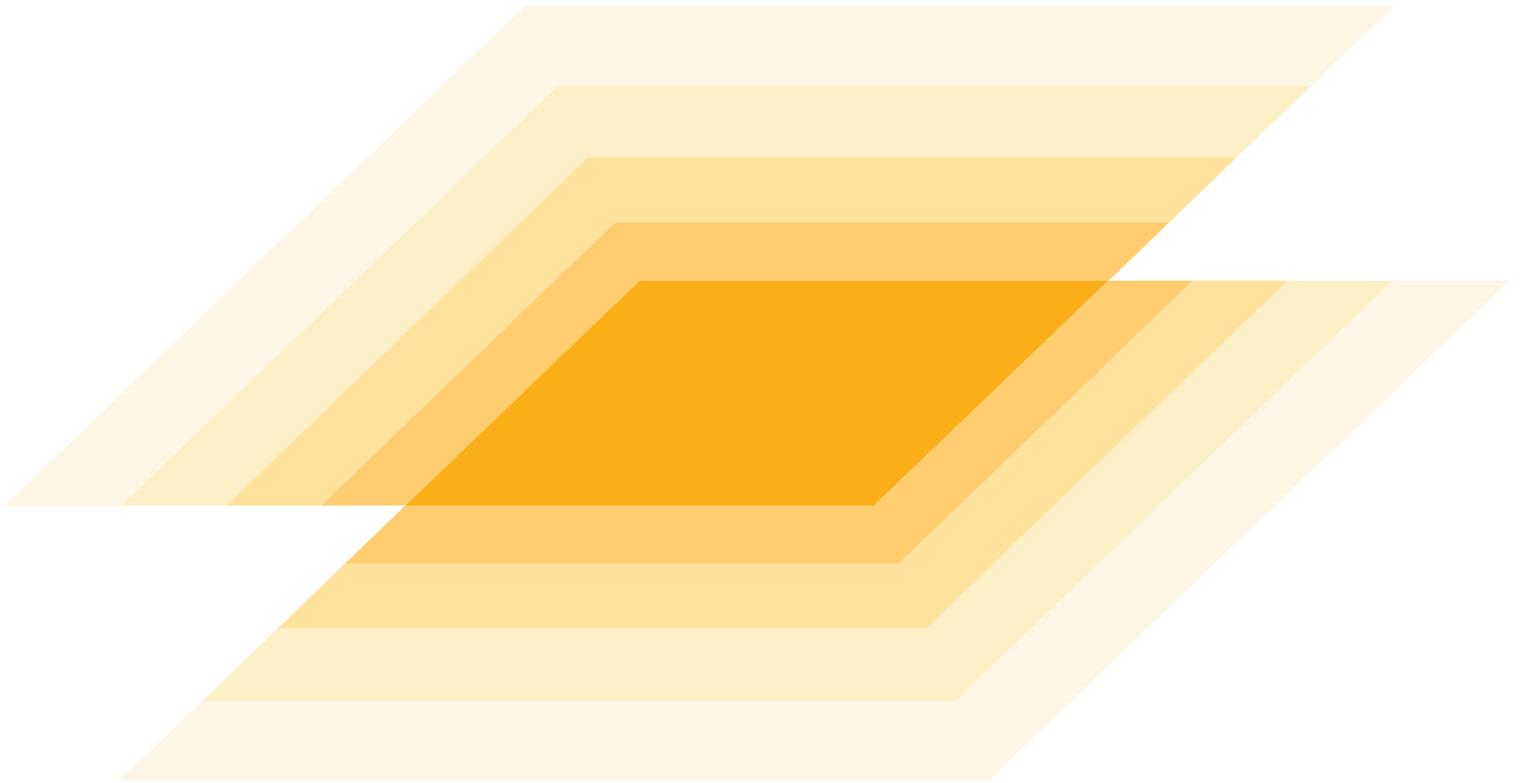


# FACTs on Growth

A new look at the dynamics of growth and decline in American congregations based on the *Faith Communities Today 2005* national survey of congregations



C. Kirk Hadaway

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*A Publication of  
Faith Communities Today  
and CCSP*

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## The *Faith Communities Today* series was launched in 2000 with the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States.

The study of 14,301 local churches, synagogues, parishes, temples and mosques provided a public profile of the organizational backbone of religion in America—congregations—at the beginning of the new millennium. The working coalition of denominations and faith groups that sponsored the statistical portrait was so pleased with the insights and appreciation generated that they formalized their continuing efforts as The Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP), hosted by Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research. Our primary purpose: The development of research-based resources for congregational development. An on-going purpose: Advancing the public's understanding of one of the most pervasive voluntary organizations in the U.S.—our religious congregations.

The long-term goal of CCSP is to conduct a mega-survey like FACT2000 at the turn of every decade, coinciding with the U.S. Census. But just as the Census Bureau conducts regular national surveys between its large-scale decadal enumerations, it is our intent to conduct several, smaller sample-based national surveys of congregations in intervening years. FACT2005, the results of which provide the data for this report, is the first of these national polls. Its goal, as well as that of the FACT series of national surveys more generally, is to track changes in U.S. congregations and plumb the dynamics of selected congregational practices and challenges.

A copy of the FACT2005 questionnaire, designed by the CCSP Research Taskforce, is available on the FACT website ([fact.hartsem.edu](http://fact.hartsem.edu)). It should be consulted for exact question and response category wordings. The survey was administered by the Institute for Social Research at Calvin College. The questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 3000 congregations, and included the option of completing the questionnaire online.

The sample was originally generated by American Church Lists, then reviewed and cleaned by CCSP denominations and faith groups. Random replacements for non-responding congregations were drawn from an American Church Lists shadow sample and from denominational yearbook samples.

Eight hundred and eighty-four usable questionnaires were received. To enhance national representation, responses were weighted to the population parameters for region and faith family provided by Hadaway and Marler [C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, *How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2005) 44(3): 307-322, Table 2], and for size of congregation and rural/city/suburban location found in the FACT2000 national survey of 14,301 congregations ([fact.hartsem.edu/research/index.html](http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/index.html)). Sampling error for such a survey can only be estimated. We estimate it to be +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.

# FACTs on Growth

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Some congregations in America are growing; others are declining. Why do many congregations do well and thrive but others find growth to be elusive?

In seeking answers to this question, we explore the many sources of congregational growth and decline, including:

- The location and demographic makeup of the congregation,
- The congregation's identity,
- The congregation's worship, and
- The congregation's activities (including recruitment).

Most of what you will see here are things that help congregations grow, but in a few cases the emphasis will be on decline—things that declining churches tend to exhibit and growing churches are more likely to avoid.

Growth is measured by change in average weekly attendance from 2000 to 2005 using a 4-category growth/decline variable that ranged from decline, plateau, some growth, to greatest growth. Congregations with the greatest growth scored at the top of a scale that combined percent change in worship attendance from 2000 to 2005 with net change over the same period. Using this growth scale mitigates the problem of small congregations tending to have the greatest percent change in attendance and large congregations tending to have the greatest net change in attendance. In order to be included in the top growth category a congregation must have experienced both substantial net and percentage growth from 2000 to 2005.

The charts below report the percentage of congregations with greatest growth within response categories on various survey questions. For instance, when congregational leaders are asked, "Is your congregation willing to change to meet new challenges?" among those congregations that say they "strongly agree," 46% have experienced the highest level of attendance growth. Among those saying "somewhat agree," 37% are growing strongly. And finally, among congregations who say they "strongly disagree," "disagree" or are "unsure" about whether they are willing to change to meet new challenges, only 15% have the highest level of attendance growth. The strength of the relationship with growth is seen in the degree of difference between the highest and lowest columns, which in this case is 31 percentage points—a very large difference.

# Congregational Context and Composition

Congregations are located in geographic communities and form communities themselves, with rich social lives. As such, the growth/decline profile of a church is greatly affected by where it is located and the composition of the congregation.

**FIGURE 1** shows that congregations located in newer suburbs are more likely to experience growth than congregations in any other type of location. Congregations are least likely to grow in rural areas and small towns. Newer suburbs are where the greatest population growth is occurring. New people move into new housing and often look for a worshipping community nearby. Population growth is not a dominant feature of the other locations. Thus, congregations cannot rely on an increasing supply of newcomers, but must do ministry within a stable or declining population.

A surprising feature of **FIGURE 1** is that the second best area for growth is in the downtown or central city of metropolitan areas. In years past, downtown congregations were mired in decline as the suburbs boomed and the central cities lost people. Urban renewal and gentrification changed this dynamic. But even though downtown and central city congregations are second most likely to experience significant growth, they are also more likely to decline than all other areas (26% are declining), followed by towns and small cities (23%) and rural areas (21%). In newer suburbs, only 10% of the congregations declined.

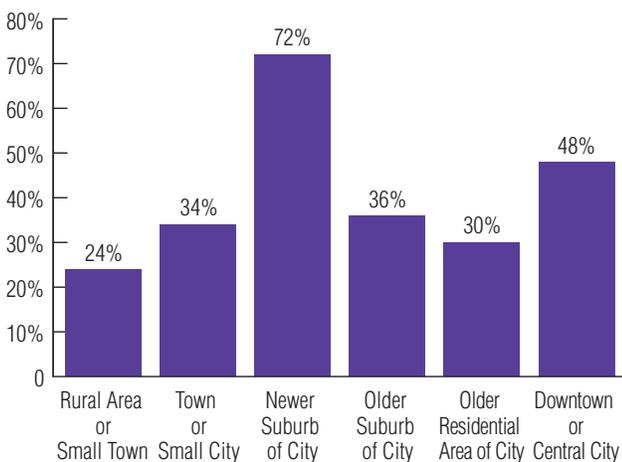
Using census data for 2000 and population estimates for 2005 confirms the strong relationship between population growth in the community and church growth. In fact, the strongest demographic correlate with growth is increase or decrease in the number of households. Among congregations in zip code areas where the number of households increased 1.8% a year or more, 58% were growing substantially. By contrast, only 14% of congregations were growing in areas that experienced no growth or actual decline in the number of households from 2000 to 2005.

Region is also important, but only in the sense that the South is better for growth than all others. In the South 44% of congregations experienced the highest level of growth. In all of the other regions, 31% or less of the congregations grew significantly. Not only is the South growing in population due to “sunbelt migration,” but it is by all accounts the most religious region of the nation—a place where religious observance remains normative.

Congregations are living organisms. They are born, they flourish or stagnate, and some even die. But as shown in **FIGURE 2**, younger congregations are most likely to grow. In part, this is because new congregations are more likely to be started in growing suburban areas. However, even outside of newer suburbs, younger congregations are more likely to grow than older congregations. New organizations of all types tend to be more focused on establishing themselves as viable institutions. They cannot take it for granted.

**FIGURE 1**

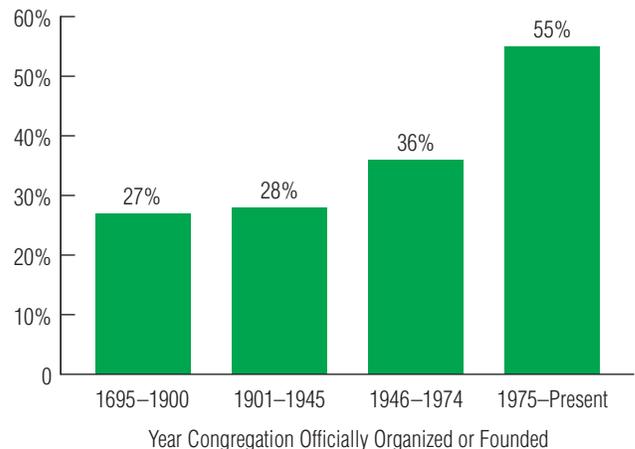
**Location, Location, Location** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Place Where Congregation's Principal Place of Worship is Located

**FIGURE 2**

**Younger Congregations Grow** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



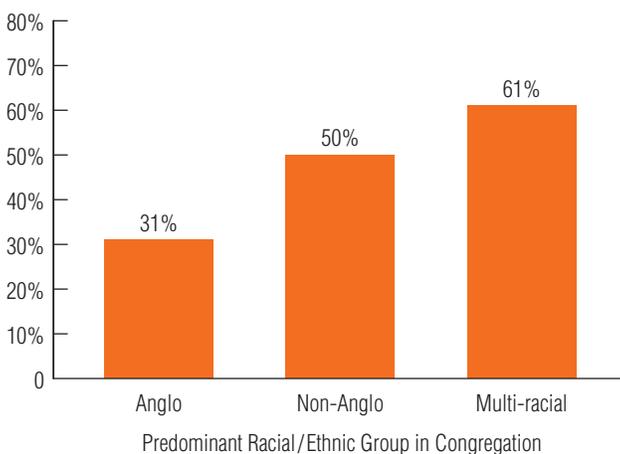
For a variety of reasons (including residential segregation), the vast majority of congregations in America are composed of a single racial/ethnic group. However, the rather rare exceptions—congregations that are composed of two or more racial/ethnic groups—are most likely to have experienced strong growth in worship attendance. Least likely to grow rapidly are predominantly white, non-Hispanic congregations. Among these congregations, only 31% experienced the highest level of growth from 2000 to 2005. Not only is the Anglo majority a shrinking proportion of the American population, but racial/ethnic minority churches and multi-racial/ethnic churches tend to be newer and to have more dynamic, exciting, and inspirational worship services.

One of the pervasive images of congregations in America is that of aging communities of faith. To be sure, the average parishioner tends to be older than the average American. But not all congregations are composed primarily of older adults. Those that have a healthy mix of ages tend to be growing, but most important to growth is the ability of congregations to attract young adults and families with children.

Congregations where older adults (over age 60) comprise 20% or less of active adult participants are most likely to grow. Congregations in which more than 40% of their regular participants are over 60 are very unlikely to grow. The mere presence of older adults is not problematic in and of itself. But a congregation where a large proportion of the members are older tends to have a cluster of characteristics that inhibit growth. Not only are no children being born to members, but such congregations tend to lack a clear sense of mission and purpose, vibrant worship or involvement in recruitment/evangelism, and they also are more likely to be located in rural areas and smaller towns.

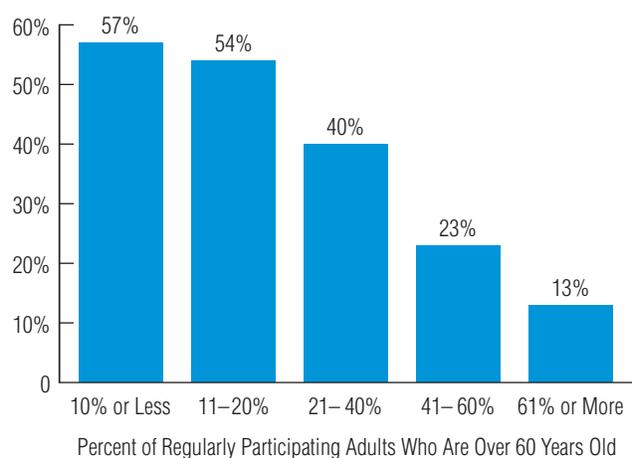
**FIGURE 3**

**Race, Ethnicity and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 4**

**Aging Congregations Don't Grow** *Percent of Congregations Growing*

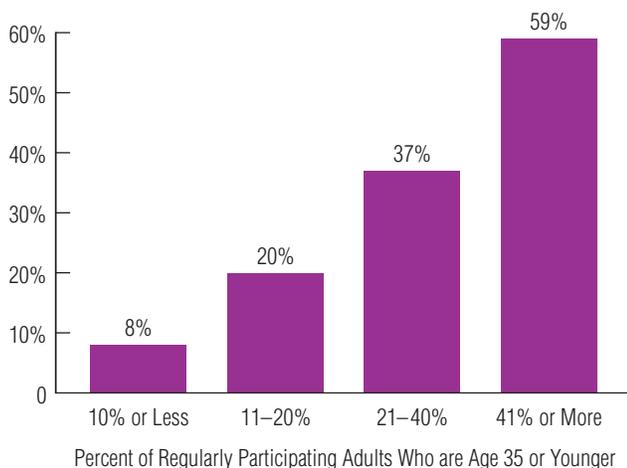


If larger proportions of older adults lead to growth problems, larger proportions of younger adults lead to growth opportunities. The congregation that is able to attract younger adults is somewhat exceptional. To be sure, such churches are most often found in the suburbs and are thus able to reach that increasingly elusive commodity in American society: married couples with children in the home. Yet the fact that such congregations are also able to reach younger adults in general—people who are less frequent attendees—implies that they have qualities that go beyond an advantageous location. They tend to be more exciting, innovative and are more involved in recruitment. They want to reach people and make the effort to do so.

Other elements of congregational composition are also related to growth and decline. Not surprisingly, the proportion of households with children in the home is related to growth. More is better. However, the same cannot be said for the proportion of females among active participants. Even when controlling for the proportion of older participants, a higher proportion of women in the congregation is associated with decline rather than growth. As was the case for younger adults, the congregation that is able to attract larger proportions of men, who also tend to be less religiously active, is the exceptional congregation—and is more likely to grow.

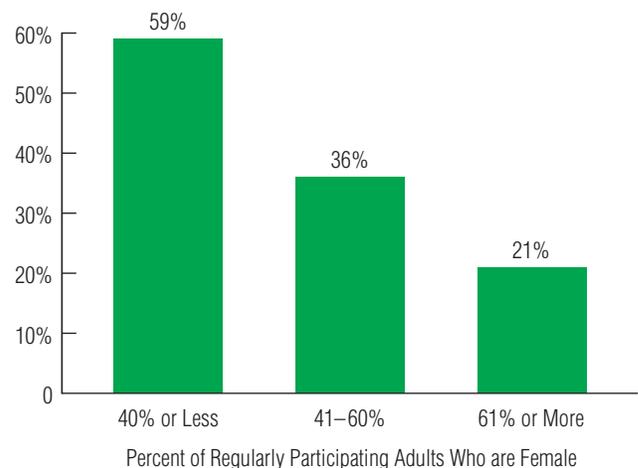
**FIGURE 5**

**Younger Adults and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 6**

**Growth and Gender Balance** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



# Congregational Identity and Orientation

There are many types of religious congregations in America. One of the most obvious differences is in the faith tradition that they represent. The Faith Communities Today survey included both Christian congregations and non-Christian congregations. But as noted earlier, 93% of the congregations included were Christian. Christian congregations can be subdivided into mainline churches (United Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian Church in the USA, Evangelical Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, etc.), evangelical/conservative churches (most Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, Church of Christ, etc.), Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and a residual “other Christian” category (Latter Day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist, Brethren, etc.).

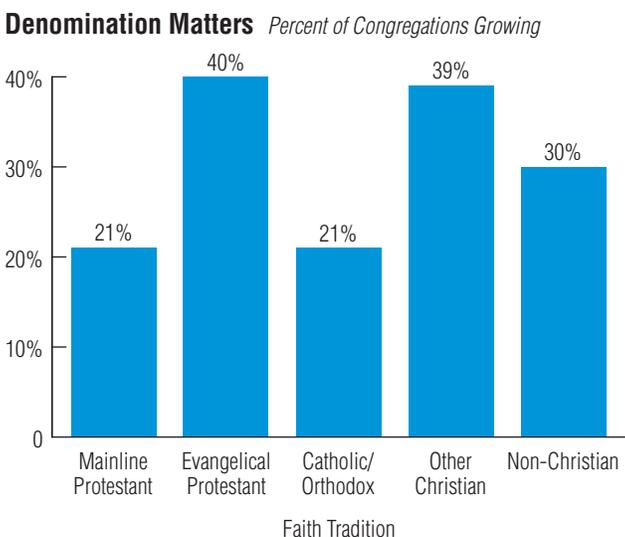
There are substantial differences in the growth profile of American denominational families. **FIGURE 7** shows that growth is much more likely among evangelical and “other Christian” congregations. Growth is much less likely among mainline and Catholic and Orthodox congregations.

It is well known that most conservative, evangelical and more sectarian religious bodies are growing and mainline denominations have been in decline since the mid-1960s. But the lack of growth among Catholic congregations may be somewhat surprising, given continued increases in the overall Catholic population. However, as many observers have suspected, increases in the Catholic and Orthodox constituency have not translated into increased worship attendance in their churches.

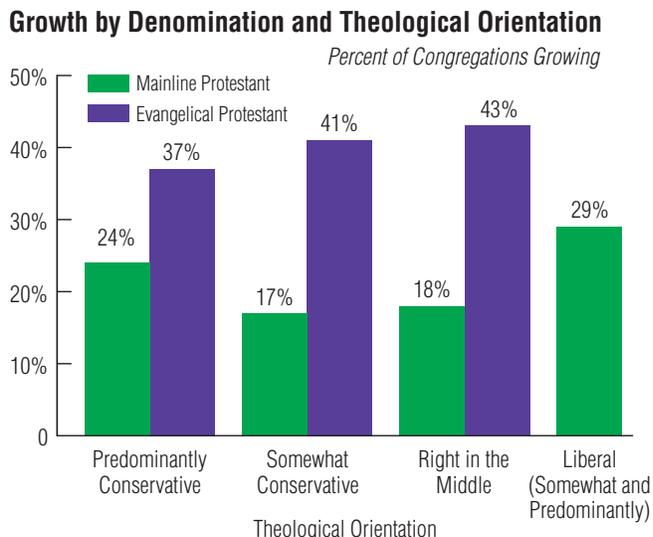
The disparity in growth between mainline and evangelical Protestant churches may seem to reinforce the widely held view that theological differences are the key to understanding why so many mainline churches are declining and why so many evangelical churches are growing. However, the situation is not so simple.

All congregations were asked about the theological orientation of the majority of their members or participants. Options ranged from predominantly conservative to predominantly liberal. When all congregations are combined, there is very little relationship between growth and theological orientation. In fact, the proportion growing is highest on the two end points: predominantly conservative congregations and liberal congregations (growth rates of 38% and 39%, respectively). Growth is least likely among congregations that say they are “right in the middle.” Only 27% of centrist congregations are growing at the highest level.

**FIGURE 7**



**FIGURE 8**



But since the debate over conservative vs. liberal growth is primarily focused on mainline and evangelical Christian churches, it is instructive to look at the relationship between theological orientation and growth among churches representing these two denominational families.

Within evangelical denominations, it is the less conservative churches that are most likely to grow. Evangelical denominations have very few self-defined liberal churches (only 4% say they are liberal), so it was necessary to combine these few churches with centrist, “right in the middle” congregations. Together, 43% of these less conservative churches are growing, as compared to 37% of predominantly conservative evangelical churches. Not surprisingly, over half (57%) of congregations in evangelical denominations say their active adult members are predominantly conservative.

The proportion of growing churches is low among mainline congregations of all types, but it is higher for liberal mainline churches. Overall, only 18% of mainline churches claim to be liberal, 25% are right in the middle, 32% are somewhat conservative and 25% are predominantly conservative. The fact that the most vital, growing mainline churches are most likely to be found among their most liberal and most conservative churches may partially explain the conflict between traditionalist and progressive elements in these denominations.

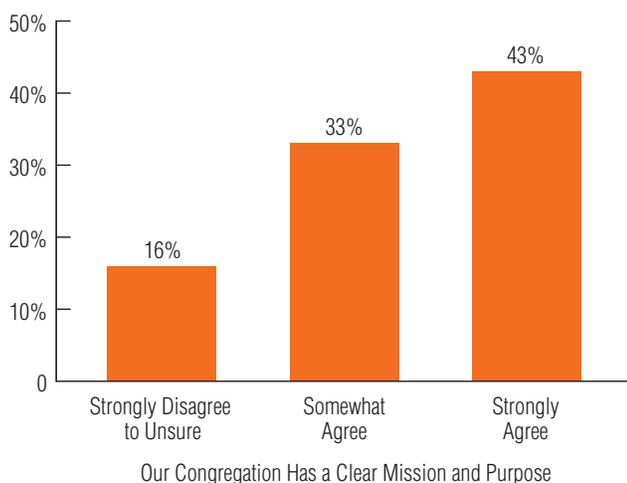
So are conservative churches growing? The answer is yes, but primarily because they are part of growing evangelical denominations where most churches are theologically conservative. But the findings of the Faith Communities Today survey suggest that it is not theological conservatism per se that leads to growth, but rather something intrinsic to the evangelical Christian family and their constituency. Likewise, the weakness of mainline churches probably has more to do with pervasive problems among the mainline constituency (such as lower levels of church involvement, competing demands for time, and lower birth rates) than it does with their more moderate theology.

More important than theological orientation is the religious character of the congregation and clarity of mission and purpose. Growing churches are clear about why they exist and about what they are to be doing. They do not grow because they have always been at the corner of Prospect and 77th Street. They do not grow because they are internally focused. They grow because they understand their reason for being (whatever that may be) and they make sure they “stick to their knitting”—doing the things well that are essential to their life as a *religious* organization.

Not surprisingly, churches in evangelical denominations and “other Christian” groups are much more likely to “strongly agree” that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose than mainline congregations (50% or more vs. 26%). So it would appear that at least part of the explanation for mainline decline is lack of a clear motivating purpose.

FIGURE 9

**Purpose-Driven Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



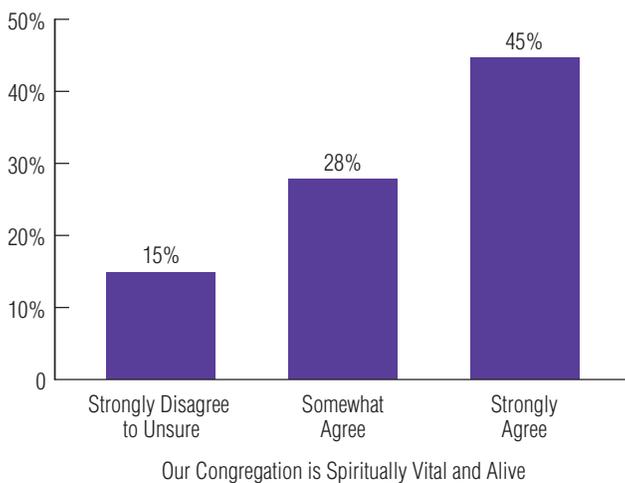
Essential to the mission of any religious congregation is to create a community where people encounter God. Otherwise, congregations often resemble inward-looking social clubs with little unique sense of purpose. In **FIGURE 10** we see the strong relationship between growth and the sense that the congregation is “spiritually vital and alive.” This is perhaps the key to whether a congregation is actualizing its unique purpose—doing that thing that congregations are more able to do than any other organization in society.

Congregations are often likened to families in which people are nurtured and grow. A sense of belonging is no doubt a good thing, but in some congregations belonging becomes the primary reason that the congregation exists. **FIGURE 11** shows that congregations that have less of a sense of being a “close knit family” are most likely to grow. This negative association with growth is not very strong, however, because even very purposeful, mission-oriented congregations value a sense of community.

Also important to interpreting **FIGURE 11** is the fact that congregations that feel like close knit families tend to be smaller. Small congregations either nurture community (feeling like families) or they die. Larger congregations tend to be more mission-oriented and less familial. Rural or small town settings also foster family-oriented congregations. People tend to know one another in the community and this familiarity is transferred into the church. And, of course, rural areas and small towns also tend to have smaller congregations.

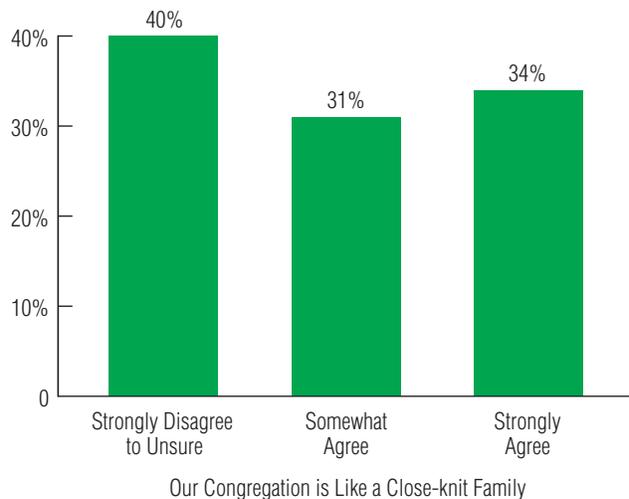
**FIGURE 10**

**Spiritual Vitality and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 11**

**Close, But Not Too Close** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Congregations exist in neighborhoods and communities that are constantly changing. The membership of congregations themselves is in constant flux as people join, become active or inactive, drop out, move away and so forth. Vital organizations are those that adapt and adaptation requires change.

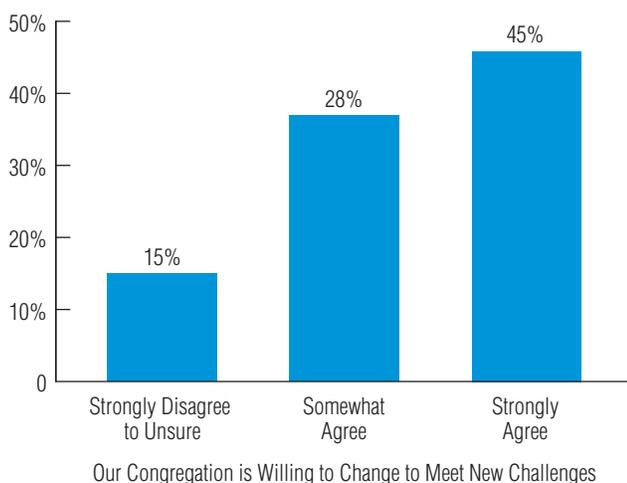
**FIGURE 12** shows that congregations that say they are willing to change to meet new challenges also tend to be growing congregations. Most congregations (three quarters) believe that they are willing to change, which is somewhat surprising given the traditionalistic reputation of religious groups in America. But among the minority of congregations which are unsure about or doubt their ability to change, growth is very unlikely. Only 15% of these congregations experienced significant growth in worship attendance from 2000 to 2005.

Congregations, families, communities, and clubs are all social groups and one characteristic they share is the possibility for internal conflict. Members sometimes argue, fight, and hold grudges. Congregational fights tend to be unpleasant, creating a situation in which some leave and others are dissuaded from joining. As seen in **FIGURE 13**, congregations that have experienced major conflict are quite likely to have declined in attendance. Congregations with no conflict during the previous two years are least likely to decline and most likely to grow. However, they are not that much different from congregations that have experienced only minor conflict.

Congregations that experienced major conflict rather than minor conflict were much more likely to have a leader resign or be fired and to have members withhold contributions to the congregation. Apparently any type of conflict tends to lead people to leave the congregation, but in the case of major conflict the loss of attendees is much more serious.

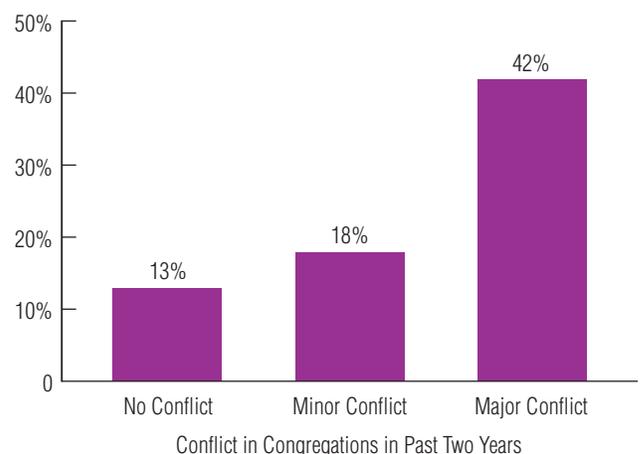
**FIGURE 12**

**Living Things Change** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 13**

**Conflict and Declining Attendance** *Percent of Congregations Declining*



# The Character of Congregational Worship

Worship is central to the life of congregations in America. The community gathers, they hear homilies, messages or sermons, they engage in community rituals, and in most cases they sing and pray. There is, of course, a great deal of variation within and among faith traditions in the manner and frequency in which these elements take place. For instance, congregations differ in the number of worship services they hold.

If weekday services are excluded (other than Friday evening services that “count” as weekend worship), most churches hold either one (38%) or two worship services (39%) each week. This latter number includes evangelical denominations that hold a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening service—which are attended by the same people for the most part. Only 12% of congregations have three services and 11% have four or more on a typical weekend.

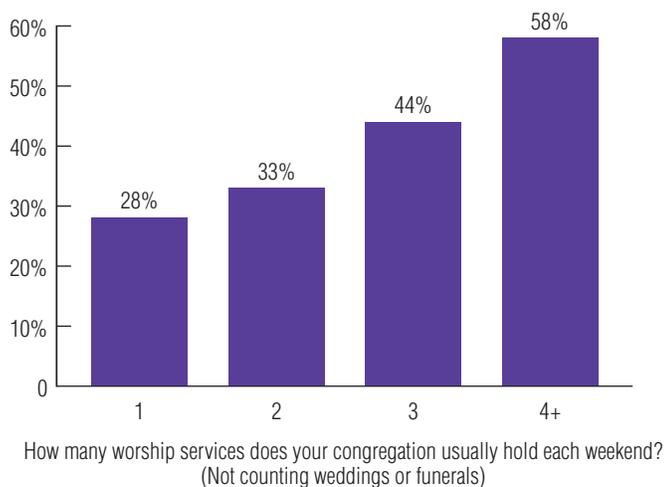
In general, the more worship services a congregation holds, the more likely it is to have grown. Over half (58%) of congregations with four or more worship services grew substantially from 2000 to 2005. But do churches grow because they have more worship services or do they grow first and then need to add additional services? Unfortunately, there is not a definitive answer to that question, but controlling for size in 2000 and 2005 suggests that congregations tend to add worship services to accommodate additional attendees and also to encourage growth.

In terms of the character of worship itself, the descriptors most strongly associated with growth are “joyful,” “exciting,” “inspirational,” and “thought-provoking.” Less important, but still related to growth, were “filled with a sense of God’s presence” and “informal.”

**FIGURE 15** indicates that a congregation which describes their worship as “joyful” is more likely to experience substantial growth. This relationship exists among all denominational families. However, the same cannot be said for worship that is considered “exciting.” Exciting worship is essentially unrelated to growth among main-line churches, but is strongly related to growth among all of the other faith families. So apparently for main-line congregations, exciting worship may seem too foreign or perhaps too evangelical.

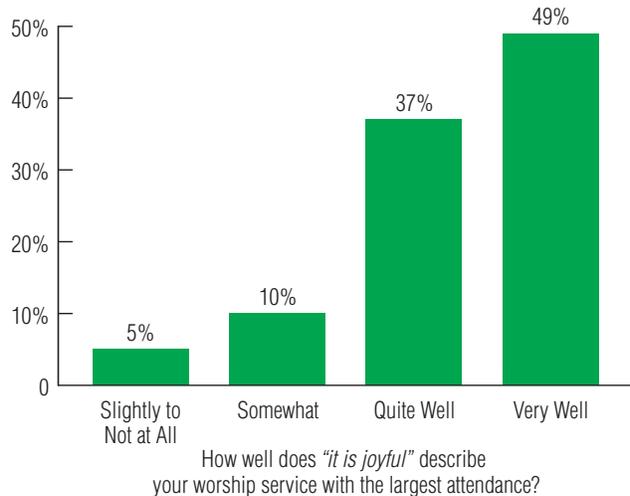
**FIGURE 14**

**Worship Services and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 15**

**Making a Joyful Noise** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



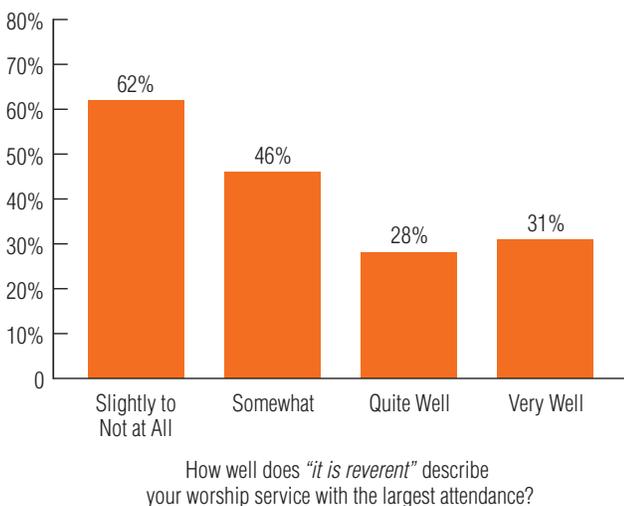
The one worship descriptor that was actually negatively related to growth was “it is reverent.” Congregations that say “reverent” describes their worship “very well” or “quite well” were more likely to decline than congregations that said reverent describes their worship “somewhat,” “slightly” or “not at all.” This negative relationship was strongest among congregations in evangelical denominations—suggesting that “reverence” strongly connotes stilted, less “exciting” worship among evangelicals.

Exciting worship and the use of certain instruments to make worship more exciting are strongly related to growth, and particularly so in evangelical churches. **FIGURE 17** shows the relationship between growth and use of drums or other percussion instruments. Over half of the congregations that use drums often or always in their worship services have experienced substantial growth from 2000 to 2005, as compared to less than a quarter of congregations that use drums seldom or never. Essentially the same relationship exists between growth and the use of electric guitars. The relationship is fairly strong in the overall set of congregations, but considerably stronger among evangelical churches and weakest among mainline churches.

Clearly drums and electric guitars seem to fit together as “contemporary worship,” but the relationship between growth and the use of visual projection equipment (a clear marker of contemporary worship) is weaker. Also, interestingly, the use of incense was moderately associated with growth, but only among churches in evangelical denominations.

**FIGURE 16**

**Reverence and Lack of Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 17**

**Drums, Percussion and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*

