

One of the more interesting relationships with growth/decline was the participation of children in worship through speaking, reading and performing. **FIGURE 18** shows the association of this question with decline rather than growth. Congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience significant growth, and congregations that did not were much more likely to experience *decline*. Among congregations that never or seldom involve children in worship, 32% declined in worship attendance, as compared to only 5% of congregations which always included children. Of course, in order to involve children and youth in worship a congregation must have children present—and many congregations have none. Controlling for the proportion of households with children and youth in the home reduces the strength of the relationship somewhat, but it does not disappear. Whether a congregation has relatively few or more than a few children and youth, not involving them in worship is associated with decline.

As was shown earlier in **FIGURE 12**, institutional change is necessary for a congregation to adapt to a changing environment. Part of that change may be in its worship services. Obviously, changing worship format and style may involve very minor things such as a different worship time or a slight alteration in the order of the service. Such changes do not really affect whether or not a congregation grows. However, greater changes tend to be associated with growth.

What do congregations do that justifies saying they changed worship moderately or a lot? One synagogue said: “we hold different styles of worship at different times and different Shabbats to appeal to our diverse community.” A Christian church leader noted: “We are a traditional congregation, but we are open to new and contemporary music. We are also trying to involve our young people in various ministerial roles—lectors, cantors, ushers, Eucharistic ministers, altar servers, greeters.” But whether or not the change involves elements of contemporary worship, the focus in growing congregations is openness to change. However, it also should be noted that changing worship was strongly related to growth among conservative/evangelical congregations, but was not significantly related to growth among mainline Protestant congregations. It may be that contemporary worship is an easier fit in evangelical denominations, but often comes off as a foreign, even desperate element in mainline congregations.

FIGURE 18

Seen But Not Heard? *Percent of Congregations Declining*

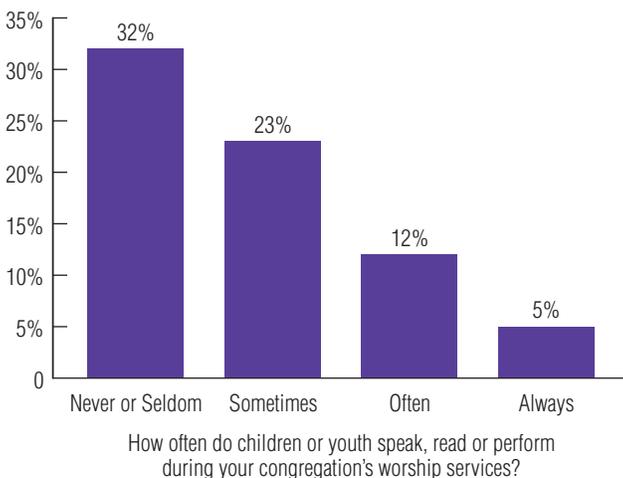
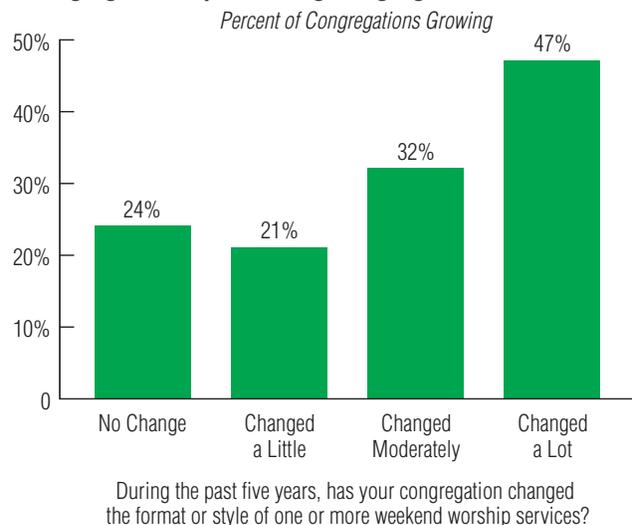


FIGURE 19

Changing Worship, Growing Congregations



Congregational Program and Recruitment

Almost all congregations say they want to grow. When asked if they agree or disagree with the statement, “our congregation wants more members,” 72% said they strongly agree and another 22% said they agree somewhat. **FIGURE 20** shows that the remaining 6% who are not so sure about growth are indeed less likely to grow. But it also shows that the extent to which a congregation wants to grow really doesn’t matter much in terms of actually growing. There is essentially no difference between the growth of congregations that really want to grow and congregations that are less emphatic about their desire to grow.

What matters ultimately is not one’s desire to grow, but intentionality and action.

Growing congregations are those that have intentionality about growth, rather than just wanting to grow. Congregations that developed a plan to recruit members in the last year were much more likely to grow than congregations that had not.

Growth requires intentionality, but it also requires action and the involvement of members and active participants. Recruitment success results not just from official programs and events, but from the behavior of members who promote the congregation and invite others to attend and join. As other studies have shown, the primary way people first connect with a congregation is through a pre-existing relationship with someone who is already involved.

FIGURE 22 shows the strong relationship between recruitment activity on the part of members and growth. Where “a lot” of members are involved in recruitment, 63% of congregations are growing. By contrast, where very few if any members are involved in recruitment, hardly any of those congregations are experiencing substantial growth.

FIGURE 20

Wishing Doesn’t Make it So *Percent of Congregations Growing*

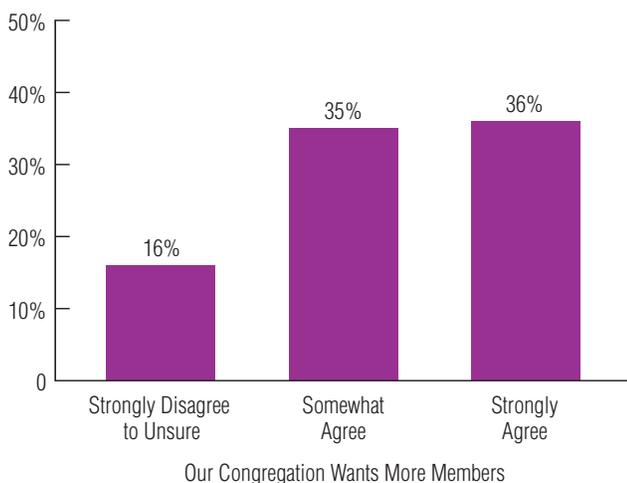
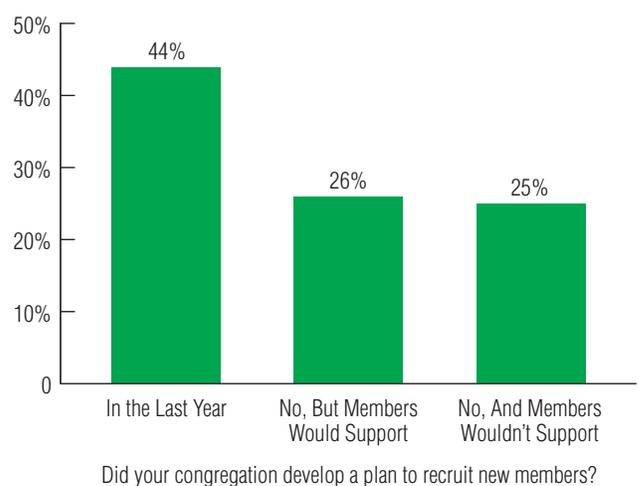


FIGURE 21

Recruitment Planning and Growth *Percent of Congregations Growing*



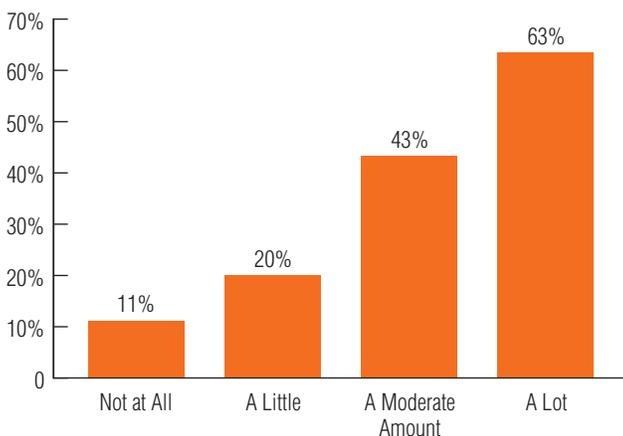
Growing congregations are more likely to engage in a variety of recruitment-related activities. Members tell others about their congregation and the congregation makes itself more visible through various forms of advertising. Most formal activities, such as radio and television spots, newspaper ads, flyers, etc. help only a little. However, the programmatic activity that is most strongly related to growth is establishing or maintaining a web site for the congregation.

Congregations that have started or maintained a web site in the past year are most likely to grow. Congregations that have not done so, but are open enough to change in order for such a thing to happen have a somewhat lower rate of growth. Congregations that would oppose a web site are very unlikely to have experienced growth.

Obviously, larger congregations are more likely to have web sites than small congregations. So is a web site a result of larger size or does it actually encourage growth? Controlling for initial size (in 2000) suggests that developing a web site has an effect on growth, independent of size. It is part of a constellation of activities that congregations use to enhance their growth possibilities.

FIGURE 22

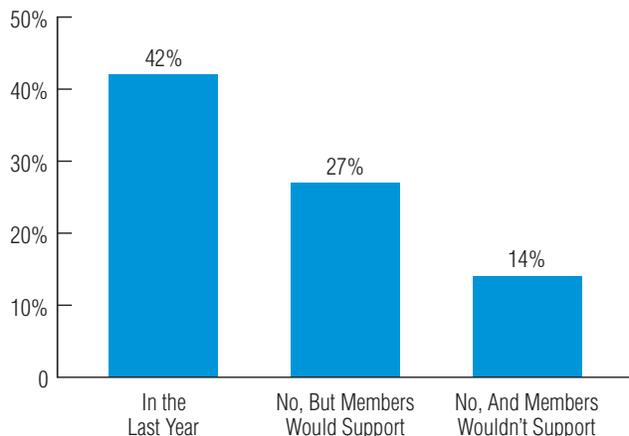
Recruiting New Members *Percent of Congregations Growing*



To what extent are your congregation's members involved in recruiting new members?

FIGURE 23

Ludites Beware! *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Did your congregation establish or maintain a web site for the congregation?

Another specific action that a congregation can do to encourage growth is sponsoring a program or event to attract non-members. As shown in **FIGURE 24**, 44% of congregations that sponsor such events grew substantially from 2000 to 2005.

The types of special events and programs offered by growing congregations can be quite varied, but what they have in common is the intent of attracting both members and non-members. They are not just held for the enjoyment and edification of the congregational family. Congregations hold seminars, concerts, fairs, and sponsor groups that would be of interest to people in the congregation and in the surrounding community. This adds value to congregational involvement and also gives non-members a low-key opportunity to visit the congregation’s facility. They can participate on their own terms and “check out” the church, synagogue, etc. without the imagined pressure of attending an actual worship service.

Another thing that congregations offer which attracts both non-members and members is support groups. As shown in **FIGURE 25**, of congregations that consider support groups to be a key program or activity, 67% are growing. Support groups are more often found in larger congregations. Yet like web sites, these groups have an independent effect on growth when controlling for congregational size.

More basic to congregational growth than the programs that a congregation offers is follow-up with visitors. Few people decide to join or become regular participants after one or two initial contacts, so follow-up contacts are essential to help transition people from visitor or prospect to member. If visitors attend a worship service, the congregation asks them to complete a visitor’s card, sign a pew pad or some other means of letting their presence known. Many congregations also make sure they collect the names and/or addresses of persons who

FIGURE 24

If You Hold One They Will Come *Percent of Congregations Growing*

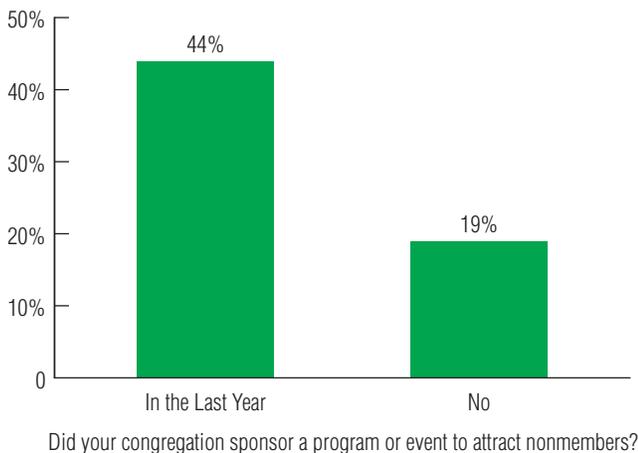
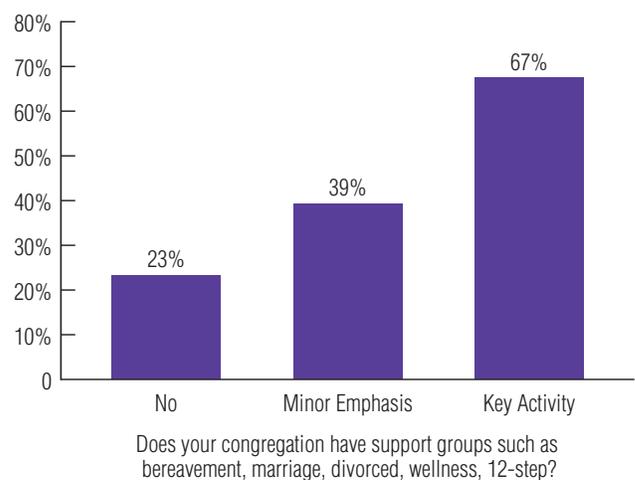


FIGURE 25

Support Groups and Growth *Percent of Congregations Growing*



attend special events or support groups and those who visit their web site. In order for people to know the congregation cares about their presence, the congregation must know they attended and make the effort to contact them—through as many ways as possible.

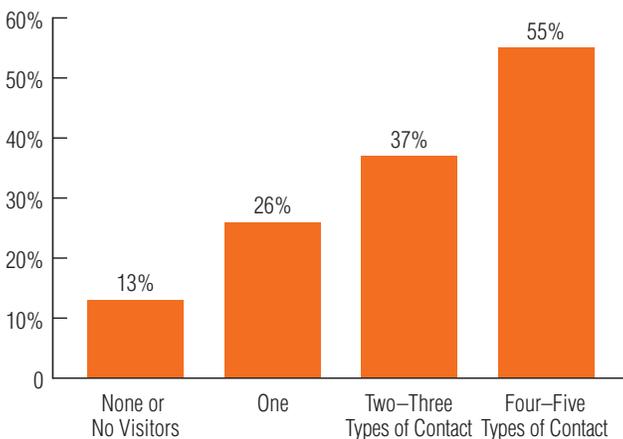
Congregations that follow-up on visitors through mail, phone calls, emails, personal visits, mailed materials, etc. are those most likely to grow. Of course, in order to be able to follow-up on visitors it is necessary to have visitors. Some congregations say they have few if any visitors, but even among these congregations, following up on the few visitors that they have is important to growth. And for congregations that have more than a few visitors, following up reaps even greater rewards.

Growing congregations are almost always healthy congregations. There is something attractive about the congregation that causes people to attend and join. And when a congregation is attractive enough to grow it also tends to be in good financial condition. Active, committed members give to the support of a congregation that means something to them and fills an important place in their lives.

Congregations that are in excellent financial shape are much more likely to have experienced growth than congregations where the finances are not so good.

FIGURE 26

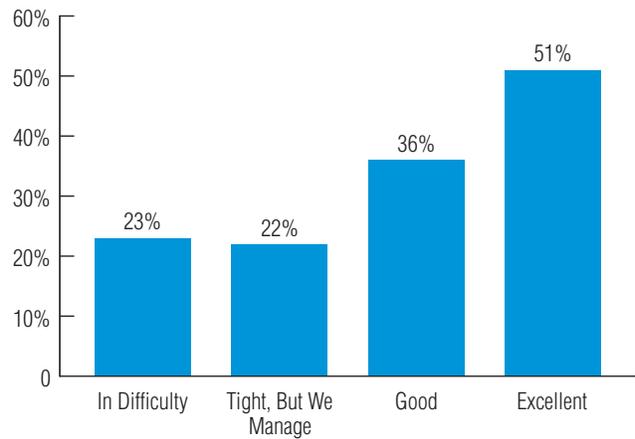
Letting Them Know You Care *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Number of Ways That Congregations do Follow-up with Visitors (Mail, Phone, Email, Personal Visit, Sending Materials)

FIGURE 27

Growing in Members and Money *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Congregation's Financial Situation Today

Putting It All Together

Each of the charts in the above sections looked at the relationship between growth and one congregational question, usually in isolation from other growth-related factors. It is possible using multivariate statistical procedures to look at the independent effect of each factor in order to determine which is more important to understanding why some congregations grow and others do not.

Clearly, some things a congregation has some control over and some things a congregation cannot control. Among those things that are related to growth and about which a congregation has no control are the location of the congregation nationally and growth/decline in households in the surrounding community. Of these two issues, the most important is *South/non-South* location. Even when controlling for all other growth-related variables, being located in the South is very advantageous when it comes to growth. Congregations do better in the South because it is both a growing region and because the culture is more supportive of religion. But *growth in households* also remains statistically significant as a source of growth. And this stands to reason—areas where the population is increasing through new households and new housing units are areas where people are moving to and putting down new roots. Population growth helps congregations grow, as does the need of newcomers to establish community connections.

A congregation has limited control over the age structure of its membership, and this factor has a very strong independent effect on growth. Congregations with *smaller proportions of older members* and larger proportions of younger adults and households with children are more likely to experience growth.

Obviously, it is easier for congregations to reach a younger constituency in growing suburbs, but the effect of age structure is strong even when controlling for the location of a congregation. In order to be healthy a congregation must be able to include both younger and older persons, retirees and families with children. A related influence is the proportion of females in a congregation. As American congregations become increasingly populated by women, those congregations that are able to even out the proportions of males and females are those most likely to grow—even when controlling for the effect of age.

The strongest correlate of growth when all controls were in effect was the presence or absence of *conflict*. Obviously, conflict cannot be completely avoided, but whether or not a congregation finds itself mired in serious conflict is the number one predictor of congregational decline. This finding points out the need for conflict resolution skills among clergy so minor conflict does not become serious, debilitating conflict. It also suggests the probability of serious membership problems for religious bodies experiencing denomination-wide conflicts over sexuality. If such national conflicts are played out at the local congregational level, the result is increased decline—when they are added to the usual congregational fights over leadership, finances, worship and program.

Independent worship-related factors that are important to growth include both positive and negative influences. Strongest and most interesting among these influences is a rating of corporate worship as “*reverent*.” Reverence in worship has an independent negative effect on growth. Although most worship services probably could

be said to be reverent to some extent, characterizing worship as reverent seems to imply a level of stiltedness and somberness that works against the possibility of growth. The obverse of reverence, characterizations of worship as “joyful” and “exciting” had no independent effect on growth even though they added to the overall ability to predict growing congregations. So apparently, as was observed in the case of congregational conflict, *not having a growth-killing factor* is more important than having something that would seem to encourage growth.

Positively and significantly related to growth is the degree to which a congregation *changed its worship services* in the past five years. Congregations that changed their worship services moderately or a lot were more likely to experience substantial growth than congregations that changed worship only a little or not at all. The independent effect of worship change on growth is interesting because it does not include any information about the direction of change. Apparently, change in worship is a primary means by which congregations adapt. Congregations that adapt in this way tend to grow, but congregations that remain the same do not.

In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was a rating of the congregation as “*spiritually vital and alive*.” Since congregations are religious institutions, it is essential that religion be central to their collective identity. And it is odd that so many congregations find other, more tangential activities and identities to crowd out the core function of a congregation. Spiritual vitality is necessary for a congregation to be a congregation and thus to grow.

Somewhat surprisingly, most of the recruitment/outreach questions did not turn out to be statistically significant when controls were in effect. The clear exception was *web site development*. Congregations that have established or maintained a web site for the congregation are more likely to grow. Obviously, simply setting up a web site is not an automatic growth producing activity—even though it helps with congregational publicity and internal communication. But what may be more important is what the effort implies. Congregations that establish web sites are outward looking and are willing to change and adapt. They look to a variety of traditional and non-traditional means to reach out to their members and non-members. Of less independent importance to growth, but adding to the overall ability to predict growth or decline, is *follow-up of visitors and inquirers*. Growing congregations are those who follow-up through a variety of means.

Congregations grow (and decline) for many reasons and it is not possible to examine them all. We cannot, for instance, get at the relative quality of preaching or congregational leadership. Age and gender of the leader were not related to growth and assessments of preaching and other leadership skills tend to be biased and unreliable. Also, growth occurs for different reasons within different contexts. Here we look only at the national, gross picture. The relationships are instructive, but each faith family and denomination is different and the relative impact of growth-related factors may vary among them, at least to some extent.



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