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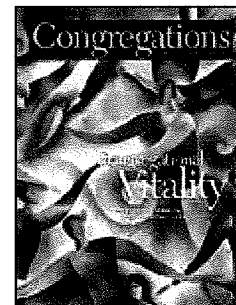
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CONGREGATIONS

November/December 2002

Ordinary People, Strong Congregations

A NEW PROFILE OF PEOPLE IN THE PEWS



In the final moments of the film *Jurassic Park III* the scientist hero talks with the young boy who dreams of being a scientist. The scientist explains the difference between astronauts and astronomers. He says astronauts accomplish exceptional feats. By contrast, astronomers seldom become famous, but they make those exceptional feats possible. People of faith are like astronomers—essential partners in helping their congregations accomplish an extraordinary mission. Strong congregations are like astronauts—extraordinary heroes moving toward a realm that only God can bring.

Describing a strong congregation rests on our understanding of what a congregation is and what its purpose or mission is. Evaluating a congregation's strengths should reflect how well it is doing in "being" a congregation. Congregations are strong if they consistently, effectively, efficiently, and collectively achieve the goal of being a congregation. Are they gathering people for worship that is meaningful to those in their community? Are they replacing lost members and welcoming new people? Are they teaching others about the faith, especially the young? Do they provide places where people are emotionally and spiritually nurtured? Are they sharing their abundance with others? Are they conveying a message of hope and meaning?

What is at the heart of strong, vital congregations? A recent study of America's congregations—from Christian to Jewish to Buddhist—profiled their strengths in four areas:

Spiritual connections—the worship and faith dimensions of congregations.

Inside connections—worshippers' activities within the congregation.

Outside connections—how congregations and worshippers reach out to and serve those in the community.

Identity connections—who worshippers are and how they see their congregation's future.

More than 2,000 congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, making it the largest study of worshippers ever conducted. Here is some of what we learned from surveying 300,000 worshippers.

Spiritual Connections

Where do worshippers find their spiritual growth? More than half of worshippers (54 percent) said they experienced *much growth* in their faith in the past year (39 percent reported some growth in faith). What fuels their growth in faith? Among those who experienced much growth, most said it came through taking part in the activities of their congregation. A second source of spiritual growth came through the practice of private devotions. The clear majority of worshippers (63 percent) reported that they pray, read the Bible or other sacred text, or meditate. Almost half (45 percent) said they devote time to this practice daily. Most worshippers (86 percent) said they find services and congregational activities helpful and relevant to their everyday lives. Our findings indicate that many

congregations, especially small ones (those with fewer than 100 attending worship services), show strength in nurturing worshipers and encouraging their spiritual growth.

Inside Connections

How are worshipers involved in their congregations? Attending worship services is the way most people participate in congregational life. Eighty-three percent of the people in the pews reported attending worship services regularly (every week or almost every week). This fact points to the centrality of worship in congregations of all denominations and faith groups and underscores the need to ensure that worship is meaningful. In what other ways do worshipers connect with their congregations? Fewer than half of all worshipers (44 percent) reported involvement in small-group activities associated with their congregation, such as church school, other religious education classes, prayer circles, groups studying the Bible or other sacred texts, or social groups. Small-group participation is more likely to be a strength in small or mid-size congregations, in the congregations of historically black denominations, and in conservative Protestant churches.

Many congregations provide ample opportunities for people in the pew to assume leadership roles. More than one-third of worshipers (38 percent) have one or more leadership positions in the congregation. Being a leader is strongly linked to levels of monetary giving. While only one in five overall reports giving 10 percent or more of income to the congregation, regular worshipers and those in leadership positions are more likely than others to give at this level. Small congregations excel in this area—a higher percentage of their worshipers invest in congregational life through leading and financial giving.

Outside Connections

How are worshipers involved in their communities? Worshipers are active citizens. Almost half of all worshipers (45 percent) said they are involved in community service, social service, or advocacy groups. Some take part in such activities through their congregations (19 percent), but a larger number (31 percent) are involved through other organizations. Involving people in community service is a strength of mid-size congregations or parishes—those with between 100 and 350 in worship. Also, churches in historically black and mainline Protestant denominations show above-average strength in these types of community interactions.

Worshipers are far more likely to vote than the average American. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of all worshipers (compared to one-half of the U.S. population) said they voted in the most recent presidential election. And worshipers are good neighbors. Almost three in four gave money to a charitable organization other than their congregation in the past year. In mid-size and large congregations, and in mainline Protestant churches, larger percentages of worshipers vote and give to charitable causes. Communities of faith are not always aware of the extent to which their worshipers are responding to the call to be messengers of hope and justice in the world.

Identity Connections

Who worships and where? Another strength of congregations lies in the characteristics of the average worshiper. Worshipers are better educated than the average American. Thirty-eight percent have college degrees (compared to 23 percent for the U.S. population). Along with their active community involvement, this strength attests to faith communities' potential for transforming their neighborhoods and cities. One-third of worshipers are "new people"—having started attending their current congregation or parish in the past five years. In fact, 20 percent have been in their congregation for two years or less. This high turnover indicates that congregations are not as stable or static as they are commonly portrayed. Welcoming new people and incorporating them into small groups and leadership roles requires explicit, ongoing efforts. Are there avenues to ensure that newcomers understand, feel part of, and support the mission of the congregation?

While most new people (57 percent) are transfers from other congregations of the same denomination or faith tradition, a healthy percentage (25 percent) are getting involved in a congregation or parish for the first time ever, or are coming back to a faith community after staying away for a while. The remaining new people (18 percent) are "switchers" who have moved from one denomination or faith tradition to another. The proportion of new people in the

pews is not related to congregational size—a small church is just as likely to have newcomers as a large parish or congregation. However, churches in historically black denominations are likely to have the fewest new arrivals in the last five years, while conservative Protestant congregations are more likely than other faith groups to draw larger numbers of new people.

The Larger Galaxy: Some Challenges

Certainly the constellation of America's congregational life is not all positive. One problematic paradox lies in this fact: Most congregations are small, but most worshipers attend large congregations. Just 10 percent of U.S. congregations—the largest ones—draw 50 percent of all worshipers each week. The smallest 10 percent of congregations gather only around 11 percent of worshipers in a given week. This extreme unevenness in the average size of congregations and the experiences of worshipers has far-reaching consequences. Small congregations, those with fewer than 100 attending services, find it a strain to fund the salary and benefits of a full-time pastor or priest. As more people experience large churches, the small-church experience will be a foreign one to increasing numbers. As people move and look for new places of worship, this trend may begin to feed on itself. A third consequence stems from the experiences of clergy. Most people seeking to enter ministry as a profession come from a large-congregation experience. As they complete their seminary or other education, they often hope to serve in congregations like the ones they came from—most often large congregations, in urban or suburban locations. Few will know the unique challenges and culture of small congregations or rural settings or seek to work in those contexts. Another outcome surfaces at the national and regional levels of religious leadership. Most professional staff serving at these levels admit that they spend the majority of their time working with the half of congregations that represent only one in 10 worshipers.

Many congregations struggle with finances. Almost all congregations and parishes (99 percent) list individual contributions (in the form of offerings, pledges, donations, or dues) as the largest source of income. The median congregational income from all sources is about \$105,000 annually, and congregational expenses average just \$5,500 less than average income. Operating expenses alone average about \$84,000 annually. Thus, the typical congregation spends most of its income on day-to-day operating expenses and a much smaller portion on program and mission. Most congregations are extremely vulnerable to shifts in giving, worship attendance, and the local economy.

Beyond the Ordinary

Are congregations called to be strong in new ways? The ordinary congregation stops short, limits options, and gets stuck in old ways of doing things. Ordinary people are often afraid to venture into uncharted territory. Like astronauts, people in faith communities need to make leaps into the future and into the unknown. Although many congregations are already strong and getting stronger, there is no reason we cannot become even more heroic. In light of the stakes, we must.

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