

# New FACTs

on

Episcopal

Church

Growth and Decline

*A look at the dynamics of growth and decline in Episcopal congregations based on the 2014 Survey of Episcopal Congregations, in conjunction with the Faith Communities Today (FACT) ecumenical/interfaith survey project*

THE  
*Episcopal*  
CHURCH



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# New FACTs

## On Episcopal Church Growth and Decline

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SOME EPISCOPAL CONGREGATIONS ARE GROWING; MANY ARE STABLE IN ATTENDANCE AND MEMBERSHIP; OTHERS ARE DECLINING. WHY DO CONGREGATIONS THRIVE OR EXPERIENCE LOSSES?

In seeking answers to this question, many sources of congregational growth and decline are considered, including:

- The setting and demographic makeup of the congregation;
- The congregation's identity;
- The congregation's worship;
- The congregation's programs and activities; and
- The congregation's leadership

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

Findings are based on Parochial Report data and the 2014 Survey of Episcopal Congregations, which was completed by 762 congregations out of an initial sample of 1,100. Growth is measured by change in average Sunday attendance (ASA) from 2009 to 2013 using a 3-category growth/decline variable. Growing churches grew by at least 10% in ASA (20% of the sample). Plateaued congregations experienced change in ASA of +5% to -7.4%. Declining churches declined by 10% or more (45% of churches). Churches were sampled randomly within these populations. Churches with moderate growth (5.5% to 9.9%) and moderate decline (-7.5% to -9.9%) were excluded in order to examine the characteristics of churches that were more clearly growing, plateaued or declining. Churches were weighted by size, as measured in 2009, and represent the size distribution of all Episcopal churches in the United States.

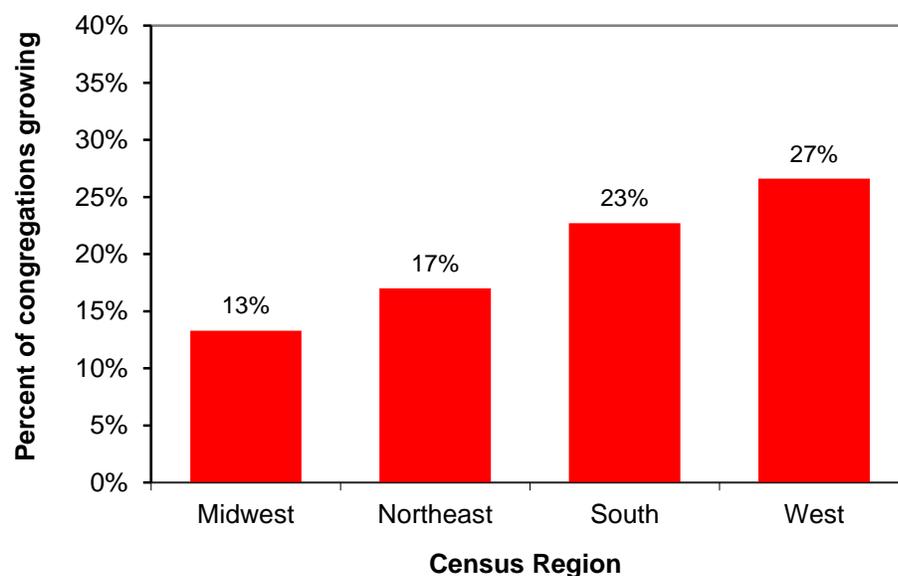
## Context and Composition

All congregations have a context, the environment where they minister, which includes their regional setting and their local community. Congregations are also communities themselves, with rich social fabrics. As such, the growth/decline profile of a church is necessarily affected by where they are located, the composition of the congregation and how the congregation reflects or does not reflect its community context.

but many of the churches there are doing well. And this is part of the odd context of the West, where overall levels of religiosity are lower than other regions, but where the religiously engaged segment of the population is quite active—resulting in more rapidly growing churches than in other parts of the country.

The Northeast and Midwest are much less hospitable environments for Episcopal churches. Both share population stability or even decline in some areas, but these characteristics are more endemic to the Midwest. Both areas are less “religious” than the South, particularly the Northeast. And unlike the West, the Northeast lacks a large religiously engaged subculture and many booming churches.

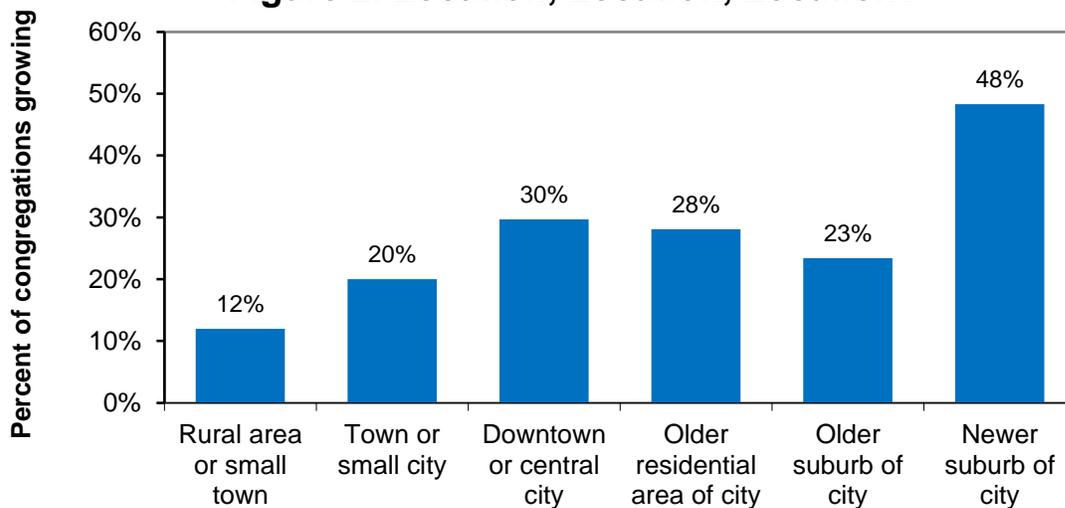
**Figure 1. Region and Growth**



Not all regions are equally fertile for the growth of Episcopal congregations. Figure 1 shows that churches in western states are most likely to experience growth, followed by churches in the South. The Northeast and the Midwest are where growth is least likely and decline is most widespread. Growth in the South and West is undoubtedly related to population growth through “Sunbelt” migration, but historically, the South has also been better for growth because the population is more likely to be active in churches than other areas of the country. Religious observance remains more normative in the South. The Episcopal Church has fewer churches in the West than in any other region,

in newer suburbs are more likely to experience growth than congregations in any other type of local community. Congregations are least likely to grow in rural areas and small towns. Newer suburbs are where the greatest population growth is occurring, of course. New people move into new housing and often look for a worshipping community nearby. Population growth is not a dominant feature in the other locations. Thus, congregations cannot rely on an increasing supply of newcomers, but must do ministry within a stable or declining population. This is particularly true in older suburbs, where many churches became accustomed to population

**Figure 2. Location, Location, Location?**



**Place Where Congregation's Principal Place of Worship is Located**

growth through new housing, but had to adjust to the lack of easy growth once the area became more stable in population.

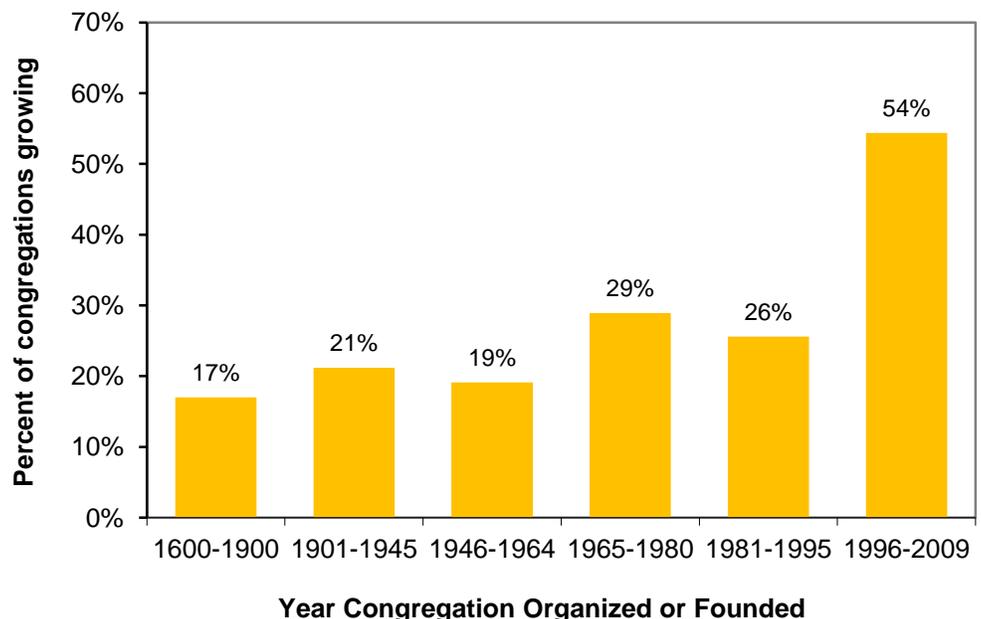
Not too many years ago, growth was least likely among churches in downtown areas of larger cities. This is no longer the case, and many downtown areas have experienced a revival. The churches that remain downtown are somewhat more likely to be growing than churches in locations other than newer suburbs.

Congregations are living things. They are born (or “planted”) and many flourish and grow, rather than withering in unfertile soil. Like people (or plants), there is also a tendency for congregations to have something resembling a life cycle of birth and growth, followed

by maturity and sometimes death. For congregations, unlike most other living things, eventual decline and death are not inevitable. The Episcopal Church has congregations started in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century that are still alive and thriving.

But very much like other organisms, initial growth tends to be the fastest, and as shown

**Figure 3. Newest Congregations Grow More**



## Context and Composition

in Figure 3, growth is most likely among congregations organized since 1995. New organizations of all types tend to be more focused on establishing themselves as viable institutions and are able to incorporate new people more easily than older organizations. Clearly, however, the early growth that comes easily does not last forever, or even much past 15 years in most cases. Churches formed prior to 1900 are least likely to grow, but the differences in growth possibilities do not vary a great deal by founding date among older congregations.

Despite the tendency of new congregations to grow, the impact of these congregations on the level of attendance in the Episcopal Church is relatively small—simply because there are so few of them. The same is true for churches in newer suburbs (many of which are new or relatively new). There are relatively few of them as well. Among the three contextual factors addressed thus far, the most pervasive, independent effect on growth and decline is provided by region.

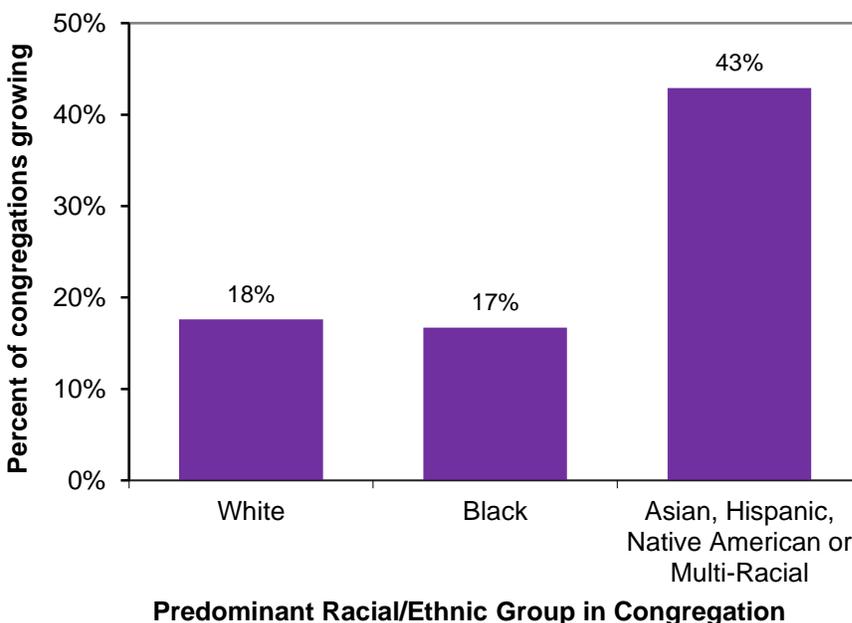
Much like other mainline denominations in the United States, the vast majority of Episcopal congregations are predominantly white (non-Hispanic/Latino) or “Anglo” (86%). And as is also the case in all mainline denominations, predominantly white churches are less likely to grow and more likely to decline. In the Episcopal Church, unlike most other mainline denominations, the growth profile of predominantly Black congregations resembles Anglo congregations. Only 17% of

Black congregations are growing and only 18% of Anglo churches are growing.

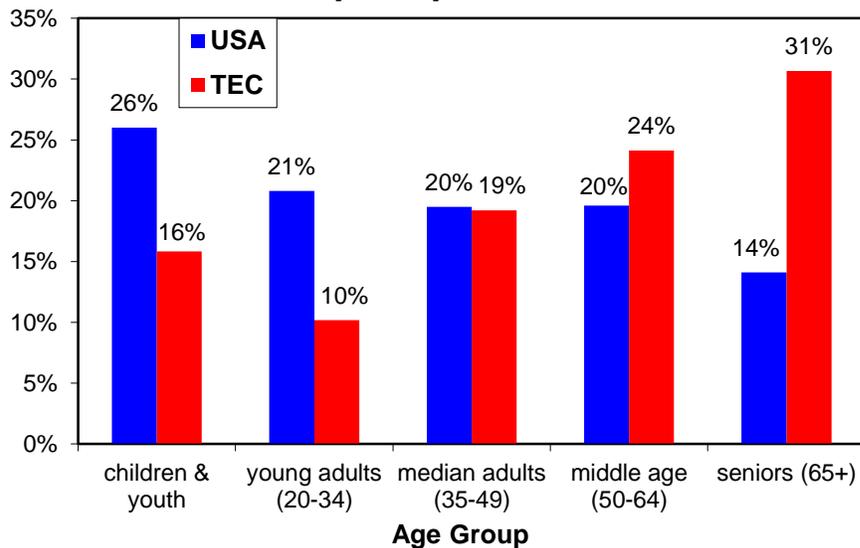
Although predominantly Black congregations (which make up 5% of all Episcopal congregations) have some characteristics which might suggest greater growth possibilities (more lively worship; clearer purpose), they also tend to be older than Anglo churches (in terms of origin and members) and are less engaged in evangelism and recruitment, on average.

There are not enough Latino, Asian, Native American and multi-racial/ethnic churches in the survey sample to separate them out, but as a group, their growth profile is much more positive than Anglo or Black congregations. Additional data from the Parochial Report indicates that growth is most likely among Latino, Asian and multi-racial/ethnic churches. These churches tend to be newer, have younger members, more lively worship and are more engaged in evangelism and recruitment.

**Figure 4. Race, Ethnicity and Growth**



**Figure 5. Age Structure of the USA and The Episcopal Church: 2014**



Episcopal Church members are older on average than the American public. The differences are greatest among the oldest and youngest age categories. Proportionately, we have many more persons age 65 or older and many fewer children, youth and young adults than the general population. This is due, in part, to the cumulative effects of a low birth rate following the baby boom era among a highly educated, predominantly white constituency. But the Episcopal Church has also failed to retain many of the children of its members over the years. These trends are not exclusive to the Episcopal Church, or to mainline Protestant denominations, but they are more extreme among mainline, predominantly white, highly educated

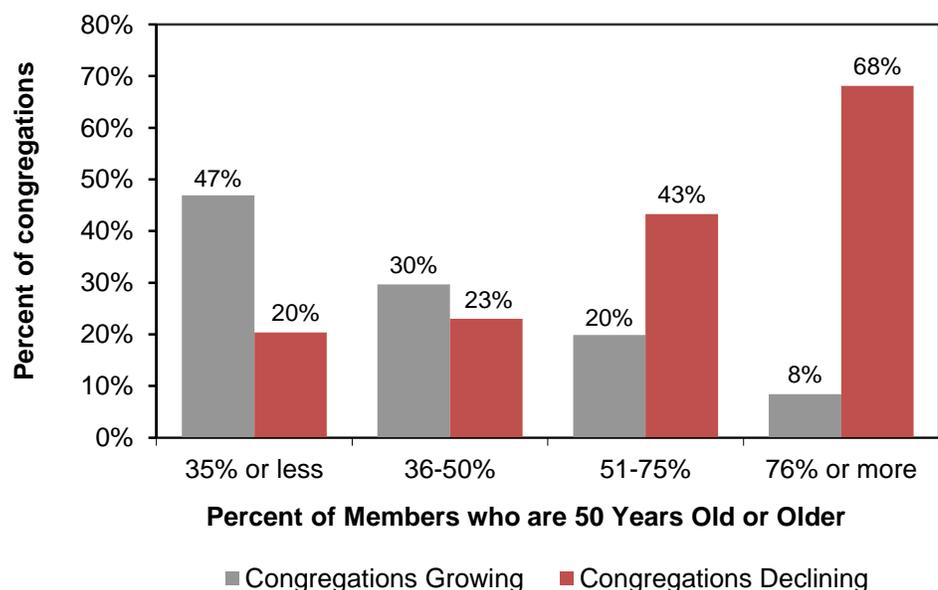
denominations and most Jewish groups.

Figure 5 shows that 31% of Episcopal church members are age 65 and older, as compared to only 14% of the American public. By contrast, 26% of Americans are age 19 or younger, as compared to only 16% of Episcopalians.

Of course, not all Episcopal churches are primarily composed of older persons. But many churches skew toward an older age profile. Overall, one quarter of Episcopal congregations have a membership that is 50% or more elderly (age 65+). And in almost three quarters of Episcopal congregations over half of the membership is age 50 or over.

The larger the proportion of older people in the church, the less likely is the church to

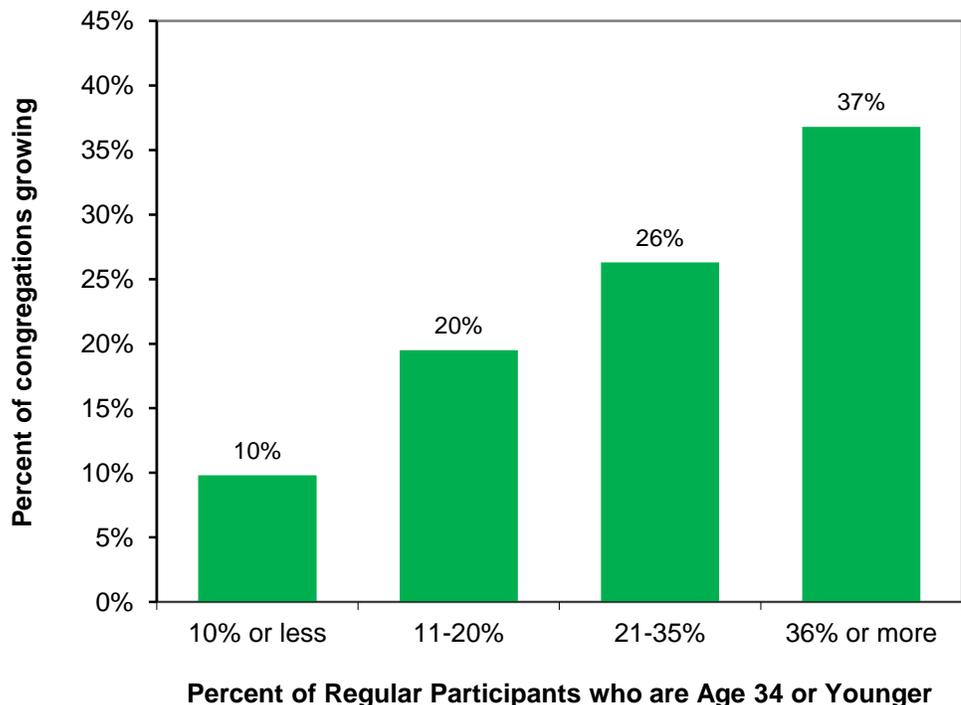
**Figure 6. Aging Congregations Don't Grow**



grow and the more likely is it to decline (see Figure 6). Among Episcopal churches where over three quarters of members are age 50 or older, 68% are declining and only 8% are growing. Growth is much more prevalent among Episcopal churches where the proportion of those ages 50 and up is 35% or less of membership. The “tipping point” in terms of likelihood of decline seems to be where over half of members are 50 years old or older. Decline or plateau is the norm among churches with predominantly older (age 50+) members.

The presence of older adults (age 50 or older) is not problematic in and of itself. Healthy congregations include a wide range of ages. But a congregation where most of the members are older tends to have a cluster of characteristics that inhibit growth. Not only are few, if any, children being born to members, but such congregations often lack a clear sense of mission and purpose, vibrant worship and involvement in recruitment and evangelism. They are also more likely to be small and to be located in rural areas and smaller towns.

**Figure 7. Young Adults, Children, Youth and Growth**

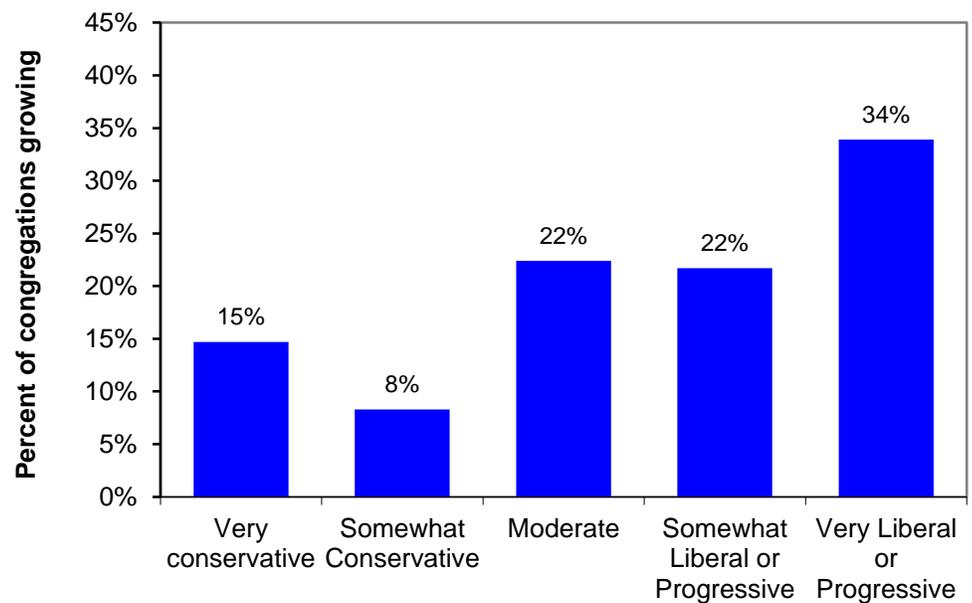


If larger proportions of older adults lead to growth problems, larger proportions of younger adults lead to growth opportunities. The congregation that is able to attract younger adults is somewhat exceptional. To be sure, such churches are most often found in the newer suburbs and are thus able to reach 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.

It is well known that most conservative, evangelical and sectarian religious bodies have been growing (until recently in some cases) and mainline denominations have been in decline since the mid-1960s. The Episcopal Church was something of a mainline anomaly from the early 1990s through 2001 when consistent growth in average Sunday worship attendance was recorded. After 2001, however, membership and attendance decline returned to the Episcopal Church. The continuing disparity in growth between mainline and most conservative evangelical denominations reinforces 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. But the facts are not quite so simple.

Within conservative evangelical denominations, the minority moderate and somewhat liberal churches are actually more likely to grow than very conservative congregations. Among most *mainline* denominations there is a “curvilinear” relationship between conservatism and church growth; with more conservative and more liberal churches growing and moderate churches most likely to decline. Interestingly, the Episcopal pattern in 2014 is more similar to the conservative evangelical pattern. As shown in Figure 8, conservative Episcopal congregations are least likely to grow

**Figure 8. Why Conservative Churches are Growing?**



**Theological Outlook of Most Active Members**

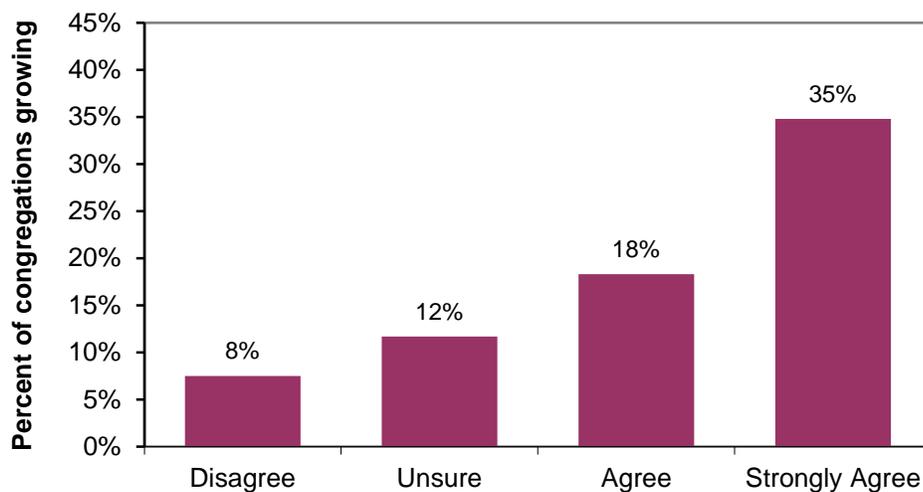
(particularly those that are “somewhat conservative”); whereas the most liberal churches are most likely to grow and least likely to decline. It should be added that this is not one of the strongest relationships with growth—as can be seen in the relatively small differences between several categories in terms of percent growing. Nevertheless, the correlation is significant and may also seem counter-intuitive.

Not surprisingly, there are proportionately more conservative Episcopal churches in the South and proportionately more liberal churches in the Northeast. And it is in these two regions where the relationship between theological liberalism and growth is the strongest. In the South, for instance, 39% of the most liberal churches are growing and 17% are declining, whereas only 14% of the most conservative churches are growing and 52% are declining. In the West, growth is almost non-existent among the relatively few

churches where members are more conservative.

Much more important to the growth profile of a congregation are the religious character of the congregation and its sense of mission and purpose. Churches that are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing are most likely to be growing congregations. They do not grow because they have been at their location for a century or two nor because they have an attractive building where they worship. They grow because they understand their reason for being and make sure they do the things well that are essential to their lives as communities of faith.

### Figure 9. Purpose-Driven Growth

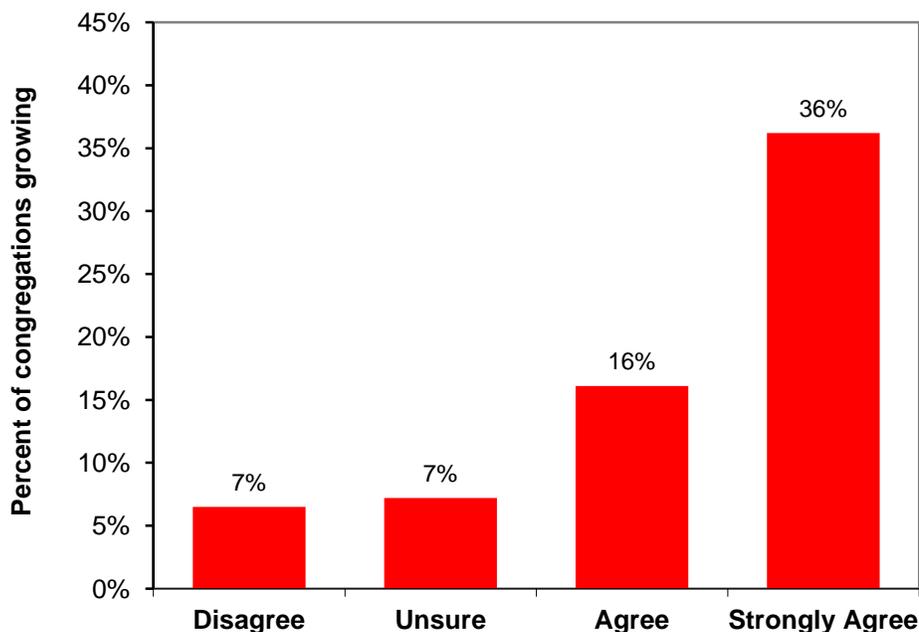


**"Our Congregation Has a Clear Mission and Purpose"**

Without a clear purpose, congregations often resemble inward-looking clubs or clans where fellowship among friends is the primary reason for being. The strong correlation between growth and having a clear mission and purpose is seen in Figure 9. Growth is very unlikely if a church has no definable purpose (other than existing) or if it takes its purpose for granted. The nature of purpose will vary among churches, of course, but the key is to have one.

Essential to all churches as worshipping religious communities is a sense of spiritual life, rather than simply human relationships and organizational/ritual activity. So in Figure 10 we look at the extent to which a congregation is considered to be "spiritually vital and alive." Relatively few churches disagree with such a designation and no congregation *strongly*

### Figure 10. Spiritual Vitality and Growth



**"Our Congregation is Spiritually Vital and Alive"**

## Identity and Orientation

disagrees that they are spiritually vital and alive, but many are unsure or agree only somewhat. This question gets at the essential character of a congregation and, as such, it is highly related to growth and decline.

Although the vast majority of congregations agree that they are spiritually vital, there is a large difference with respect to growth on whether they strongly agree or simply agree. As with many areas of church life, congregational leaders are not particularly likely to downgrade their own congregation, so frequently the key to understanding what is going on with respect to vitality is the degree to which a congregation rates themselves highly.

basic aspect of Christian practice: “living out one’s faith in their daily life,” those congregations where the emphasis was lacking or only marginal were very likely to be in decline. Over 60% of the churches that said they had some, a little or no emphasis on living out one’s faith in daily life were in decline. Having such a basic emphasis did not guarantee growth, but lacking it nearly guaranteed decline or plateau.

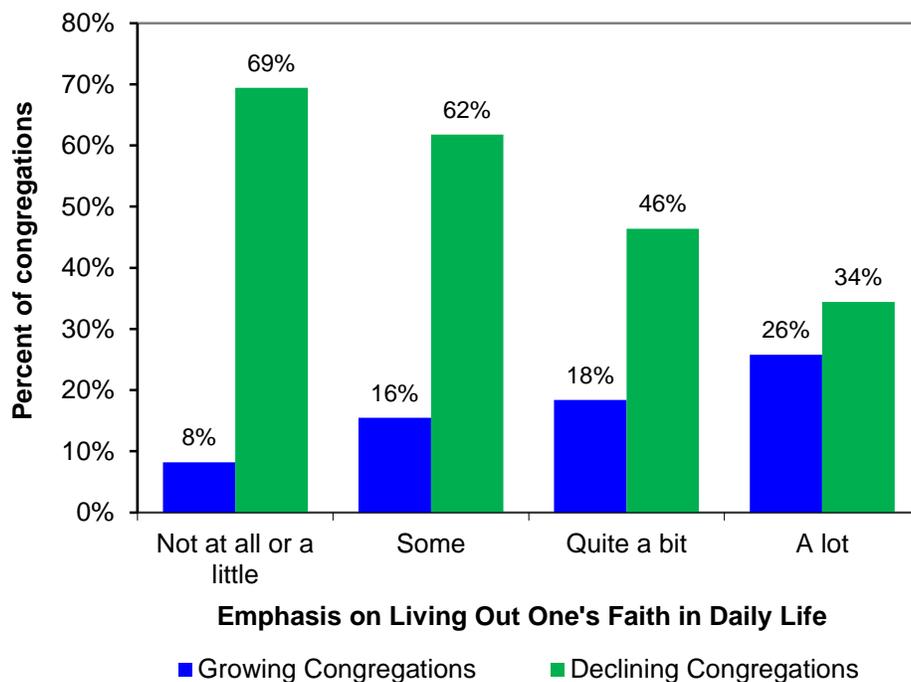
Congregations are living communities and are constantly in flux. Any sense of constancy is an illusion or the result of a desire to keep things from changing. But change is inevitable as towns and neighborhoods change and as people join, become more active, give birth,

become less active, drop out, move away or die. Vital organizations are those that adapt and adaptation requires purposeful change rather than drift.

Figure 12 shows that congregations that are willing to change to meet new challenges also tend to be growing congregations. Most congregations believe that they are willing to change, which is somewhat surprising given the obvious resistance to change in churches across America. But among the minority of Episcopal congregations that doubt

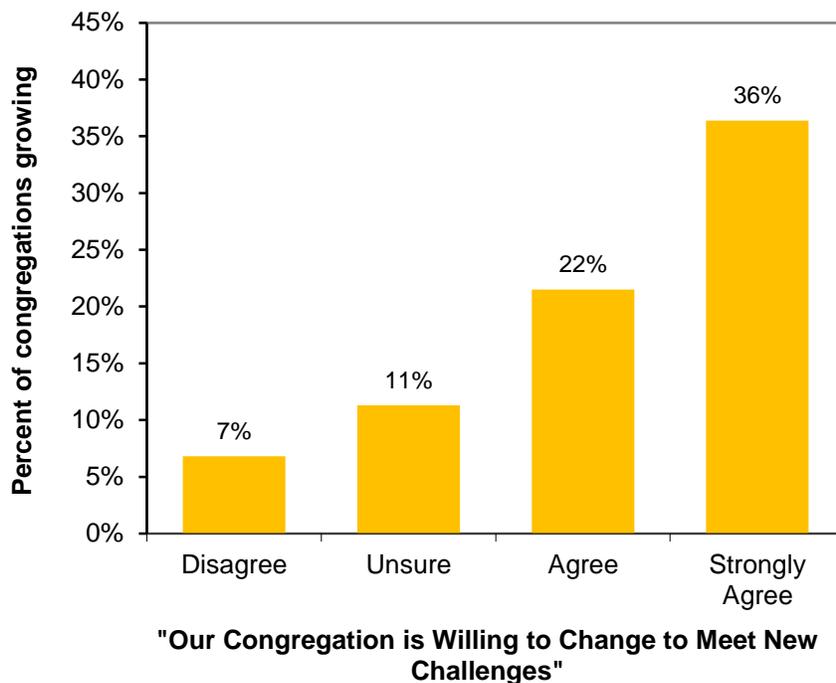
their ability to change, growth is very unlikely. Only 7% of congregations that are unwilling to change and 11% of congregations that were unsure experienced growth in worship attendance.

**Figure 11. Living Out One's Faith and Growth/Decline**



Since so many Episcopal churches are declining, for some survey questions the association with change in average Sunday attendance is more a matter of what churches are *not* rather than what they *are*. Thus, when asked about their emphasis on a rather

**Figure 12. Living Things Change**



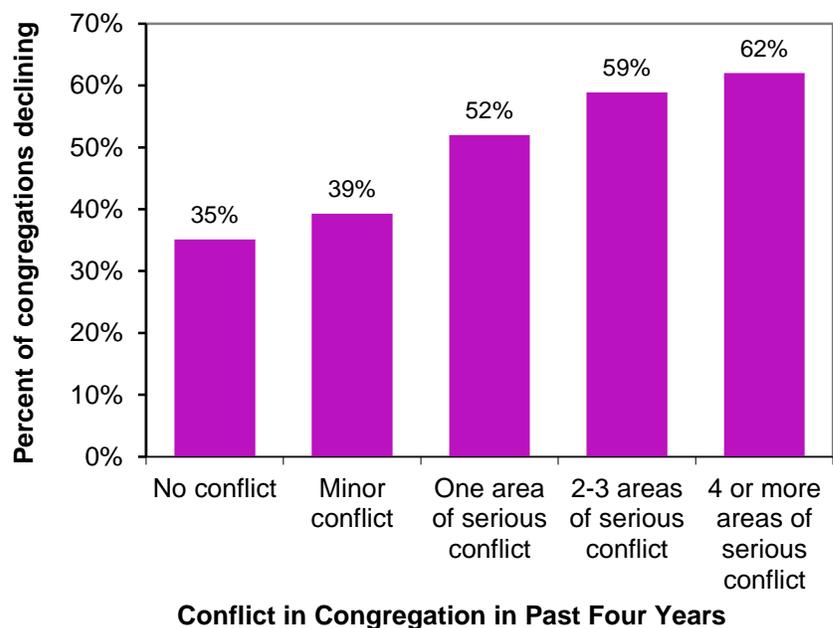
Congregations are social groups and one thing that all social groups (families, friendship networks, clubs, companies, etc.) have in common is the possibility for internal conflict. Members disagree with specific decisions that were made or with the direction of the organization. Sometimes people become angry, argue, fight, hold grudges, stop attending or withhold contributions. Some conflicts are minor and represent differing opinions or displeasure with some aspect of church life, but other conflicts are serious fights that are unpleasant for all and create a situation in which some people leave and visitors are unlikely to join. Congregations that have experienced serious conflict are more likely to have

declined in worship attendance over the past four years.

Figure 13 looks at the impact of various degrees of conflict on attendance decline. Congregations were asked about seven areas over which conflict sometimes occurs: finances, how worship is conducted, priorities of the congregation, the priest's leadership style, decisions of the vestry (or Bishop's committee), disagreements between the priest and lay leaders, actions of General Convention, and other areas of conflict (which could be

written-in). Responses for each area of conflict were "no," "the conflict was not serious," and "it was a serious conflict." In addition, respondents could indicate outcomes of the conflict in terms of people

**Figure 13: Conflict and Decline**



## Identity and Orientation

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leaving the church or withholding donations. The latter two outcomes were typically associated with serious conflict.

In prior surveys dealing with conflict in Episcopal congregations, the issue of ordaining gay or lesbian priests or Bishops was raised. In 2005 and in 2008 this was the most frequently cited source of conflict, by far. Since 2008, however, lingering conflict over this issue has become less frequent and less salient for congregations. So in 2014, a more generic reference to “actions of General Convention” was used.

Not surprisingly, congregations with no conflict (23% of Episcopal congregations) were least likely to be in decline. Decline was also not pervasive among the 39% of Episcopal congregations with only minor conflict. However, among churches with serious conflict, more than half were in decline. And if a congregation had more than one area of serious conflict, decline was even more likely.

Conflict over finances was the most frequently mentioned area of conflict, but most of the conflict in this area was minor. The priest’s leadership style was the most frequently mentioned area of *serious conflict* and it was one of three areas of conflict most strongly associated with decline in worship attendance, along with how worship is conducted and actions of General Convention.

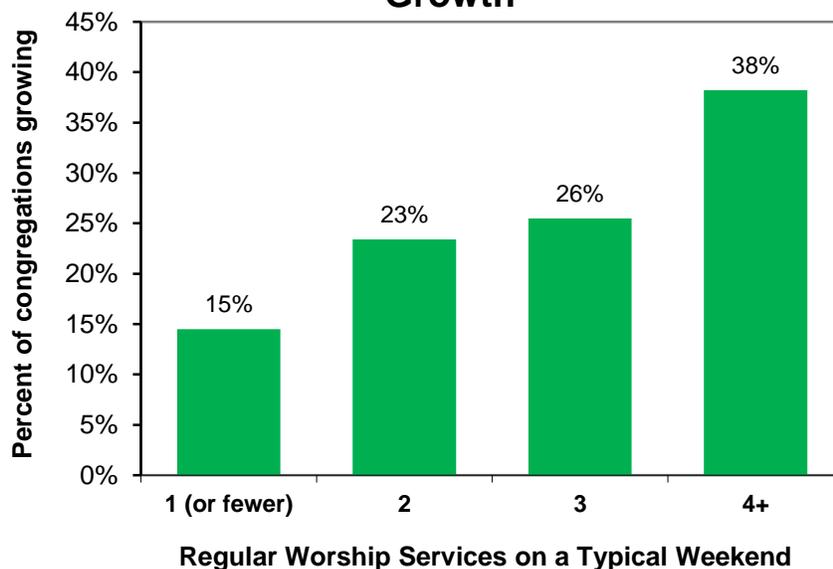
Many other areas of conflict were described by churches in addition to those offered as options. The most frequently stated were about the following: sexual orientation (same-sex blessings or same-sex marriage, hiring a gay priest), staff conflict, and important decisions about the continuing life of the parish (such as merging the congregation with another, moving the place of worship, or a building project).

Serious conflict remains a strong independent source of decline and impediment to growth, but as will be seen in the final section of this report, it is no longer the strongest factor associated with growth or decline.

## The Character of Worship

Worship is the central event in the life of Christian congregations. The community gathers, they hear scripture read and homilies preached, pass the peace, participate in the Eucharist, sing, pray, and engage in other worship-related activities. There is variation within and among denominations and faith traditions in the manner, style and frequency in which these elements take place, but for the most part there is less variation among Episcopal congregations than in most other religious bodies.

**Figure 14. Worship Services and Growth**



If weekday services are excluded, most Episcopal congregations hold either one (45%) or two (38%) regular “Sunday” worship services, including services on Saturday evening. If a congregation holds its primary service on a weekday (this is very rare), that service also is considered a “Sunday service.” Only 13% of Episcopal congregations have three weekend worship services and another 3% have four or more. Episcopal congregations differ from most other Protestant denominations in that more Episcopal congregations have at least two weekend worship services, but the

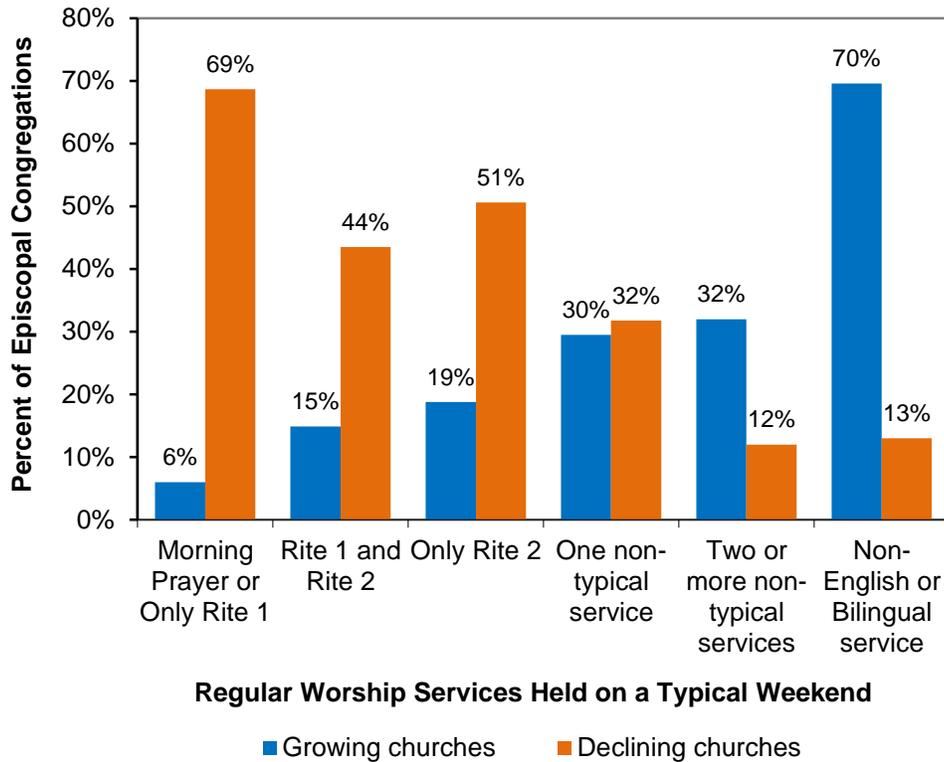
percentage with four or more services is smaller.

In general, the more worship services a congregation has, the more likely it is to have grown. Only 15% of churches with one Sunday service grew between 2009 and 2013, as compared to 38% of congregations with four or more services. Since very few churches have four or more services and the vast majority of Episcopal congregations have one or two services, the key finding here is that churches with only one service are very unlikely to grow, but churches with two or more services are more likely to experience growth.

A stronger relationship between services and attendance growth deals with the type of services a congregation has, in addition to simply its number of services. As shown in Figure 15, churches that have Morning Prayer on Sunday, a combination of Morning Prayer and Rite I or Rite II, or only Rite I, are very unlikely to have experienced any growth (only 6%) and most are declining in worship attendance. Growth is a bit more likely (but still infrequent) among churches that have a combination of Rite I and Rite II services. This includes churches with only one service which alternates its rites weekly and churches that have more than one Sunday service. The proportion of churches growing increases among Episcopal congregations that have only Rite II services. Again, these can be churches with any number of services.

Churches featured in the next two columns of Figure 15 have at least one regular (weekly or

**Figure 15. Worship Service Types and Growth/Decline**

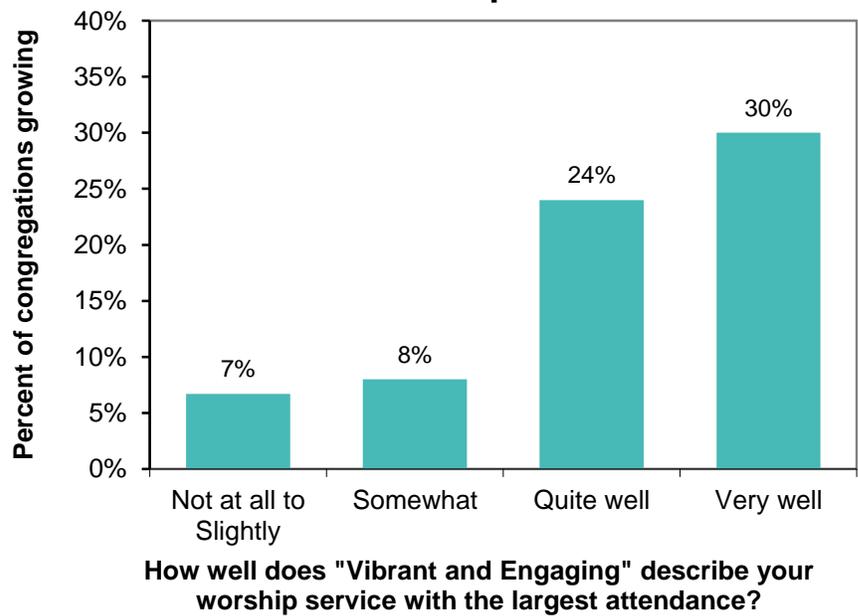


nearly weekly), non-typical service. The key distinction here is that at least one regular service was “different” from the typical Rite I or Rite II service.

In some cases these non-typical services were traditional services such as compline, evensong, Taizé, candlelight services with chant and meditation, or “family oriented” services followed by a meal. In other cases, the services were more “contemporary” or were “imaginative” in some way. Many churches feature contemporary or blended music. Other churches have a folk Eucharist, gospel Eucharist or Jazz Vespers. Some churches also are featuring a “named” service, such as

Celebrate! (a liturgy for young children and their parents), Messy Church Family Eucharist, Family Table, Out of the Box, Welcome Table (with discussion and food), Pray and Play, Summer Worker’s Service (Evening Jamaican service for locals who work Sunday morning), and “S6” (Super Speedy Summer Sunday Service with Supper). Churches with either one or two non-typical services are similar in their growth profile, but churches with *two or more* non-typical services are less likely to be declining (only 12%). Of course, some of the non-typical

**Figure 16. Vibrant & Engaging Worship**



## The Character of Worship

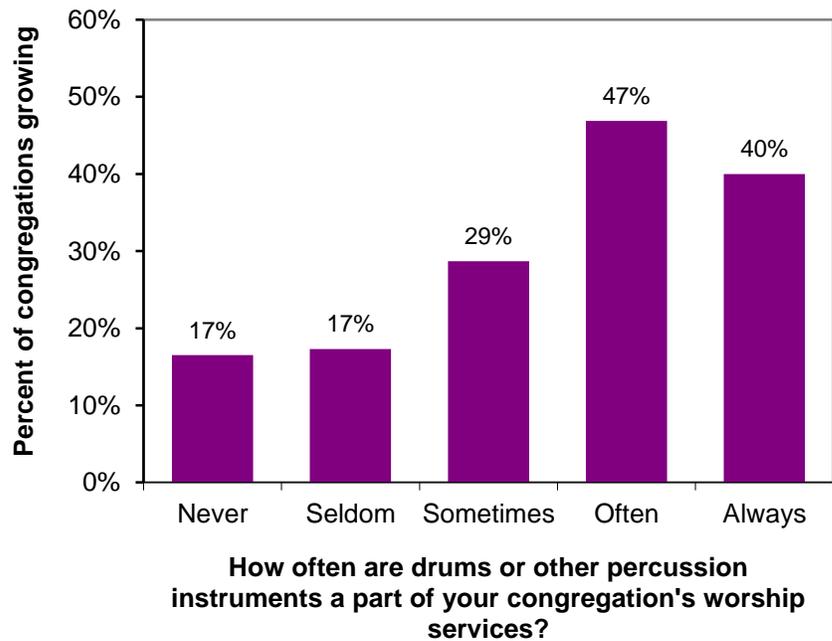
services may include the Rite II liturgy. But these are not the usual Rite II service. Something is added in terms of style, substance or a connection to a meal or other event following the service.

Even more likely to grow than congregations with either non-typical traditional, imaginative or contemporary worship services were congregations that held services in a language other than English—either fully in another language or a bilingual service. Most of these churches (70%) were growing and only 13% were declining.

In terms of the character of worship in Episcopal congregations, churches that describe their worship as “vibrant and engaging” were most likely to grow. This was also the case for churches that described their worship as “fun and joyful.” There is a sense of life in the worship of growing churches that is less evident in most non-growing churches. Part of this vitality may be related to a critical mass of people creating a sense of community celebration, but, of course, vibrant worship is also possible in smaller churches.

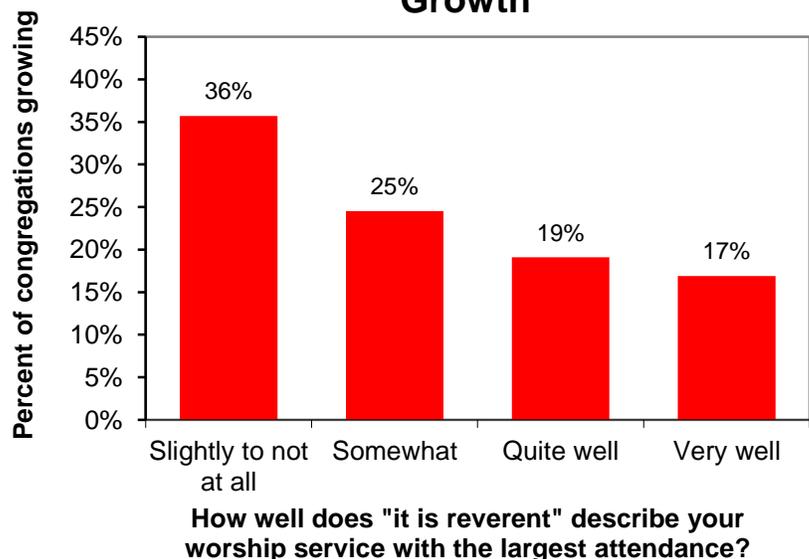
As was shown above in Figure 15, growing churches tend to have at least one service that is non-typical. Partly this is about the use of music. Drums and other percussion instruments, for instance, are strongly related to growth. Drums do not necessarily imply a praise band with a drum set. But sometimes it does. In other cases drums mean African or Native

**Figure 17. Drums, Percussion and Growth**



American drums, timpani, tambourines, and so forth. For Episcopal churches the use of drums, other percussion instruments and acoustic instruments is more strongly related to growth than electric guitars and other instruments typically associated with contemporary worship.

**Figure 18. Reverence and Lack of Growth**

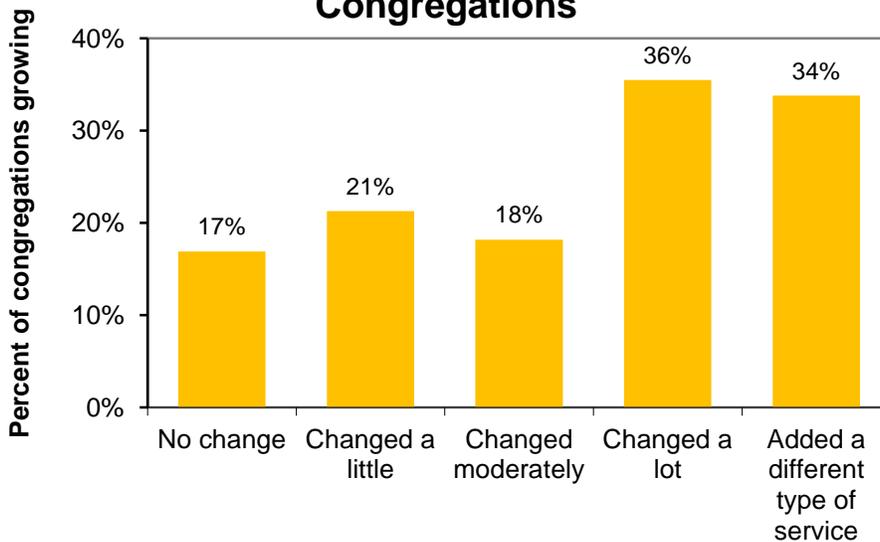


## The Character of Worship

The key seems to be doing something different from very traditional worship with a particularly solemn tone. For Episcopal churches, characterizing worship as

with a different character. Churches that have added a different type of service or that changed an existing service “a lot” in the past three years were much more likely to grow than churches which did not change their services or only changed them somewhat.

**Figure 19. Changing Worship, Growing Congregations**



**During the past 3 years, has your congregation changed the format or style of one or more weekend worship services?**

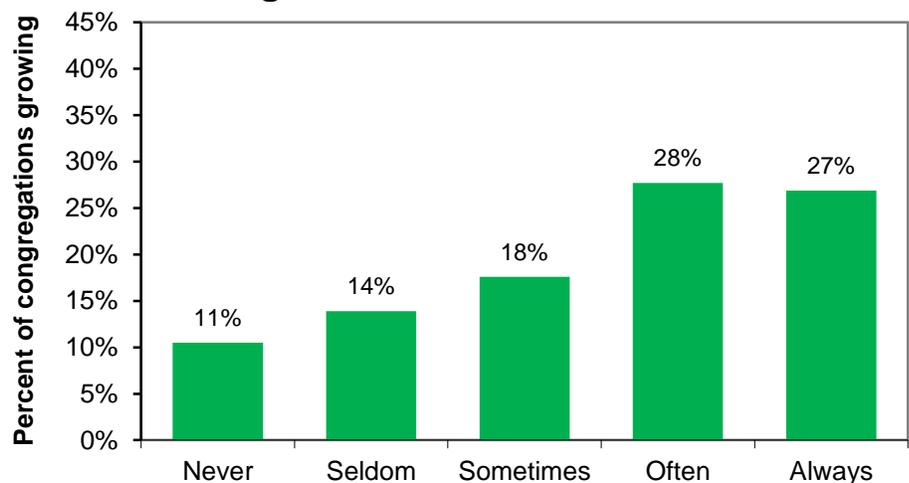
“reverent” is related to decline, as is always or nearly always using kneelers. It is not that churches with vibrant, engaging worship lack any sense of reverence. But if being reverent and all the word implies is what characterizes worship rather than vibrancy and joy, the result is not likely to be growth. Most Episcopal churches are not growing and most of the churches that are not growing feature a basic Rite II service or alternate between a basic Rite I and Rite II service.

Having a non-typical, contemporary or imaginative service usually means that a church has changed its worship service or added a new service

One of the more interesting relationships with growth and decline concerns the participation of children and youth in worship. A question was asked about how often children or youth are engaged in worship leadership roles, including doing the readings, speaking, and music. Congregations that involved children in worship leadership roles (beyond the typical acolyte role) were more likely to experience growth and congregations that did not

were much more likely to experience decline. Involving children did not ensure growth. As shown in Figure 20, only 28% of churches

**Figure 20. Seen and Heard?**



**How often do children or youth read or engage in other worship leadership activities during your congregation's worship services?**

## The Character of Worship

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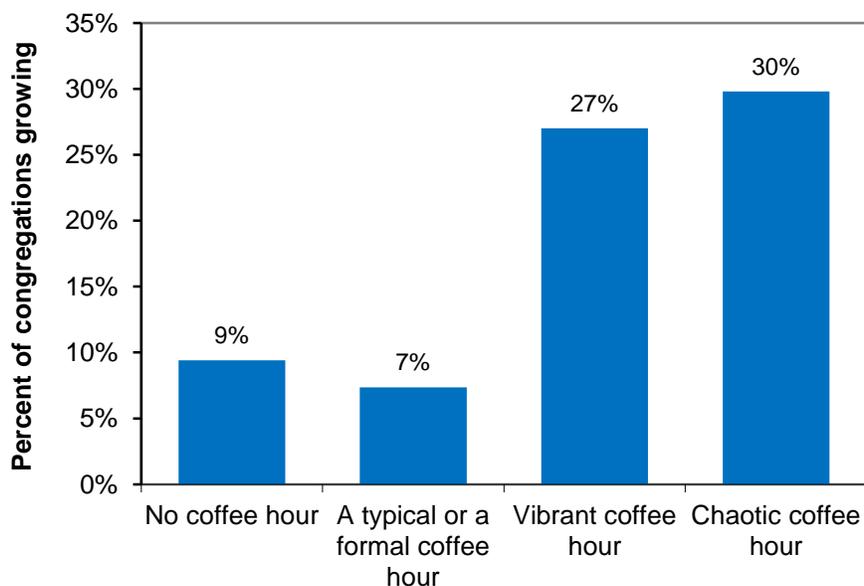
that “often” involve children and 27% of those which “always” involve children in worship were growing. But among churches that never involve children, only 11% were growing and 74% were declining. Of course, in order to involve children and youth in worship a congregation must have children present—and *some congregations have few, if any children.*

Controlling for the proportion of children in the congregation reduces the strength of the relationship with growth somewhat, but it does not disappear. In fact, it actually becomes stronger among churches with some, but not many, children. Churches with a lot of children tend to involve them in worship as a matter of course. But among churches with a smaller number of children, their level of involvement in worship is strongly associated with growth.

A coffee hour follows worship services in the vast majority of Episcopal congregations (93%). In many churches the coffee hour features drinks (including coffee, of course), light snacks and casual conversation among members. If a church has visitors who find their way to the coffee hour, they sometimes

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, in Montclair, New Jersey the coffee hour featured all sorts of food and drink. There was ham on biscuits, homemade cookies and brownies, quiches, cider, punch, etc. It was quite a spread, prepared by different teams each week. Essentially it was an after-church

**Figure 21. Coffee Hour Community**



### Describe your coffee hour

feel awkward, as if they are attending a party without knowing anyone. To visitors, the gathering may seem stilted and formal, but to members it is not. Churches that do not have a coffee hour at all tend to be declining rather than growing, as do churches that describe their coffee hour as "typical" or "formal."

In studying vital, growing Episcopal congregations it was observed that many had a coffee hour that was much different from the average congregation (in any denomination). Rather than sedate clusters of members standing around or sitting at tables drinking coffee for a few minutes, these churches had lively conversation that drew in newcomers. They were vibrant rather than stilted situations. In some rapidly growing congregations the coffee hour was almost chaotic, but in a good way. For instance, at

brunch with coffee and dessert. With food placed on tables in the center of the room, people gathered at round tables surrounding the food to eat and talk. Children were running around somewhat wildly. Visitors were drawn into the chaos, sitting at the crowded tables with newer and older members and with some members who were on the lookout for visitors. It was impossible to be ignored in the setting and no one was. In this church and in many others that do something similar, the coffee hour

creates community and provides an initial entry for visitors into the life of the congregation.

So, although "chaotic" sounds bad and somewhat non-Episcopalian, 24% of Episcopal congregations described their coffee hours as "chaotic" and these congregations were more likely to be growing and less likely to be declining than any other type of congregation.

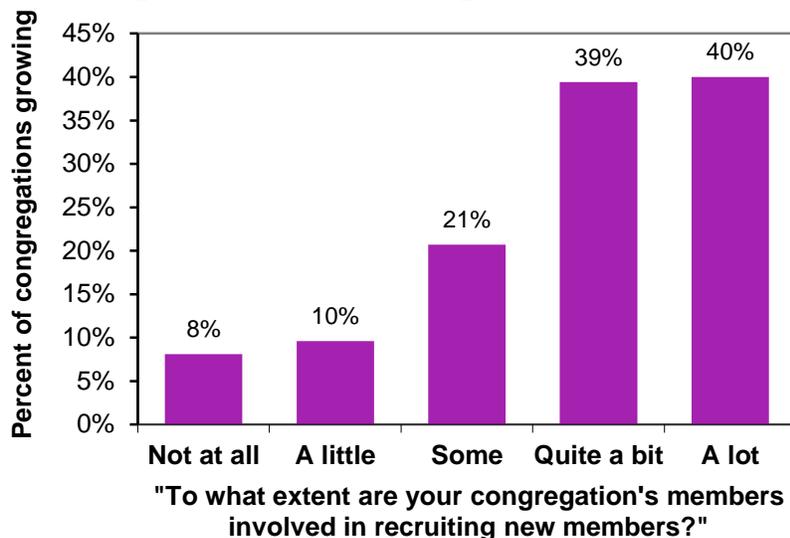
Although it may seem mundane, a vitalized coffee hour is a tangible thing that a congregation can do that helps it develop a sense of community and draws new people into it.

Attracting and incorporating new members requires desire and intentionality, but it also

requires action and the involvement of existing members. Recruitment success results not just from official programs and events, but from the behavior of members

life of the church is a matter of making contact. This begins at worship in the character of the welcome people receive. Some churches have members assigned to

**Figure 22. Recruiting New Members**



greet people, and the greeting can be warm and genuine or it can be perfunctory. Most churches ask newcomers to fill out a card and put it in the offering plate, but sometimes newcomers find the cards missing or there is no meaningful follow-up later in the week.

who promote the congregation and invite others to attend worship and other events. As many studies have shown, the primary way people first connect with a congregation is through a pre-existing relationship with someone who is already involved.

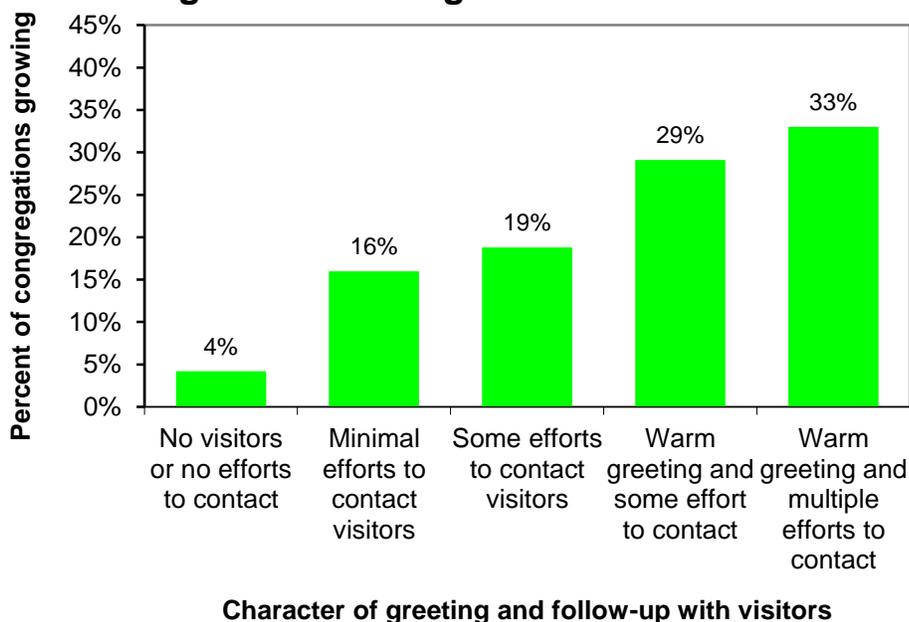
Making contact is also not just about those who attend worship services. Many congregations also make sure they collect the names, mailing or email addresses of persons who

attend special events or support groups or visit their web site. In order for people to know the congregation cares about their presence, the congregation must know that they attended and make an effort to contact them—through several reinforcing ways.

Figure 22 shows the very strong relationship between recruitment activity on the part of members and growth. Where members are involved “quite a bit” or “a lot,” growth is quite likely. By contrast, for congregations where members are involved only “some,” “a little” or “not at all,” very few congregations are growing and many are declining.

For the most part, reaching newcomers and incorporating them into the

**Figure 23. Letting Them Know You Care**



## Program and Recruitment

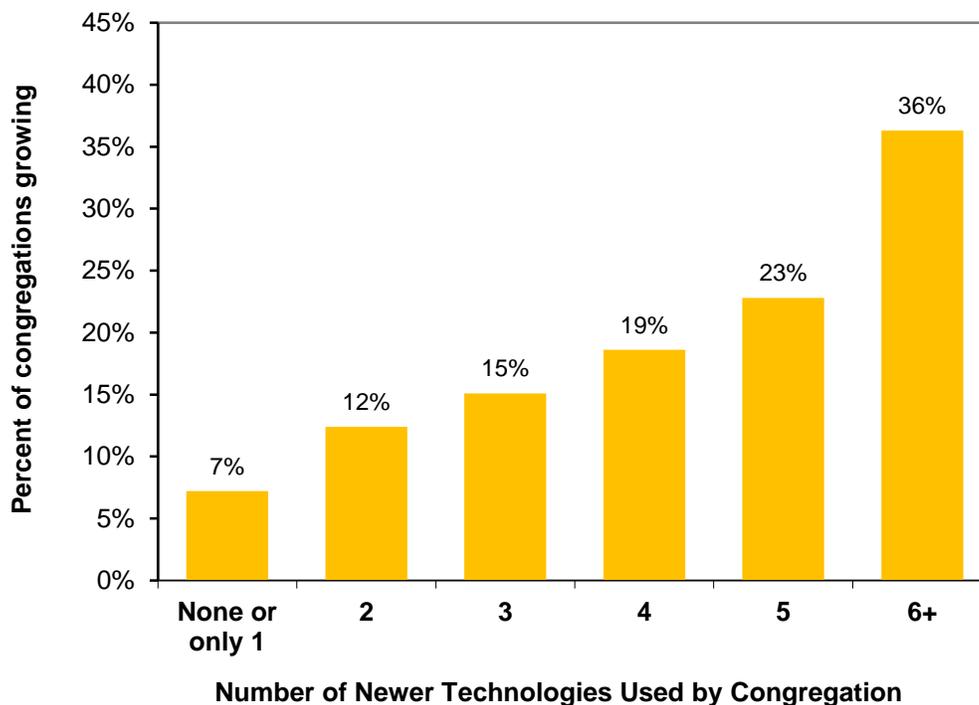
Congregations which say they have no visitors or make no effort to contact the visitors that they have are highly unlikely to experience any growth. As seen in Figure 23, churches that expend some or minimal effort to contact visitors, but that do not go out of their way to greet them warmly in the worship service are more likely to grow than churches which do nothing. In most cases, these visitors are welcomed during announcements, asked to fill out a card, and receive a note, call or follow-up email within the next week or two.

A much stronger association with growth can be found among churches that greet people warmly and individually before or during worship and that also make one or more efforts to contact the visitor after the service. The more types of contact a church uses to reinforce the greeting, the more likely it is to grow.

It is important for a church to communicate with its visitors. It is also important that a church communicate with its members, regular participants and potential members in the community. For contacting members, there were once only printed newsletters and bulletins, calling trees, and announcements during worship. To reach out to potential members in the community, many churches relied on mass mailing, flyers, newspaper ads and even radio and television spots.

Typically, these traditional approaches were either not very effective, costly, or both. A little over ten years ago many churches began to set up web sites for their congregations and to collect email addresses

**Figure 24. Technology, Social Media and Growth**



for their members. In 2005 when a similar survey was conducted, simply having a church web site was strongly related to growth—because it created a 24-hour portal into the church which allowed for greater communication with members and a more visible presence for non-members who may have been either looking for a church or wanted to check out a church before they attended.

In 2015, simply having a website is not rare or cutting-edge. The vast majority of congregations have web sites and for this reason the relationship between simply having a site and growth is not very strong. Now, the issue is whether the web site is regularly updated and whether more active

means of electronic communication are used. The effect of technology for communication is cumulative. The more things are done by a church, the more it is likely to grow. Figure 24 shows that churches that use many kinds of platforms (6 or more) are most likely to grow.

Although nearly all Episcopal congregations see themselves as friendly and welcoming to newcomers and as good at incorporating newcomers into the life of the church, the actual process from a welcome, to engagement, to membership can be tricky

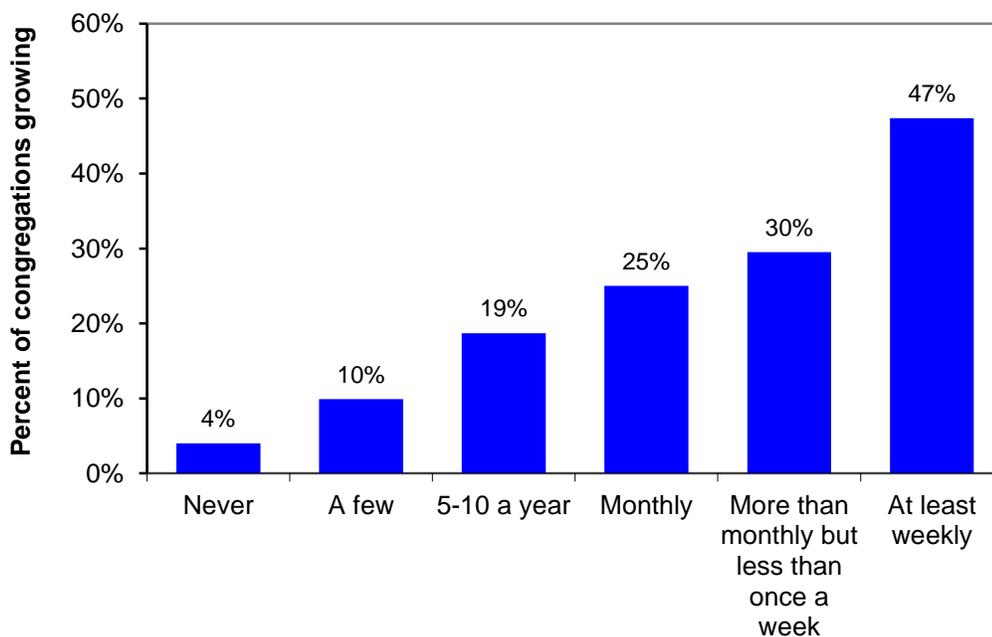
and not always successful. Vital, growing Episcopal congregations are strong, welcoming communities which thrive through the active involvement of members and potential members. A central component of community development is special events and fellowship activities. And this is also true for small congregations that cannot afford to hire speakers or hold concerts.

Congregations that rarely, if ever, hold

special events or fellowships are not likely to grow and almost three quarters are declining. As shown in Figure 25, the more crowded is the special events and fellowship calendar, the more likely is a church to grow. For some churches such activities are weekly events and 47% of these churches were growing and only one church in our sample experienced decline.

Special events and fellowships vary from truly special, major events that may occur only once or annually, to more mundane, even traditional activities that occur more frequently.

**Figure 25. Special Events, Fellowship Activities and Growth**



**How many special events or fellowship activities were held in the past year?**

A growing church will have both an active website and a related Facebook page. In addition to listing services, staff, leadership, a calendar and special events, a visitor to the site can see photos and videos of events, stream the current service or watch a prior service or homily. There will be links to newsletters and one can sign up for e-newsletters and emails from the church. While at church, you can access the Wi-Fi system and follow the order of service, with readings and songs, on your iPad, tablet or smartphone. There is no need to write out a check and put it in an offering plate. Your pledge for the month is deposited automatically.

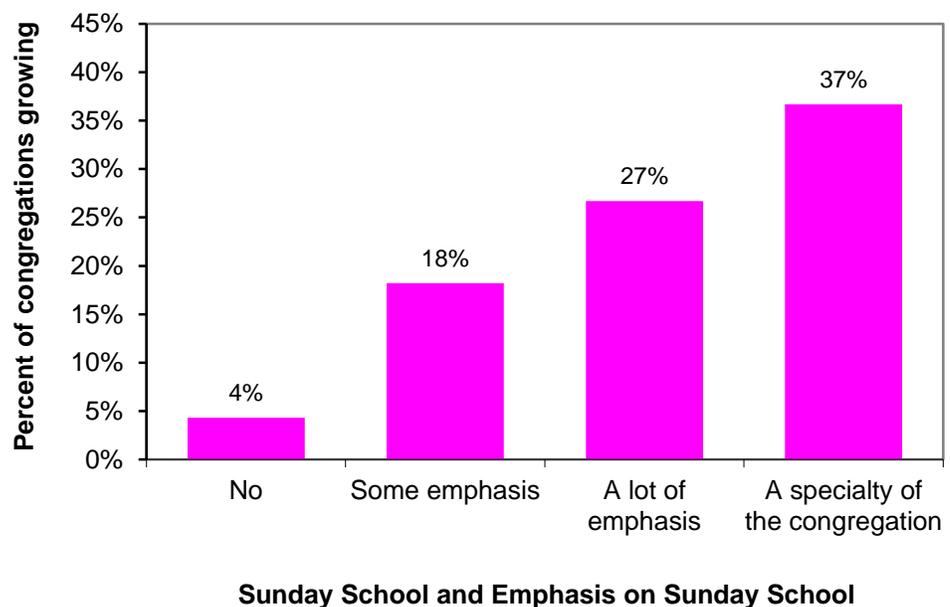
## Program and Recruitment

St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Windham, Maine, just outside of Portland is a vital, growing church with a wide variety of special events and fellowship activities, many of which are organized by the "Fun and Fellowship" committee." These include a Potluck and Chili Challenge and Family Game Night, a kayak/canoe summer cruise down the river to "pray and play," a Mardi Gras celebration with a potluck and variety show, a "Field Day and Fiesta Luncheon," Christmas Caroling with holiday cheer, an annual potluck with movie, and a church-wide excursion to see a local minor league baseball game (the Sea Dogs). In addition to these fellowship events, the church holds a "family Sunday service" monthly with a heavy involvement of children in worship, followed by a meal. There is a Christmas fair, and to raise money for the Christmas fair, wine tastings are held—becoming fellowship activities of their own. There is the typical Shrove Tuesday pancake breakfast, a weekly "lunch and liturgy" on Tuesdays and a monthly family breakfast on Sunday morning. Even outreach becomes a chance for fellowship through the Monday Meals program serving elderly and needy persons in the community with food and lively fellowship with members and their children. St. Ann's is not a wealthy church and not too many years ago it was led by a part-time rector. Other churches with a rich calendar of events and fellowships feature lectures, workshops,

retreats, concerts. And for churches with a rich, chaotic coffee hour, this event is a weekly fellowship opportunity in its own right. Through regular fellowship apart from greetings at Sunday worship, community is initiated, developed and reinforced. In vital growing churches, people do not come to worship and go home without personal interaction with others.

Growing churches emphasize Sunday school. In Episcopal churches, Sunday school typically involves the children and not all Episcopal churches have a lot of children. So is the relationship between an emphasis on Sunday school and growth simply a result of the proportion of children and youth in a church? The answer is "no." There is a strong correlation between an emphasis on Sunday school and growth even in churches with relatively few younger members. The strongest correlation between an emphasis on Sunday school and growth is found for churches with a moderate proportion of children and youth.

**Figure 26. Sunday School and Growth**



## Program and Recruitment

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Almost all congregational programs are related to growth to some degree. Be it prayer and meditation groups, Bible studies, parenting or marriage enrichment, pastoral care, youth activities, young adult activities, outreach, community service, etc., churches that do more are more likely to be growing. This is not just a matter of size, although larger churches do have more activities and programs. Still, the key factor seems to be whether or not a church puts a lot of emphasis on program areas, outreach, or other ministries beyond holding regular worship services.

One of the strongest correlates of growth comes from the emphasis a congregation places on adult religious formation. For churches where this activity is a specialty of the congregation, 36% are growing, as compared to only 6% of churches which do not have adult religious formation classes. Other strong correlates of growth include the emphasis on Children's activities (other than Sunday school), youth activities and programs, young adult activities and programs, and parenting or marriage enrichment activities. Still, among these various program activities, an emphasis on Sunday school has the strongest independent effect on the likelihood for growth.

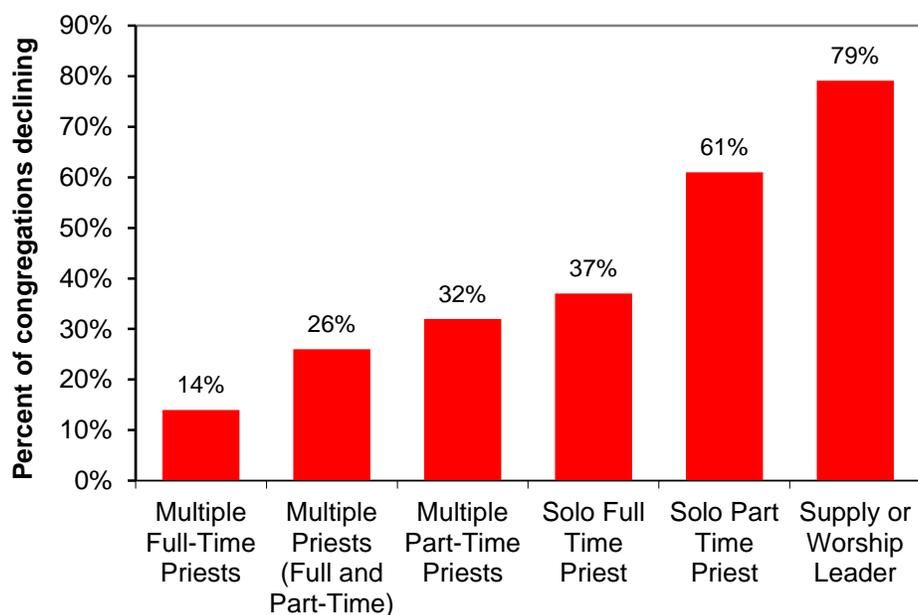
## Leadership

Leadership is important to sustaining the health of a congregation. Historically, the norm was for a congregation to have a full-time paid priest, and in slightly over half of Episcopal congregations (56%) the traditional model is still present. However, as the median attendance of Episcopal congregations dropped and the costs of paying insurance and retirement benefits increased, more churches shifted to part-time clergy, or they rely on supply clergy or lay worship leaders.

have priest and worship is typically led by lay leaders (some licensed) or deacons. Of the approximately 13% of Episcopal congregations that only use supply priests, a deacon or a worship leader, 79% experienced decline in worship attendance.

Decline was also widespread among churches with a solo part-time priest. These churches included congregations that shared a full time priest (but who was part-time in each of the congregations they served).

**Figure 27. Priest Status and Decline**



### Priest Status in Congregation

Not surprisingly, churches with multiple priests were most likely to have grown and least likely to have *declined* between 2009 and 2013. In terms of the percentage *growing*, it did not matter if all priests were all full-time, a combination of full and part-time or even the rare situation where all priests were part-time.

On the other side of the leadership spectrum were churches that had no priest, other than a supply priest. Some of these churches rarely

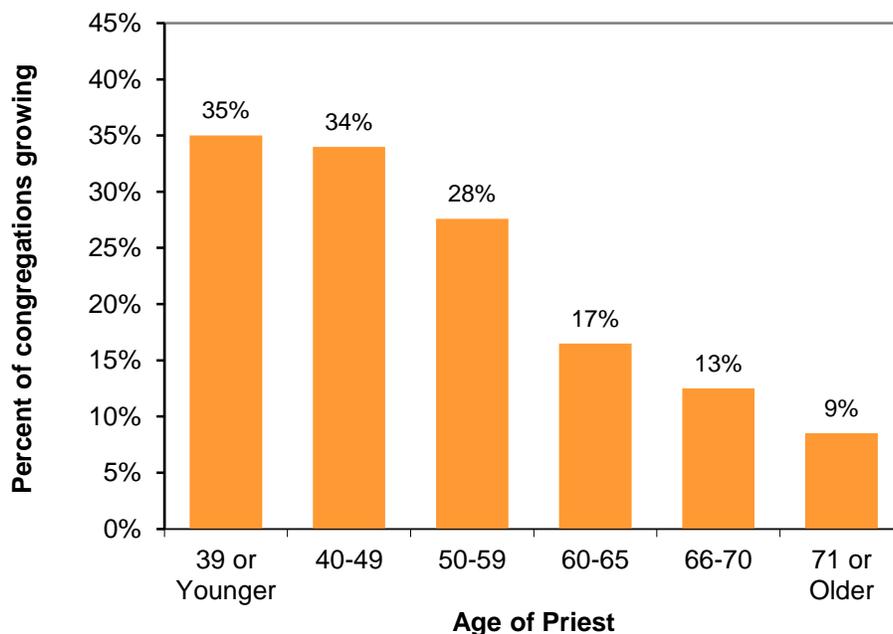
Decline was less likely in the “normative,” church with a solo, full time, paid priest. The growth/decline profile of these churches was not as positive as churches with multiple priests, but it was much better than churches with a part-time priest or supply priests.

Although it is increasingly difficult for smaller churches to support a solo full-time priest, a part-time priest or supply priest is likely to lead to further decline.

The median Episcopal rector, vicar, dean or priest-in-charge (not counting interims, supply priests, curates or associates) is 59 years of age. The age of a congregation’s priest is strongly related to growth and decline. Churches with priests age 49 and younger are most likely to grow, followed by churches with priests age 50-59.

The likelihood of growth decreases greatly among older age cohorts of priests leading congregations. Only 17% of churches with

**Figure 28. Age of Priest and Growth**



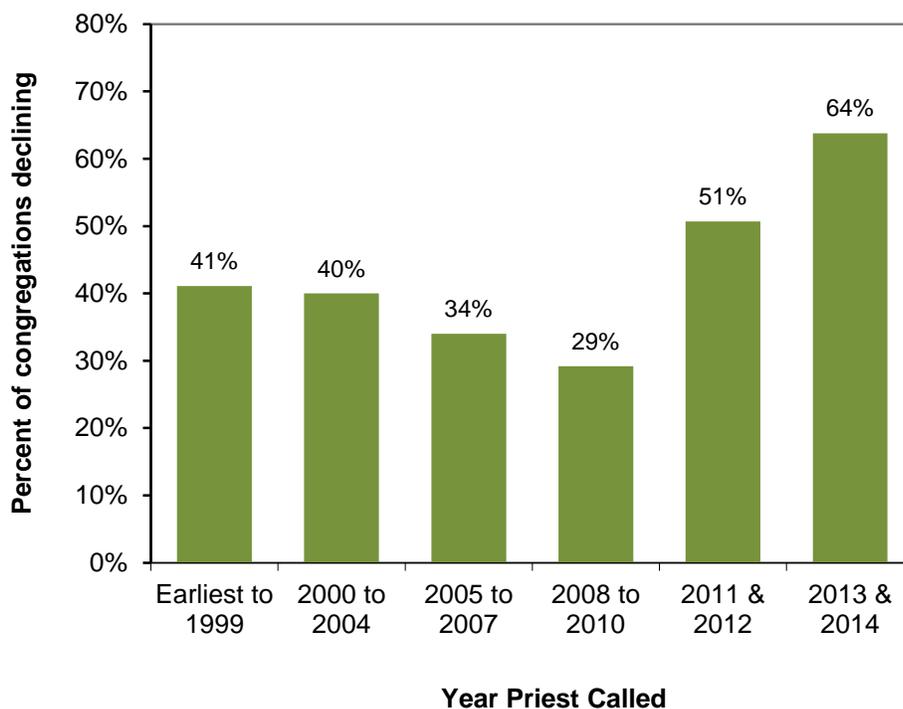
priests age 60-65 are growing and the proportion growing is even lower among congregations led by priests in their late 60s or in their 70s. Of course, some of the older priests are retired clergy that serve congregations while receiving retirement benefits. But retirement status in and of itself is not strongly associated with serving a declining parish. The association is primarily with age.

Calling a new priest can be problematic for many congregations. The majority of Episcopal congregations that called a new priest (not an interim) in 2013 or in the first half of 2014 were declining and slightly over half of congregations that called a priest in 2011 and 2012

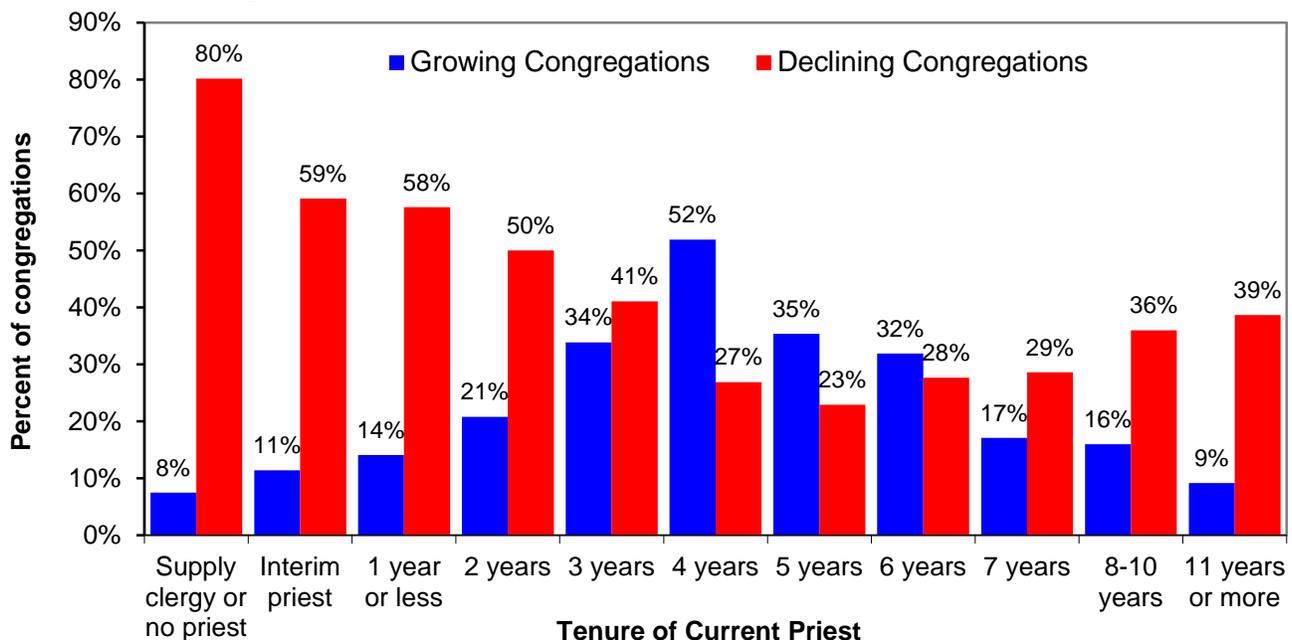
were also declining. To a certain extent, the decline may be a result of frequent clergy turnover in some congregations, but the effect of a recent call is so pervasive that it speaks more to problems in the period of transition—from the resignation of a priest, the hiring of an interim (or a succession of supply priests), the interim period (including the search), the hiring of a new priest and the adjustment to a new leadership situation. The transitional period tends to be one of decline. Decline

becomes much less likely several years after the transition is made.

**Figure 29. Year Priest Called and Decline**



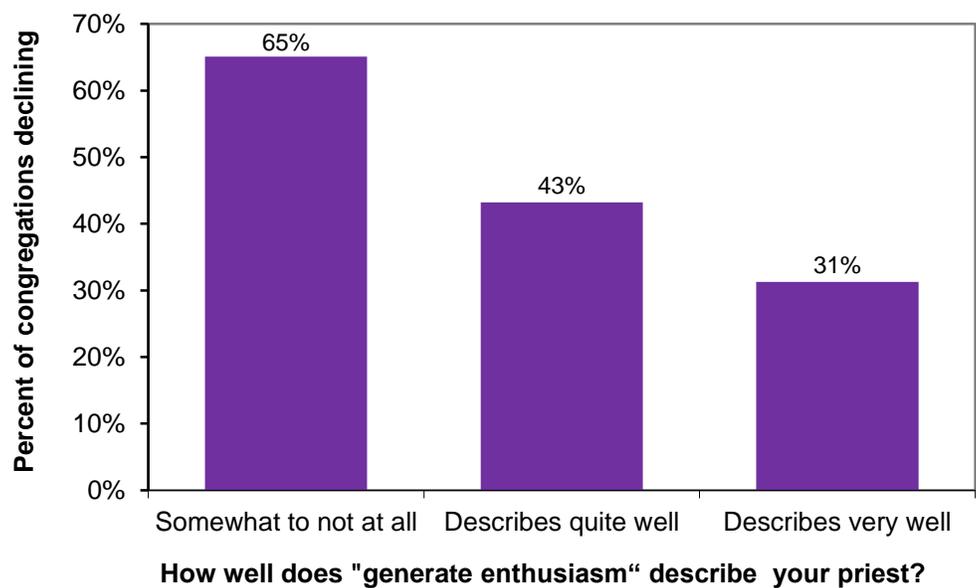
**Figure 30. Tenure of Current Priest and Growth/Decline**



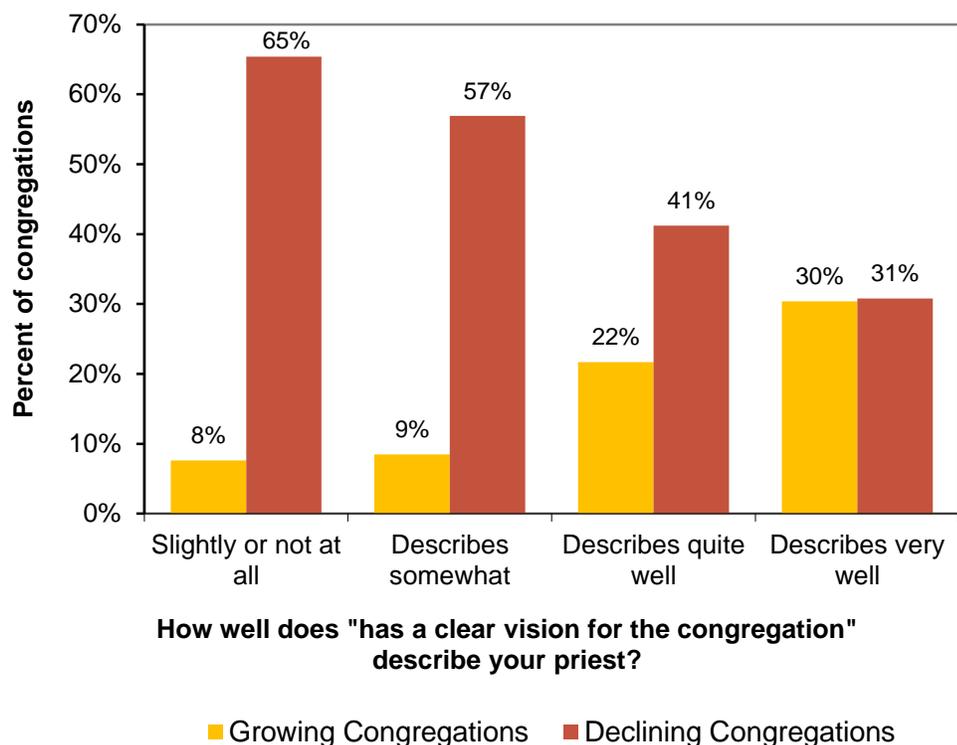
As seen earlier, decline is most likely when a congregation has no priest or only uses supply clergy (including long-term supply situations). Figure 30 shows that decline is also widespread among churches with interim priests and among churches where the new priest has been there one year or less. The likelihood of growth increases with tenure through four years. After four years of tenure, fewer congregations are growing and more are declining. In churches where the priest has led the congregation for 11 years or more, 39% of congregations are declining and only 9% are growing. As compared to churches with an interim or a new priest, the percentage of

churches in decline is lower among congregations with long-tenured clergy, but the percentage growing is also quite low. That is because so many churches with long-tenured priests are on stable plateaus—neither growing nor declining very much.

**Figure 31. Not Generating Enthusiasm and Decline**



**Figure 32. Clear Vision and Growth/Decline**



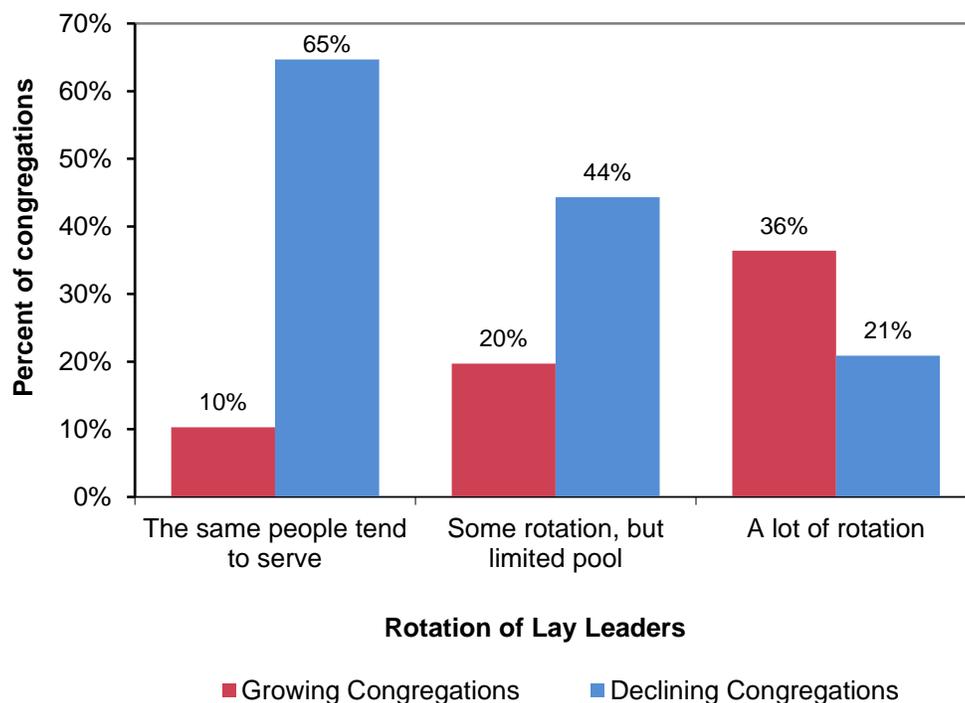
Priests lead congregations in a variety of ways. Gifts vary, as does the focus of ministry and the ability to provide leadership. Unfortunately, it is not possible to create truly objective ratings of ministerial performance using a survey of this type. But a number of subjective questions were asked that were completed by either the priest or another church leader. Although prone to self-depreciation or exaggeration, the fact that relatively strong correlations exist between the ratings and growth, suggests that they have some validity and that most priests are answering the questions honestly. A large number of characteristics were tested. The characteristics most strongly related to growth and decline (in descending order of strength) were: “generates enthusiasm;” “has a clear vision for the congregation;” “is a charismatic leader;” and “knows how to get people to work together.” Lower, but still significant correlations with growth were found for “effective preacher,” “evangelistic,” “hard

worker,” “knows how to get things done,” and “is friendly and engaging.” The lowest correlations with growth were found for “knows the Bible and theology,” “cares about people,” “good liturgist/worship leader,” and “is a person of deep faith.” Lest one assume that it doesn’t matter whether or not a priest knows the Bible or is a person of faith, such characteristics are basic to being a priest and lack much variation. Indeed, the four items with the lowest correlation with growth were among the characteristics that nearly all priests said fit them “very well” or “quite well.” But the characteristics that are most strongly correlated with growth are different. Not all priests are able to generate enthusiasm, get people to work together or have a clear vision for the congregation. Even fewer describe themselves as “charismatic leaders.” These are leadership skills and many church leaders lack them or fail to use them. The ratings that were widespread among priests and that also significantly related to growth were being an “effective preacher,” and “is friendly and engaging.” Only 5% of Episcopal parish priests say that they are just “somewhat” friendly and engaging and 6% say that being “an effective preacher” describes them “somewhat” or “slightly.”

## Leadership

Moving from clergy leadership to lay leadership, the survey asked whether “the same people tend to serve in volunteer leadership roles year after year, or does your congregation rotate volunteer service among a larger number of people?” As can be seen in Figure 33, if the same people tend to serve, the congregation is very likely to be declining. Where there is some rotation, but among a limited number of people, decline is less dominant and growth is more likely. Where there is a lot of rotation among lay leaders, growth is much more likely. Lack of rotation in the vestry, wardens and other leadership positions tends to overwork the leaders to the point where the church is mostly about committee work, and it also leads to an insular, closed community that is difficult for newcomers to really join.

**Figure 33. Rotation of Lay Leadership and Growth/Decline**



## Putting it all Together

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The previous sections examined the relationship between various aspects of church life and growth or decline in average worship attendance. Each of the charts only considered one aspect of church life in isolation from other growth-related factors. It is possible to examine the independent effect of each factor using multivariate statistical procedures in order to determine which are more important to understanding why some congregations grow and why others do not.

Some characteristics of a congregation are either beyond its control or are part of its essential makeup. How those characteristics came to be present is relevant, of course, but when dealing with the character and makeup of a congregation it is necessary to realize that such characteristics are not programs or emphases that can be adjusted easily.

Looking first at background characteristics and congregational composition, we note that *regional location* has a strong, independent effect on church growth and decline among Episcopal congregations. The possibilities for growth are better in the western states and the South and less likely in the Midwest and Northeast. To a certain extent, this relationship is due to greater population growth in these regions—which contain the so-called “sun-belt.” But the lack of an independent relationship between population growth and church growth at the local level, suggests that the regional environment is more important. Churchgoing is more normative generally in the South and in western states religious bodies flourish within subcultures of interest. The West also is a region with greater experimentation and flexibility in religious expression and structure.

Episcopal churches are more likely to grow in newer suburbs, in gentrifying urban areas, and in more affluent communities (with higher incomes and property values). But these

associations do not have an independent effect on attendance growth.

Stronger than region, but also largely out of a congregation’s immediate control is the racial/ethnic composition of a congregation. Churches that are predominantly Hispanic or Asian, or that are multi-racial or multi-ethnic are more likely to experience growth than are predominantly white/Anglo and predominantly African-American or Black churches. The effect is pervasive and actually increases when statistical controls are in effect.

Another growth-related constituency factor is that of age—age of the membership, rather than the congregation. Congregations with larger proportions of members age 50 and older are more likely to be in decline than churches with smaller proportions of members in this age group. The effect of having older members (age 50+) is stronger than the positive effect of younger families or the negative effect of persons in retirement age (age 65+). Few Episcopal congregations are predominantly elderly, but a great many of our churches are primarily composed of persons in their 50s or older. Such congregations tend to be declining, irrespective of other influences on growth and decline in the congregation.

A final background characteristic is the size of the congregation, as measured by attendance in 2009. Although there is no greater tendency for smaller or larger churches to be growing, churches that were smaller in 2009 were more likely to have declined by 2013 and churches that were larger were more likely to be plateaued over the same four years. This finding speaks to the increasing difficulty faced by small congregations in the American context.

In the middle of the last decade, one of the strongest correlates of growth, or the lack of it

## Putting it all Together

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was the presence or absence of *conflict*. Compared to other denominations the impact of conflict was greater because conflict was more widespread as the Episcopal Church dealt with issues related to sexuality along with the usual congregational disputes over leadership, finances, worship and program. At present, conflicts over sexuality have greatly subsided and the overall level of conflict in the Church is much lower. Still, the presence of conflict remains an independent source of decline and a corresponding impediment to growth. But it is no longer the strongest correlate of attendance change among Episcopal congregations.

In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was a rating of the congregation as being “*spiritually vital and alive*.” Vital organizations have a different sense to them, which is tangible, but hard to describe. Social theorist Randall Collins calls it “*entrainment*,” a process of rhythmic synchronization where actions flow into each other, heightening the shared mood, the sense of collective effervescence and excitement. There is life in vital congregations and it is contagious. Such congregations tend to be growing.

Descriptions of the character of worship (joyful, exciting, vibrant and engaging, reverent, etc.) had no independent effect on growth. In past surveys there was an independent negative effect of having very formal, “*reverent*,” predictable worship. But in the present survey, there is no such strong relationship. Instead, the only strong, independent worship-related influence on growth is seen in the number and type of worship services (even when controlling for congregational size). Churches which use Morning Prayer, a combination of Morning Prayer and Rite I, or a combination of Rite I and Rite II are more likely to be declining.

Churches which stick to a typical expression of Rite II for all of their services are more likely to grow and less likely to decline. But churches that offer non-typical services, whether imaginative, contemporary, ancient-modern or in languages other than English are much more likely to experience growth.

What about the effect of what congregations do, other than providing worship? For one thing, the impact of electronic engagement has grown stronger. A decade ago, the key factor was simply having a web site; but as web sites have become almost universal, this is no longer the case. Now the effect is produced by active electronic engagement in a variety of forms, and the impact is cumulative. The more a church does, the more likely it is to experience growth. The issue is that of communication and communication comes in a greater variety of forms today. So churches must update their website and Facebook page. Tweets and Twitter feeds, regular emails, podcasts and online posts/streaming of worship and or/sermons, e-newsletters, Wi-Fi at church, online giving, etc. all add to the ongoing connection of the congregation to the member.

Somewhat surprising, given past findings, is a strong, independent relationship between Sunday school and growth. Even when controlling for the age structure of the church, an emphasis on Sunday school is important. In Episcopal congregations, Sunday school is primarily for children and churches with more children are more likely to grow. However, it is important what a church does with the children of members and whether or not it offers quality Christian education for newcomers and their families.

The creation and the maintenance of community is particularly important in Episcopal churches. Almost all congregations

## Putting it all Together

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see themselves as warm and friendly, but among growing congregations there is considerable effort to draw people into the life of the church and make them a part of it. Growing churches tend to have more special events and fellowship activities. Even when controlling for size (because larger churches have more of everything), the effect is independent. There is more going on in growing churches and it adds to the life of the congregation. A related effect is provided by a coffee hour that draws newcomers in and facilitates interaction among members, old and young. Food and fellowship are good things, but not always present at coffee hours. Creative chaos is even better.

It helps for a congregation to have a priest, but not simply a supply priest who only conducts worship on Sunday. Having a part-time priest is better than having no priest, but not as helpful as having a full-time priest. Not surprisingly, having multiple priests is most strongly associated with growth.

Among churches with priests, the relative gifts of the rector/vicar/dean or priest-in-charge were related to growth without controls in effect. It helped to be able to generate enthusiasm, have a clear vision, to get people to work together and even to be a charismatic leader. However, these relationships did not have an independent effect on growth/decline. More important were an interrelated set of “objective” characteristics of clergy. First there is the *age of clergy*. Growing churches were more likely to have younger clergy, whereas plateaued and declining churches were more likely to have clergy in their 60s and 70s. Churches that called their priest in the last few years were most likely to be declining. Separating out the effect of recently called priests from the effect of clergy tenure results in a negative relationship between length of tenure and

growth. Priests who had led their churches for seven years or more were particularly likely to be in plateaued or declining congregations. The loss of a priest and the process of living without a priest or calling a new priest (including periods without a priest, calling an interim, multiple interims, failed searches, etc.) can be quite disruptive and frequently leads to decline. A new priest sometimes provokes rapid growth, but more typically it takes a few years. Growth is more likely during years 3-6. Growth is very unlikely in churches with very long tenured priests (over 10 years). The median tenure for rectors, vicars, deans and priests-in-charge at the end of their service to a church is 5 1/2 years.

Congregations grow (and decline) for many reasons and it is not possible to examine them all. Also, growth occurs for different reasons within different contexts. Here we look only at the national, gross picture. The relationships are instructive, but there are different avenues for growth and vitality—not just one.

