

# FACTs

on

# Episcopal Church Growth

*A new look at the dynamics of growth and decline in Episcopal parishes and missions based on the Faith Communities Today 2005 (FACT 2005) national survey of 4,100 congregations*



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RESEARCH-BASED PERSPECTIVES FOR BUILDING VITAL FAITH COMMUNITIES

# FACTs

## on Episcopal Church Growth

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Some Episcopal congregations are growing, many are declining, and still others are essentially stable in attendance. Why do many congregations thrive but others find that growth is elusive?

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

- The location and demographic makeup of the congregation;
- The congregation's identity;
- The congregation's worship;
- The congregation's activities; and
- The congregation's leadership.

Most of what is considered here are things that help congregations grow, but in some cases the emphasis will be on decline—things that growing churches avoid.

Growth is measured by change in average weekend worship attendance (ASA) from 2000 to 2005 using a 4-category growth/decline variable that ranged from severe decline, moderate decline, plateau, to growth. Growing congregations scored at the top of a scale that combined percent change in ASA with net change. Using this growth scale mitigates the problem of small congregations tending to have the greatest percent change in attendance and large congregations tending to have the greatest net change in attendance. In order to be included in the growth category a congregation must have experienced substantial net growth, and also growth of at least 5% from 2000 to 2005.

The following charts report the percentage of growing congregations within response categories on various survey questions. For instance, when asked, "Does your congregation have a clear mission and purpose?" among congregations responding that say they "strongly agree," 38% are growing in worship attendance. Among those saying "somewhat agree," 24% are growing. Among congregations who say they are "unsure," the percentage growing is only 14% and it drops to 11% among congregations who "disagree" that they have a clear mission and purpose. The strength of the relationship with growth is seen in the degree of difference between the highest and lowest columns, which in this case is 27 percentage points—quite a large difference.

# Congregational Context and Composition

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

**FIGURE 1** shows that congregations located in newer suburbs are more likely to experience growth than congregations in any other setting. Congregations are least likely to grow in older residential areas of cities, rural areas, small towns and older suburbs. Newer suburbs are where the greatest population growth is occurring. New people move into new housing and often look for a worshipping community nearby. Population growth is not a dominant feature of the other locations and congregations cannot rely on a steady supply of newcomers.

A surprising feature of **FIGURE 1** is that the second best area for growth is the downtown or central city of a metropolitan area. In years past, downtown congregations were mired in decline as the suburbs boomed and the central cities lost people. Urban renewal and gentrification changed this dynamic.

In terms of decline, the highest proportion of declining congregations (48%) was found in older suburbs, followed closely by older residential areas (46%). So even though growth may be fueled by new people moving into newer suburbs, population growth does not last forever. Even before suburbs are “built out,” their growth rates drop as the wave of new construction moves into outlying areas.

Congregations that are dependent on suburban growth are often caught by surprise when the influx of new people in the community slows down. Blame for the subsequent membership problems is usually misdirected.

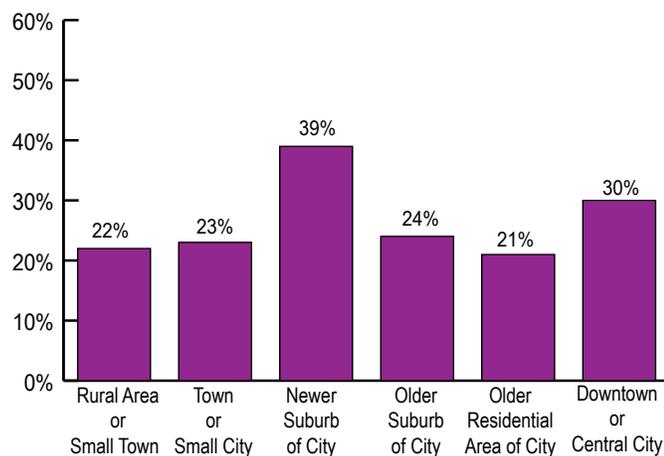
Using census data for 2000 and population estimates for 2005 confirms the strong relationship between population growth in the community and church growth. In fact, the strongest demographic correlate with growth is increase or decrease in the number of households. In zip code areas where the number of households increased 2% a year or more, 35% of congregations grew in worship attendance. By contrast, only 17% of congregations were growing in areas that experienced no growth or actual decline in the number of households from 2000 to 2005.

In years past, region was one of the most important growth-related factors—in the sense that the South was better for growth than all other regions (and the Midwest was the worst). This remains true for most religious bodies in the United States, and Episcopal churches in the South are still slightly more likely to grow, but region is no longer a major correlate of growth in the Episcopal Church.

Congregations are living organisms. They are born, they flourish or stagnate, and some even die. But as shown in **FIGURE 2**, the newest congregations are most likely to grow in the Episcopal Church. In part, this is because new congregations are more likely to be started in growing suburban areas. However, even outside of

**FIGURE 1**

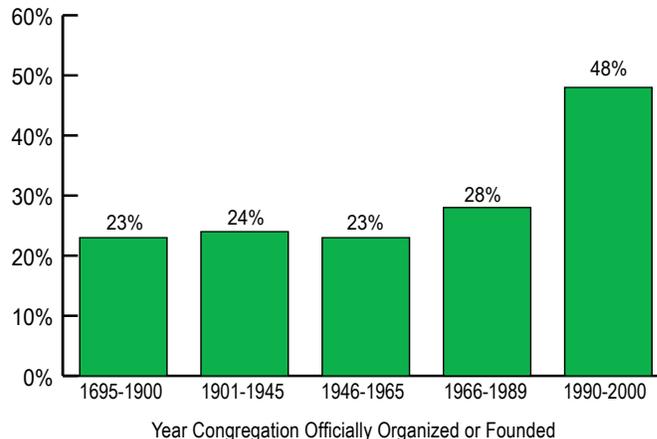
**Location, Location, Location** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Place Where Congregation's Principal Place of Worship is Located

**FIGURE 2**

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



newer suburbs, younger congregations are more likely to grow than older congregations. New organizations of all types tend to be more focused on establishing themselves as viable institutions. They cannot take it for granted. Unfortunately, the growth advantage of younger congregations does not seem to last much longer than 15 years. After that, the growth profile by age category varies little among congregations founded prior to 1990.

Like other mainline denominations in America, the vast majority of Episcopal congregations are predominantly white/non-Hispanic or “Anglo” (90%). And as is also the case in all mainline denominations, Anglo churches are least likely to grow. It should be added, however, that the relationship between race/ethnicity and growth tends to be stronger in other denominations. Typically, racial/ethnic minority churches and multi-racial/multi-ethnic churches are newer on average and have more dynamic, exciting, and inspirational worship services. But this is less true in the Episcopal Church than in most other denominations. For instance, even though worship in predominantly black Episcopal churches is rated as somewhat more “exciting” and “joyful” than in Anglo churches, Black Episcopal churches are older on average than predominantly white churches in terms of both their founding dates and the age of their members.

The other racial/ethnic congregations and the multi-racial churches fared better in most areas than Anglo and Black churches, but the differences were not extreme. In general, the profile for Hispanic congregations was better

than for any other group. They were newer, had younger members, and were characterized by more exciting and joyful worship.

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

Congregations where middle age and older adults (age 50 or older) comprise 25% or less of all active members (including children) were most likely to grow. Congregations in which more than 75% of their active members are 50 or older were very unlikely to grow. The mere presence of older adults is not problematic in and of itself. But a congregation where most of the members are older tends to have a cluster of characteristics that inhibit growth. Not only are no children being born to members, but such congregations often lack a clear sense of mission and purpose, vibrant worship, and involvement in recruitment and evangelism. They also are more likely to be located in rural areas and smaller towns.

FIGURE 3

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

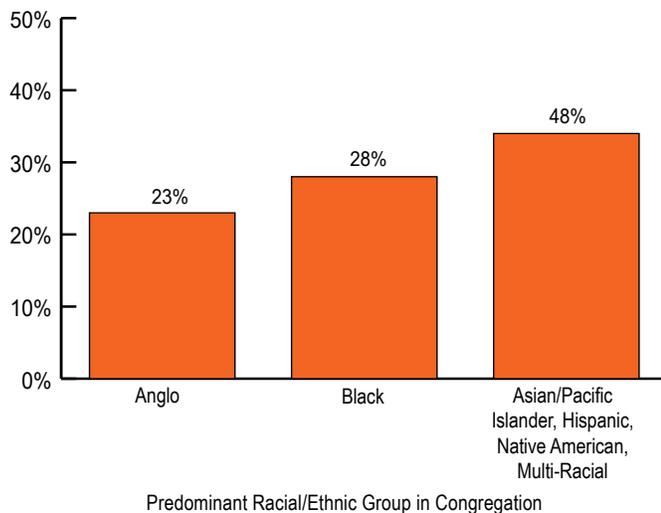
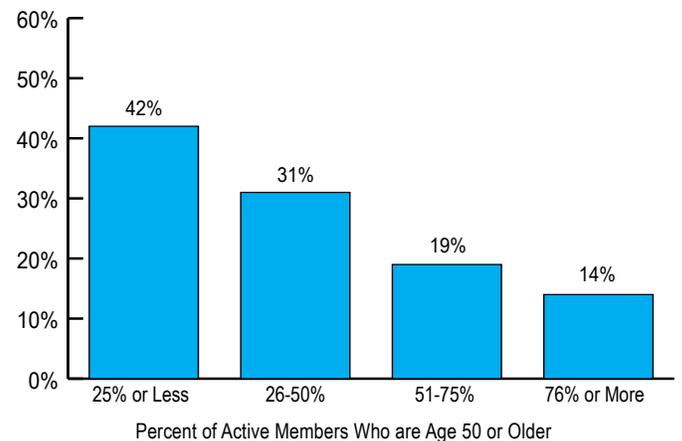


FIGURE 4

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



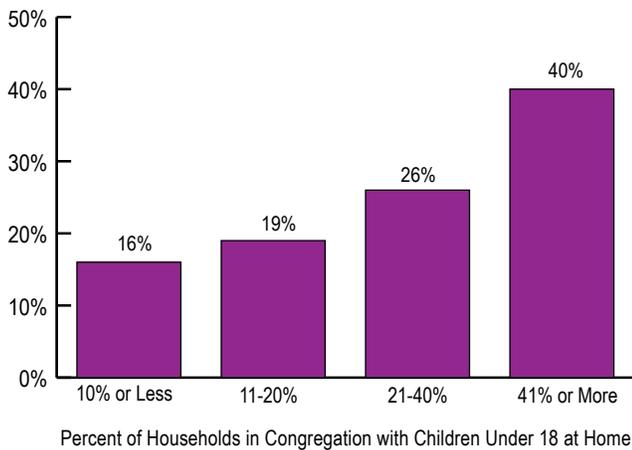
If larger proportions of older adults lead to growth problems, larger proportions of younger adults lead to growth opportunities. The congregation that is able to attract younger adults is somewhat exceptional. To be sure, such churches are most often found in the suburbs and are thus able to reach that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

Other elements of congregational composition were also related to growth and decline. Not surprisingly, the proportion of households with children in the home is related to growth. As can be seen in **FIGURE 5**, more is better. Again, churches in the suburbs tend to have more families with children. However, the relationship between the proportion of households with children and growth is stronger in non-suburban areas than it is in the suburbs.

The proportion of females among active adult participants is related to decline rather than growth in the sense that declining churches tend to have a disproportionate number of women. A near-even balance of males and females is more conducive to growth (see **FIGURE 6**). Even when controlling for the proportion of older participants, the proportion of women in the congregation is correlated with decline. This is not one of the stronger relationships found with growth/decline, but it is statistically significant.

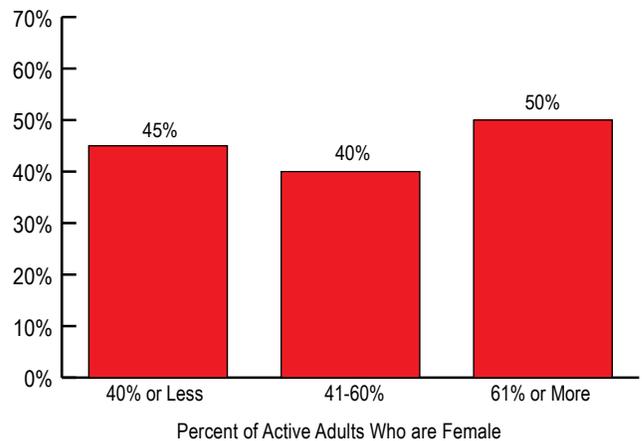
**FIGURE 5**

**Children at Home and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 6**

**The Gender Balance and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Declining*



# Congregational Identity and Orientation

It is well known that most conservative, evangelical and sectarian religious bodies are growing 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. Since 2001, however, membership and attendance decline have returned to our churches. The continuing disparity in growth between mainline and evangelical Protestant 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.

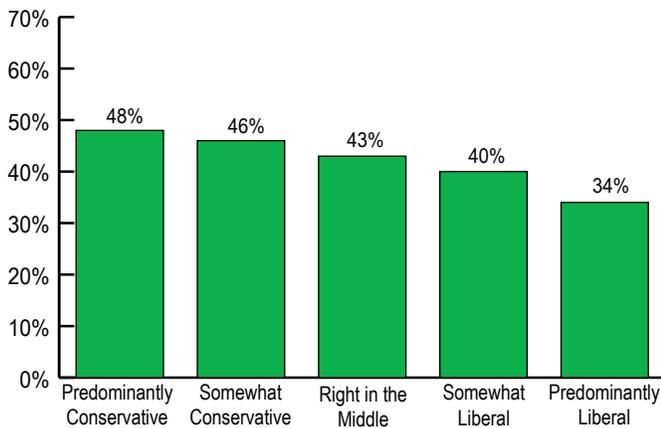
Within conservative evangelical denominations, the minority moderate and somewhat liberal churches are actually more likely to grow than very conservative churches. Among most mainline denominations there is a curvilinear relationship between conservatism and church growth; with more conservative and more liberal churches growing and moderate churches most likely to decline. Interestingly, the Episcopal pattern in 2005 is more similar to the evangelical pattern. As shown in **FIGURE 7**, the most conservative Episcopal congregations are more likely to decline; whereas the most liberal churches are least likely to decline and most likely to grow. It should be added that this is not one of

the stronger relationships with growth—as can be seen in the relatively small differences between categories in terms of percent declining. Nevertheless, the correlation is significant and may also seem counter-intuitive.

Adding confusion to the mix in terms of this relationship, parishes in the 11 most actively conservative dioceses (based on requests for alternative primatial oversight, “Network” membership and General Convention votes) are slightly more likely to grow than congregations in majority dioceses. But since the churches in the 11 dioceses tend to be more conservative on average, how can they be experiencing slightly greater growth than churches in majority dioceses? In point of fact, the relationship between congregational conservatism and growth differs between the two groups of dioceses. Within the 11 very conservative dioceses growth is greatest among “predominantly conservative” congregations (39% growing) and least among “somewhat conservative” congregations (only 25% growing). Among parishes “in the middle” and more liberal congregations the proportion growing is 29% and 30%, respectively. So in the very conservative 11 dioceses we have another curvilinear relationship, with congregations at the end-points faring better.

**FIGURE 7**

**Theological Orientation and Decline** *Percent of Congregations declining*



Theological Orientation of Most Active Members

The relationship between growth and conservatism/liberalism in majority dioceses is essentially the same as that seen in **FIGURE 7**, but the correlation is even stronger when the 11 dioceses are not included.

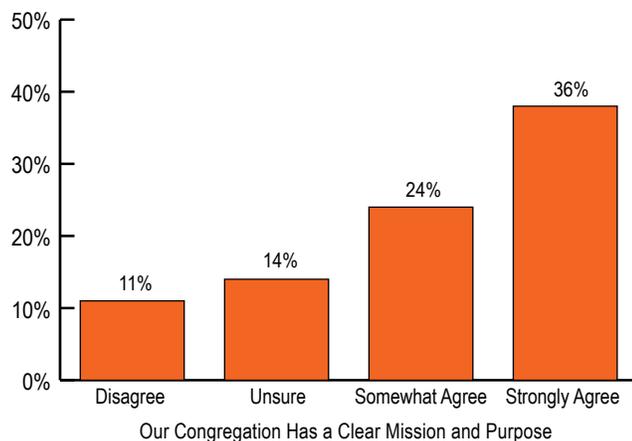
More important than theological orientation are clarity of mission and purpose and the religious character of the congregation. Growing churches are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing. They do not grow because they have always been at the corner of Elm Street and Main. They do not grow because they focus on satisfying long-term members. They grow because they understand their reason for being and make sure they “stick to their knitting”—doing the things well that are essential to their lives as religious organizations.

Essential to the mission of any religious congregation is creating a community where people encounter God. Otherwise, congregations often resemble inward-looking social clubs with little unique sense of purpose. The strong correlation between mission and purpose and growth is seen in **FIGURE 8**.

In **FIGURE 9** we see the strong relationship between growth and the sense that the congregation is “spiritually vital and alive.” This relationship is central to whether a congregation is actualizing its unique purpose—doing that thing that congregations are more able to do than any other organization in society.

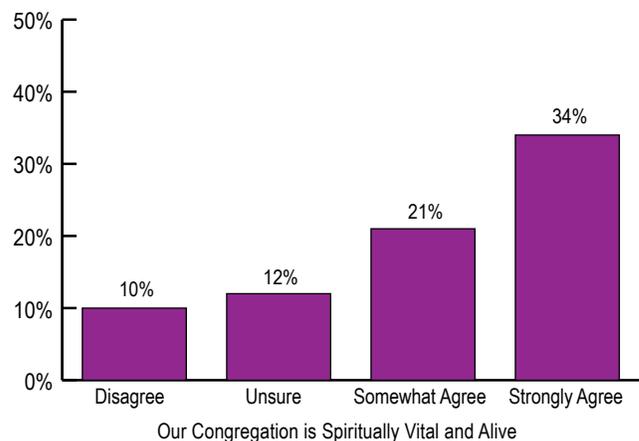
**FIGURE 8**

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



**FIGURE 9**

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



Congregations exist in towns and neighborhoods that are constantly changing. Congregations themselves are also in constant flux as people join, become active or inactive, give birth, drop out, move away or die. Vital organizations are those that adapt and adaptation requires change.

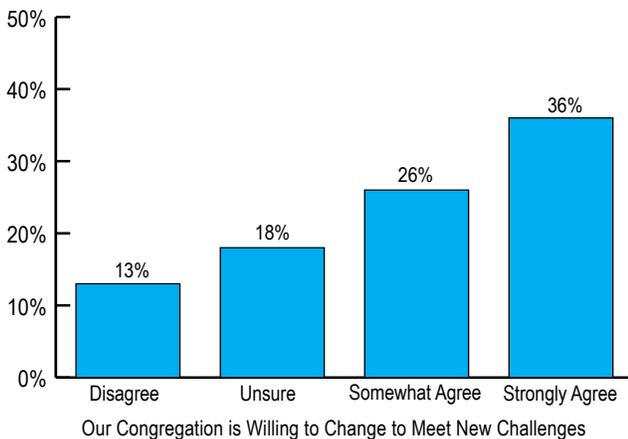
**FIGURE 10** shows that congregations who say they are willing to change to meet new challenges also tend to be growing congregations. Most congregations believe that they are willing to change, which is somewhat surprising given the traditionalistic reputation of religious groups in America. But among the minority of Episcopal congregations that doubt their ability to change, growth is very unlikely. Only 13% of these congregations experienced growth in worship attendance from 2000 to 2005.

Congregations, families, communities, and clubs are all social groups and one characteristic they share is the possibility for internal conflict. Members sometimes argue, fight, hold grudges and withhold contributions. Congregational fights tend to be unpleasant, creating a situation in which some people leave and others see no reason to join. Congregations that have experienced higher levels of conflict are more likely to have declined in attendance.

**FIGURE 11** reports results on a conflict scale which combines responses to six sources of conflict. Church leaders were asked, for instance, if the congregation had experienced conflict over money, finances or budget, and if so, was the conflict “not very serious,” “moderately serious,” or “very serious”? Other areas of possible conflict included “how worship is conducted,” “priest’s leadership style,” “program priorities of the congregation,” “use of church facilities,” and “actions of General Convention 2003 regarding the Bishop of New Hampshire.” Only 7% of Episcopal congregations indicated that they experienced no conflict in any area during the previous five years. Among congregations with little or no conflict, only 33% declined in worship attendance. By contrast, 58% of congregations with multiple types of serious conflict experienced decline.

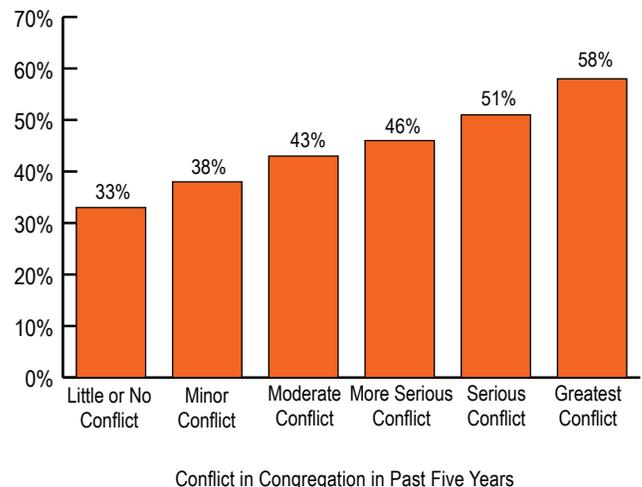
**FIGURE 10**

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



**FIGURE 11**

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



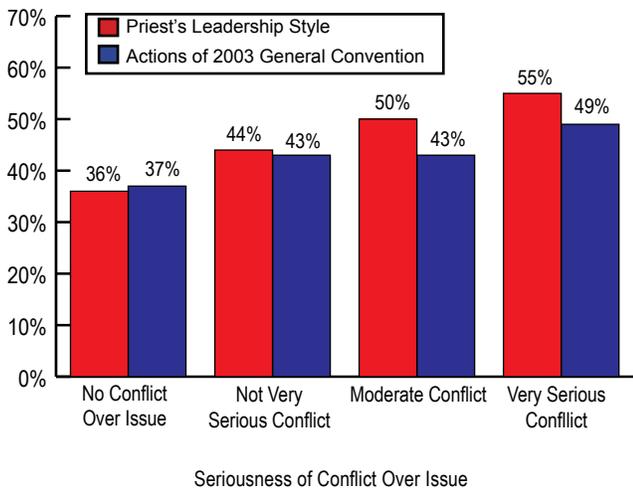
Among the various sources of conflict that were offered, the strongest correlation with growth and decline was conflict over the priest's leadership style. Also fairly strongly correlated with growth/decline was conflict over money, finances and budget. The most frequent source of conflict mentioned, however, was "actions of General Convention 2003 regarding the Bishop of New Hampshire." Overall, 78% of Episcopal congregations reported experiencing some conflict over this issue, with almost half (47%) of all congregations reporting that they had moderately serious or very serious conflict. Conservative Episcopal congregations were much more likely to have experienced serious conflict over the actions of General Convention 2003 than liberal congregations.

on average, the net impact was less than conflict over leadership. However, the fact that so many congregations had conflict over GC2003 meant that the effect of the conflict on national statistics was much greater.

Congregations that experienced major conflict (of all types), rather than minor conflict, were much more likely to have a leader resign or be fired and to have members withhold contributions to the congregation. Apparently even minor conflict tends to lead some people to leave the congregation, but major conflicts necessarily involve committed members who act on their displeasure while remaining in the congregation.

**FIGURE 12** contrasts the relationship between two sources of conflict and decline in worship attendance. As can be seen by the size of the difference in the columns (comparing congregations with no conflict with those with very serious conflict), very serious conflict over the priest's leadership was more likely to lead to decline in attendance than conflict over General Convention 2003. Conflict over leadership is often debilitating—especially when such conflict leads to the termination of the priest or other staff member. In general, conflict over General Convention tended to be less disruptive for most congregations that experienced it. Some congregations were highly conflicted over the issue, of course, but

**FIGURE 12**  
**Source and Seriousness of Conflict and Attendance Decline** *Percent of Congregations Declining*



# The Character of Congregational Worship

Worship is central to the life of congregations in America. The community gathers, they hear homilies or sermons, they participate in the Eucharist, and they sing and pray. There is variation within and among denominations in the manner and frequency in which these elements take place, but there is less variation within the Episcopal Church than in most religious bodies.

If weekday services are excluded, most Episcopal parishes and missions hold either one (40%) or two worship services (40%) each week. Only 14% of congregations have three services and 6% have four or more on a typical weekend. Episcopal congregations are a bit different than most other Christian denominations in that more Episcopal congregations have two services, but a smaller percentage have four or more.

In general, the more worship services a congregation holds, the more likely it is to have grown. Almost half (42%) of congregations with four or more worship services grew from 2000 to 2005. But do churches grow because they have more worship services or do they grow first and then need to add additional services? Unfortunately, there is not a definitive answer to that question, but controlling for size in 2000 and 2005 suggests that congregations tend to add worship services to accommodate additional attendees and also to encourage growth.

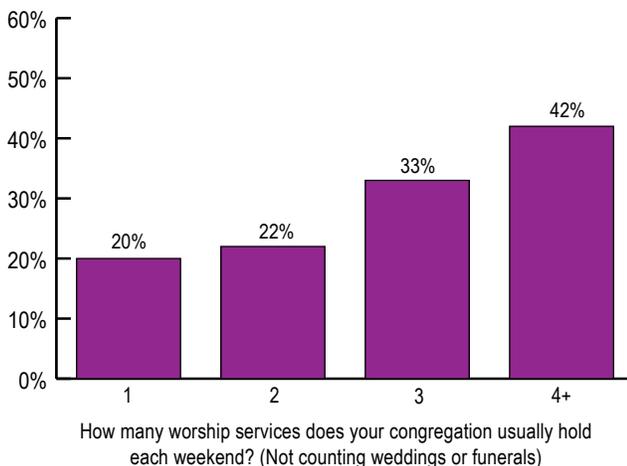
In terms of the character of worship itself, the descriptors most strongly associated with growth are “joyful,” “exciting,” and “has a sense of expectancy.” Less important, but still moderately related to growth, were “filled with a sense of God’s presence” and “welcoming to newcomers.”

**FIGURE 14** indicates that congregations that describe their worship as “joyful” are more likely to experience growth. This relationship exists among all denominational families. However, the same cannot be said for worship that is considered “exciting.” Exciting worship is strongly related to the growth of Episcopal churches, Roman Catholic parishes and conservative evangelical churches—but not other mainline churches. For many mainline congregations, exciting worship may seem too foreign or perhaps too evangelical. Yet in the Episcopal Church, characteristics such as joyful, exciting and a sense of expectancy tend to go together. “Exciting” worship does not have to involve electric guitars or visual projection equipment, nor does it preclude the Eucharist. But it is also not sedate or comfortable. It is open to the Spirit of God and is necessarily different each week.

Several worship descriptors were actually negatively related to growth. Listed in ascending order of strength these descriptors included: “contemplative,” “disorganized,” “formal liturgy,” and “predictable.” All

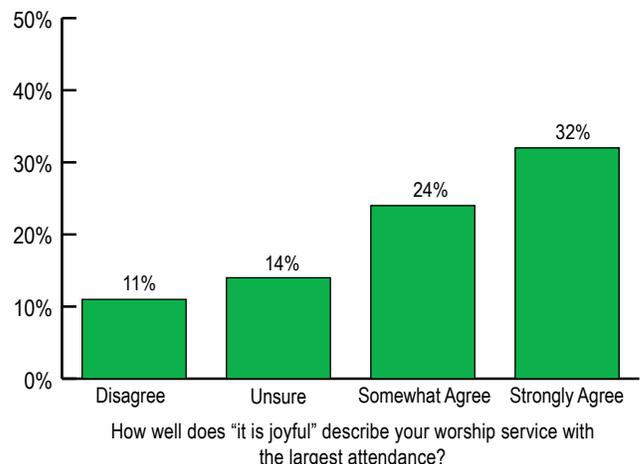
**FIGURE 13**

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



**FIGURE 14**

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



churches would want to avoid being “disorganized,” of course, but the other three descriptors may not seem to be negative characteristics. The problem, however, is that when taken together these characteristics may describe worship that is stilted, boring and tedious—the opposite of joyful and exciting.

As shown in **FIGURE 15**, congregations that say “predictable” describes their worship very or quite well were less likely to grow than congregations that said predictable describes their worship “somewhat,” “slightly” or “not at all.” The relationship is not one of the strongest in the survey, however, and this should not be surprising since some measure of predictability in worship is not a bad thing. Still, predictability as a primary characteristic of worship is something to be avoided. Doing things exactly the same way every week is characteristic of living in a rut rather than in God’s Kingdom.

Exciting worship and the use of certain instruments to make worship more exciting are correlated with growth. **FIGURE 16** shows the relationship between growth and use of drums or other percussion instruments. Not quite half of the congregations always using drums in their worship services experienced growth since 2000, as compared to only one fifth of congregations that never use drums. The same sort of relationship exists between growth and the use of electric guitars, but the correlation

is not as strong as for drums. A stronger relationship with growth was for the use of non-electronic string or wind instruments.

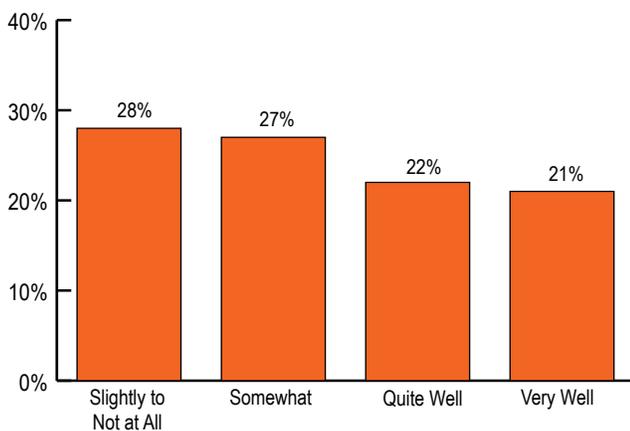
Drums and electric guitars would seem to fit together as “contemporary Christian worship,” but the relationship between growth and using visual projection equipment (a clear marker of contemporary worship) was even weaker than the correlation with the use of electric guitars.

The use of drums, electric guitars and visual projection equipment is very rare in the Episcopal Church. For instance, only 6% of Episcopal congregations say they use drums or other percussion instruments “often” or “always.” Churches that use drums with some regularity are typically those that have multiple worship services and varying styles of worship among those services. Among parishes with only one service, the correlation between growth and the use of drums (and other markers of contemporary worship) is quite weak. It strengthens, however, among churches with multiple worship services. So it would appear that the primary value of contemporary worship (in terms of growth) is in providing an alternative worship experience in a parish with multiple services.

One of the more interesting relationships with growth/decline concerned the participation of children in worship through speaking, reading and performing. **FIGURE 17**

**FIGURE 15**

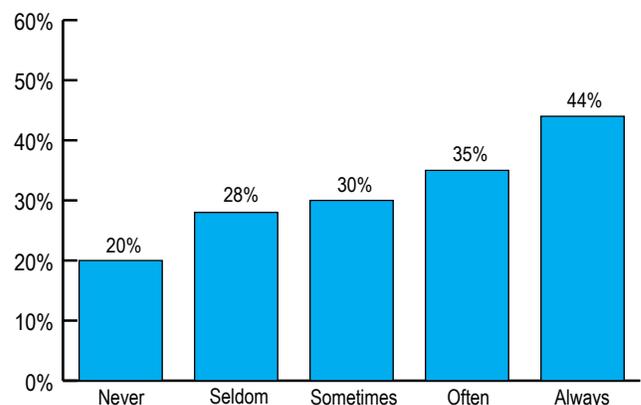
**Predictability and Lack of Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



How well does “predictable” describe your worship service with the largest attendance?

**FIGURE 16**

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



How often are drums or other percussion instruments a part of your congregation's worship services?

shows the association of this question with decline rather than growth. Congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience growth, and congregations that did not were much more likely to experience decline. Among congregations that never involve children in worship, 53% declined in worship attendance, as compared to only 31% 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 mentioned earlier, 60% of Episcopal congregations have more than one weekend worship service. One way that congregations add variety to their worship is by having different styles of worship at different services. In many churches (23%) the difference is minimal, such as music in one service and no music in the other service. But in some parishes the difference is greater. Among churches with more than one weekend worship service, 45% indicate that the services are “somewhat different in style” and another 33% say their services are very different. And it is in churches which offer very different worship services that the impact on growth is seen. One third of

these churches are growing compared to 24% of those with somewhat different worship services.

What do churches do that offer very different services? Here are a few responses: “One is traditional, Rite I, said in the chapel. One is a more informal Eucharist in the round with piano with various creative liturgies not always from the BCP. One is traditional Rite II, with organ, choir, and acolytes”; “we hold Taize services in addition to the Eucharist”; “our Saturday 5:30 p.m. service is very contemporary and contemplative with occasional guitar music. Sunday 8 a.m. is Rite I, formal with no music (and lowest attendance). Sunday 10 a.m. is Rite II with organ music, occasional piano, bell choir, adult choir and children’s choir”; “one service is Morning Prayer (sometimes contemporary, sometimes quiet), the other is a blended service Eucharist, Rite 3.”

Congregations with multiple services are more likely to grow. Congregations with multiple worship services incorporating different styles of worship are more likely to grow. And parishes that use music as a way of worshipping differently are more likely to grow. On the other hand, in parishes where worship is always predictable are more likely to decline. This is a challenge for most Episcopal parishes since worship varies little and is quite traditionalistic, featuring organ music (always used by 87% of Episcopal parishes) and kneeling (always used by 53% of Episcopal parishes).

FIGURE 17

Seen But Not Heard? *Percent of Congregations Declining*

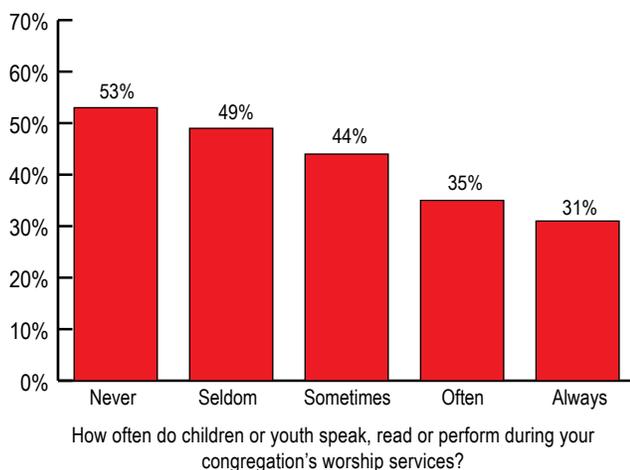
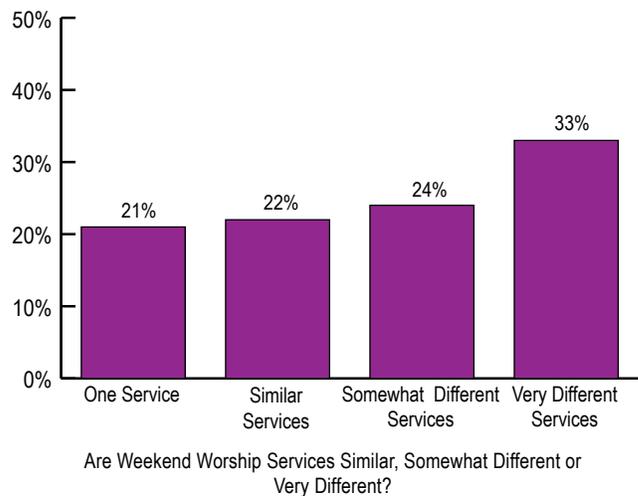


FIGURE 18

Doing Things Differently and Growing a Little More  
*Percent of Congregations Growing*



# Congregational Program and Recruitment

Most congregations say they want to grow. When asked if they agree or disagree with the statement, “our congregation wants more members,” 58% said they strongly agree and another 33% said they agree somewhat. **FIGURE 19** shows that the remaining 9% who are not so sure about growth are indeed less likely to grow.

In most denominations, and especially within conservative evangelical bodies, the proportion of church leaders who strongly agree with the question about wanting to grow is even higher than in the Episcopal Church. Yet in evangelical denominations there is no difference in growth rates between the two categories of agreement. Although what matters ultimately is intentionality and action rather than desire for growth, strongly desiring to grow seems to be more than “lip service” in Episcopal congregations.

Growth requires desire and intentionality, but it also requires action and the involvement of members. 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 20** shows the very strong relationship between recruitment activity on the part of members and growth. Where “a lot” of members are involved in recruitment, 52% of congregations are growing. By contrast, where very few members are involved in recruitment, hardly any of those congregations are experiencing growth.

FIGURE 19

## Wishing Doesn't Make it So, But it Helps

*Percent of Congregations Growing*

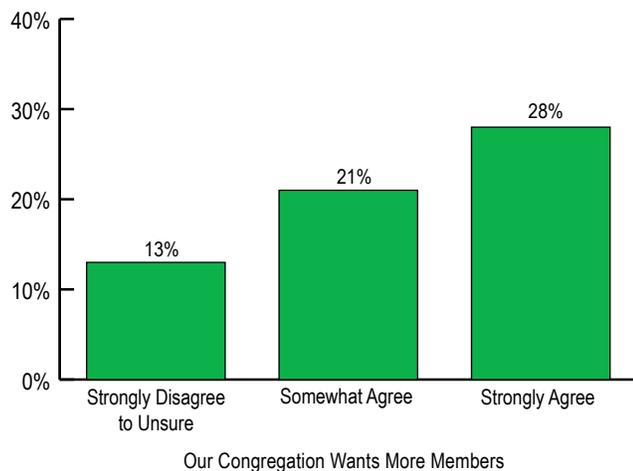
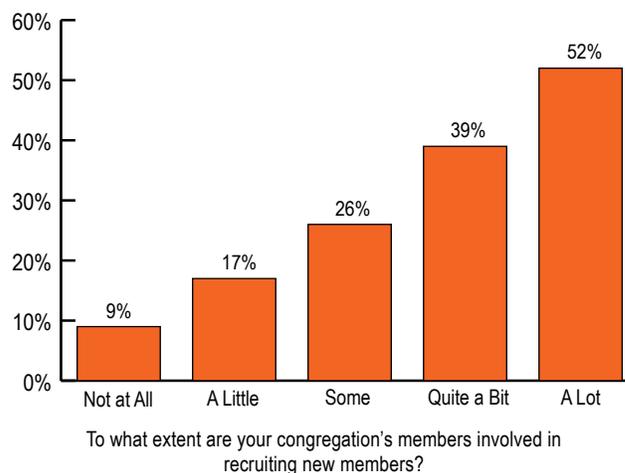


FIGURE 20

## Recruiting New Members *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 recruitment-related activities, such as radio and television spots, newspaper ads, flyers, etc., help only a little. However, one programmatic activity with a fairly strong relationship with growth is establishing or maintaining a web site for the congregation.

Congregations that have established 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.

Most congregational programs that involve education, formation, and fellowship are also related to growth. These include an emphasis on Sunday school, prayer groups, Bible studies, spiritual retreats, youth ministry and support groups. One of the strongest relationships, however, was between growth and offering parenting or marriage enrichment activities. As shown in **FIGURE 22**, of congregations that consider such activities to be a key program, 41% are growing. Parenting and marriage enrichment activities are more often found in larger congregations and growing suburbs. Yet like web sites, these groups have an independent effect on growth when controlling for congregational size and location.

FIGURE 21

**Luddites Beware!** *Percent of Congregations Growing*

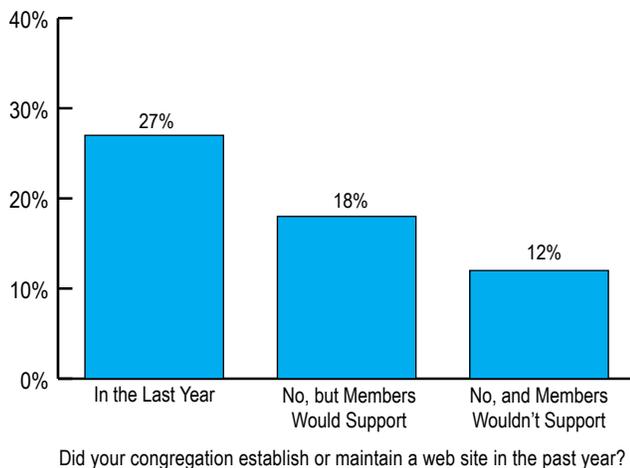
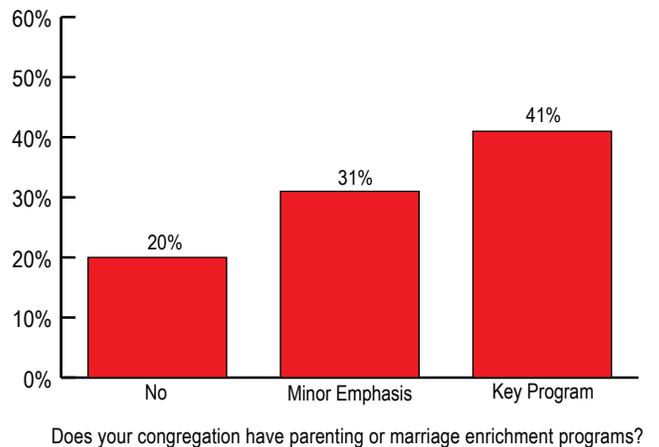


FIGURE 22

**Parenting and Marriage Enrichment** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



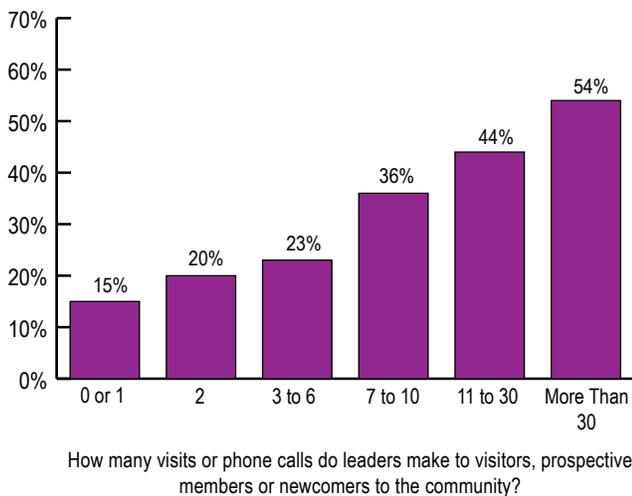
More basic to congregational growth than the programs that a congregation offers is simple contact with potential members. One of the strongest relationships with growth is how many visits or phone calls church leaders make to visitors, prospective members, and newcomers to the community. Obviously, larger churches have larger staffs and more lay leaders and can make contacts more easily than small congregations. Still, as seen in **FIGURE 23**, it does not take that many more contacts to make a difference. But many Episcopal churches (21%) make no contacts at all and almost one half (47%) make 2 contacts or less per month.

Few people decide to join a parish or become regular participants after one or two initial contacts, so to help transition people from visitor or prospect to member follow-up contacts are essential. 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 be known. Many congregations also make sure they collect the names and/or 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 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.

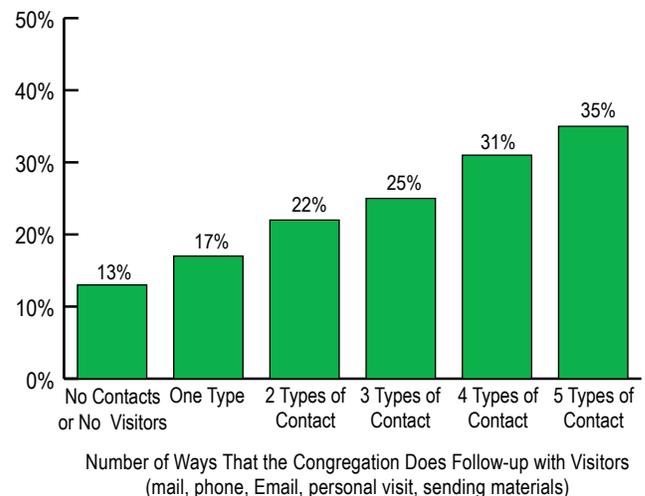
**FIGURE 23**

**If You Call Them You Will Grow** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



**FIGURE 24**

**Letting Them Know You Care** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



## Clergy Leadership

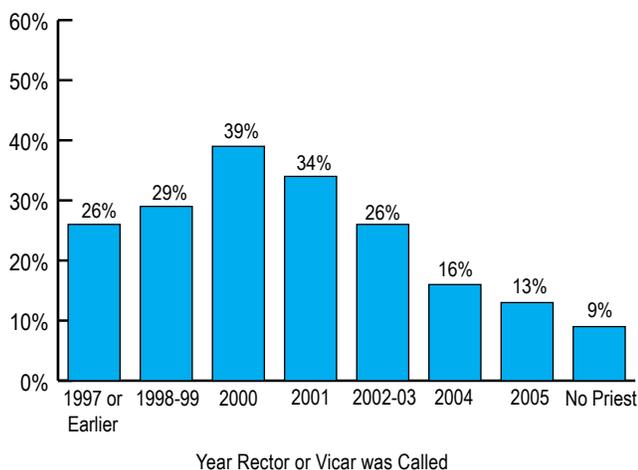
Leadership is very important to the health of a congregation. Congregations with no clergy leadership (either because they are searching for a new priest or because they cannot afford regular clergy leadership) are very unlikely to grow. Only 9% grew between 2000 and 2005 and 64% actually declined in worship attendance.

From **FIGURE 25** it is clear that the first two years of a new priest's tenure in a congregation tend to be the worst in terms of growth potential. Not only are churches with rapid clergy turnover more likely to have no priest or a recently called priest, but the incidence of conflict is much greater in congregations where the priest was called in either 2005 (the year of the survey) or the year before. New priests often arrive in parishes that are very dysfunctional or have experienced a huge problem—sometimes involving the termination of the previous minister. But even in more benign situations, the transition to a new priest is a time of change that prompts some members to drop out or switch to another congregation.

This is not to say that a new priest cannot be a catalyst for rapid transformation of a parish and subsequent growth. Such things happen with some frequency. But more likely is the situation where it takes several years of leadership and healing before a conflicted or less functional parish is able to rebound and grow. As shown in **FIGURE 25**, the likelihood of growth steadily increases over time, with the best years occurring in 5th and 6th years of a priest's tenure. Thereafter, the proportion of growing parishes tends to drop off, but never approaches the low levels of growth (and even higher levels of decline) typically seen in the first two years. In long-tenure situations congregations are more likely to experience stability in attendance rather than much growth or serious decline.

FIGURE 25

**Clergy Tenure and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



Unfortunately, it is not possible to include truly objective ratings of ministerial performance in a survey of this type. However, we did include ratings that were completed by either the priest or another church leader. Although clearly subjective and prone to exaggeration, self-deprecation and so forth, the fact that any correlation exists at all with growth suggests that the ratings have some validity. A large number of characteristics were tested. The characteristics most strongly related to growth were (in descending order of strength): “generates enthusiasm,” “charismatic leader,” “has a clear vision for the congregation,” “knows how to get people to work together,” and “knows how to get things done.” Lower, but still significant, correlations with growth were found for “hard worker,” “good preacher,” and “evangelistic.” The lowest correlations with growth were found for “good liturgist,” “has a close relationship with God,” and “knows the Bible.”

Let one assume that it doesn't matter whether or not a priest knows the Bible or is close to God, these things are basic to ministry and lack much variation. Similarly, questions regarding caring about people and being an effective teacher also produce rather weak correlations with growth because most priests do these things in at least an adequate manner. But the characteristics that are most strongly correlated with growth are different. Not all priests are able to generate enthusiasm or know how to get people to work together. These are leadership skills rather than pastoral skills and many church leaders lack them or fail to use them.

FIGURE 26

**Generating Enthusiasm and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*

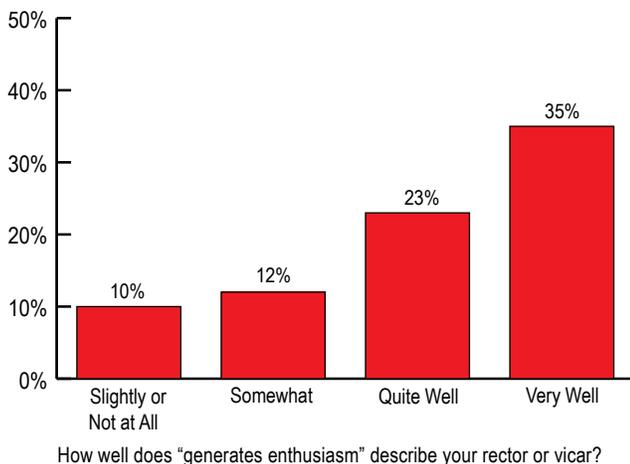
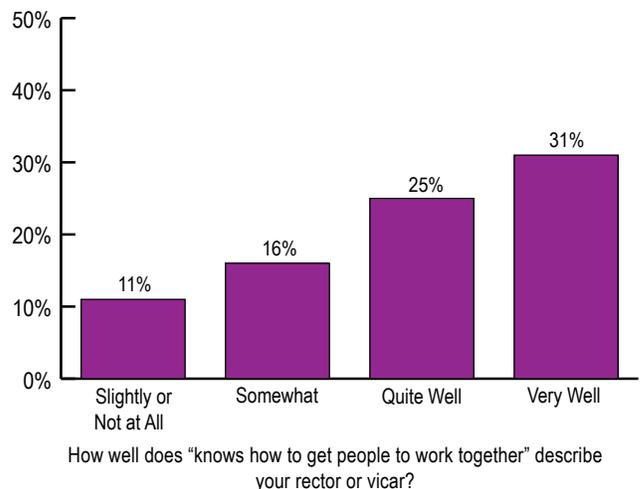


FIGURE 27

**Cooperative Leadership and Growth** *Percent of Congregations Growing*



## Putting It All Together

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

Clearly, some things a congregation can largely control and some things a congregation cannot control. Among those things that are related to growth and about which a congregation has no control is the location of the congregation. Being in an area with *growth in households* is a key predictor 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 roots. Having more people available as possible members is an advantage for congregations in growing areas, as is the desire of most newcomers to establish community connections. Obviously, this type of growth is more likely in the suburbs, but since household growth can occur anywhere, the effect is independent of suburban/non-suburban location.

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 *households with children* are more likely to experience growth. Obviously, it is easier for congregations to reach younger families 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 significant 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 to the need for conflict resolution skills among clergy so minor conflict does not become serious, debilitating conflict. In the Episcopal Church the impact of conflict is greater than in many other denominations because conflict is more widespread—in large part because conflict over sexuality is added to the usual congregational disputes over leadership, finances, worship and program.

Independent worship-related factors that are important to growth include both positive and negative influences. A scale that combined responses to questions rating worship as being “predictable,” with “formal liturgy,” and regular use of “kneeling” produced an independent *negative* effect on growth. Although worship in most

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Episcopal congregations is typically more formal than in many other denominations, a great deal of variation exists between parishes and within parishes (those having multiple services) in the level of formality and predictability. In contrast to *formality and predictability*, characterizations of worship as “joyful” and “exciting” had no independent effect on growth even though they added to the overall ability to predict growth. So apparently, as was observed in the case of congregational conflict, not having a growth-limiting factor is more important than having something that would seem to encourage growth.

In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was a rating of the congregation as having “*a clear mission and purpose*.” Growing congregations are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing. In American religion generally, conservative churches tend to be clearer about their mission and purpose. But this is not the case in the Episcopal Church. Here there tends to be a greater sense of purpose and mission among more theologically liberal congregations.

Somewhat surprisingly, given previous findings in other denominations, two of the recruitment/outreach questions were statistically significant when controls were in effect. Most important was the question asking “to what extent are your congregation’s members involved in *recruiting new members*.” Of less independent importance to growth, but adding to the overall ability to predict growth or decline is *number of visits or phone calls* to visitors, prospective members or newcomers to the community. Growing

congregations are those which let people know the congregation cares enough to contact them.

The second most powerful correlate of growth when all controls were used was a scale that combined four highly related characteristics of the parish’s rector or vicar: generates enthusiasm, charismatic leader, has a clear vision for the congregation, and knows how to get people to work together. *Leadership* is critical to growth in the Episcopal Church.

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—not just one. It also should be noted that, in general, the correlations with growth within the Episcopal Church were typically weaker than those found within a multi-denominational sample of congregations. In recent years the number of growing Episcopal congregations has dropped, resulting in much less variation in the growth-decline continuum than is the case when mainline congregations are combined with conservative evangelical churches and Roman Catholic parishes. The lack of variation in growth means that growth is harder to predict.

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

**T**he Episcopal Church participated in the largest study of congregations ever conducted in the United States—involving 14,301 local churches, synagogues, parishes, temples and mosques. That study was organized in 2000 and sponsored by the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP), hosted by Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research.

The long-term goal of CCSP is to conduct a mega-survey like FACT2000 at the turn of every decade, coinciding with the U.S. Census. But just as the Census Bureau conducts regular national surveys between its large-scale decadal enumerations, several, smaller sample-based national surveys of congregations will be conducted intervening years. FACT2005, the results of which provide the data for this report, is the first of these national polls. Visit the FACT/CCSP web site at <http://FACT.hartsem.edu> for more information about current and future research. The next FACT survey will be conducted in 2008. Results for the Episcopal version will be available prior to General Convention 2009.

A copy of the FACT2005 questionnaire, designed by the CCSP Research Task Force, is available on the FACT/CCSP website. The Episcopal version is available at the DFMS research web pages (<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/research.htm>). It can be consulted for exact question and response category

wordings. The survey was mailed to all Episcopal congregations and to an ecumenical, interfaith national sample of 3,000 congregations. It included the option of completing the questionnaire online.

The Episcopal FACT 2005 survey was completed by 4,102 congregations—for a response rate of 57%. To enhance national representation, responses were weighted by size and by region. In most cases the survey form was completed by the congregation's rector or vicar. Data on worship attendance were drawn from yearly Parochial Reports. Community demographic data were obtained from the 2000 Census and ESRI's *Community Sourcebook America 2005*.

*FACTs on Episcopal Church Growth* was written by C. Kirk Hadaway, director of research for the Episcopal Church. He can be contacted at [khadaway@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:khadaway@episcopalchurch.org). Debra Beleski Brown provided the design on which this report is based. Cover art is by Scott Thigpen (<http://www.sthig.com>).

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