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David A. Roozen

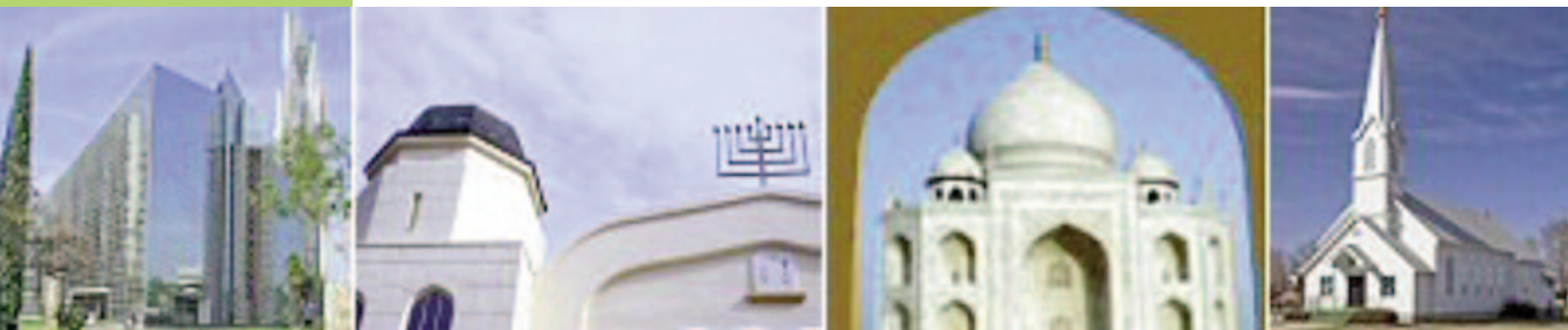
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# American Congregations 2015: *Thriving and Surviving*

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# American Congregations 2015

## *Thriving and Surviving*

David A. Roozen

**A***merican Congregations 2015* is the introductory report on the Faith Communities Today 2015 (FACT 2015) national survey of congregations. FACT2015 is the fifth survey in a series beginning in 2000, and replicated in 2005, 2008 and 2010. This report focuses on an initial look at core trends across the survey series and a first look at new sets of questions introduced in the 2015 survey. Several focused reports described in the current report will be released early next year to explore these new topical sets of questions. The forthcoming reports are also listed on the back cover.

The entire FACT survey series includes responses from over 32,000 randomly sampled congregations in the United States from all denominations and faith traditions. The FACT2015 survey contains responses from 4,436 congregations. The survey covers the characteristics, programs and vital signs of congregations as reported by a key informant in the congregation, typically the senior clergy leader. Sample and survey methodology are described in more detail in the appendix, as is the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership which conducts the survey series.

When we last probed the dynamics and changing nature of American congregations in 2010 we found a number of pockets of vitality and innovation, but also a steep drop in financial health related to the 2007/08 recession, decreasing numbers of persons in the pews and decreasing spiritual vitality. The overriding conclusion of the **FACT2010 report: *American congregations enter the second decade of the new century a bit less healthy than they were at the turn of the century.***

Against this backdrop the last five years captured in the 2015 survey might be characterized as: ***More of the same, but a little less so and with a few interesting twists.*** The details of this assessment are more fully developed in the following sections of this report:

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The FACT2010 report, *A Decade of Change in American Congregations 2000-2010*, is available online at [www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org](http://www.FaithCommunitiesToday.org); as are all FACT survey reports.

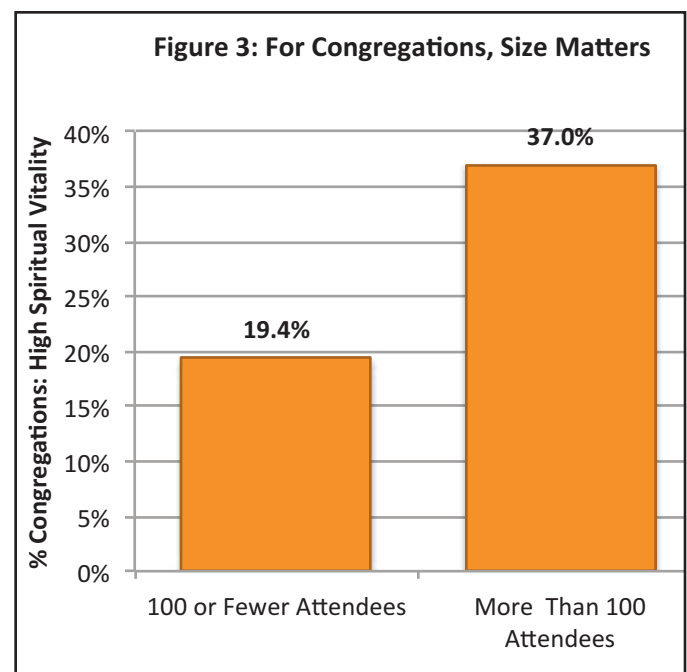
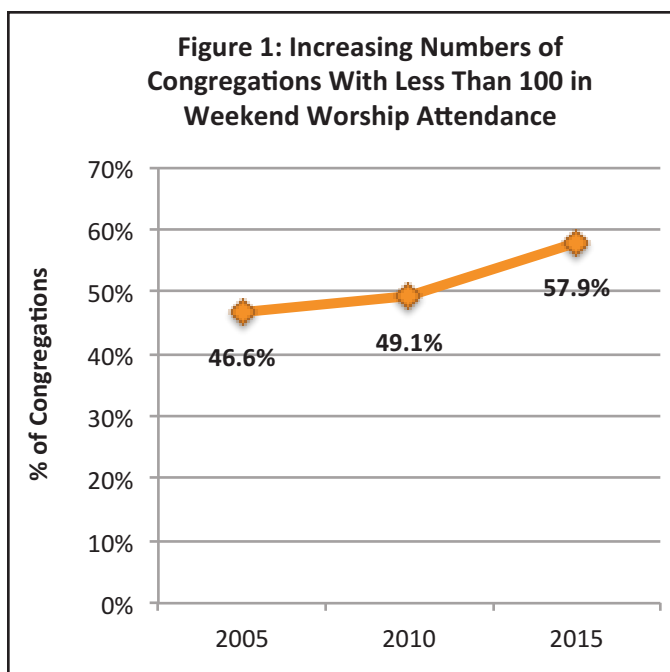
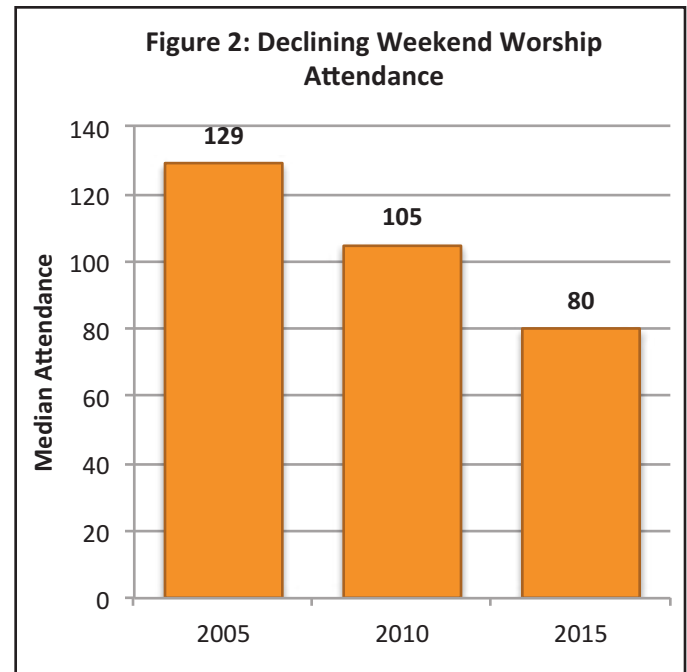
## For Congregations, Size Matters

Small size does not have to be a limiting factor, as suggested in the Matthew 17:20 reference to faith the size of a mustard seed. But organizationally and in reality, small congregations face any number of uphill battles in terms of vitality and viability. Not all small congregations struggle, of course, but on average they do so more than larger congregations. Thus, the steady and dramatic increase in the number of congregations with under a hundred people in attendance for weekend worship shown in Figure 1 must be pause for concern.

The FACT2010 *Decade of Change* report noted a new and precedent-setting dimension to the numerical erosion it documented. The declines which for the past 50 years had been the providence of oldline Protestantism, now extended to all Christian families. Congregations with racial/ethnic majorities were the major demographic exception. Figure 1 also documents a precedent-setting finding: FACT2015 finds more than half of all American congregations having less than 100 people in attendance for their weekend worship for the first time in our series. Relatedly, Figure 2 shows that for the first time median weekend attendance has fallen below 100.

Figure 3 documents what we believe is the primary reason that the ever expanding number of small congregations should be pause for concern. Smaller congregations are only half as likely to be highly spiritually vital. And as we shall see in the following pages of this report, small

congregations are less likely than larger congregations to have the organizational and programmatic capacities that foster the spiritual vitality of congregations.



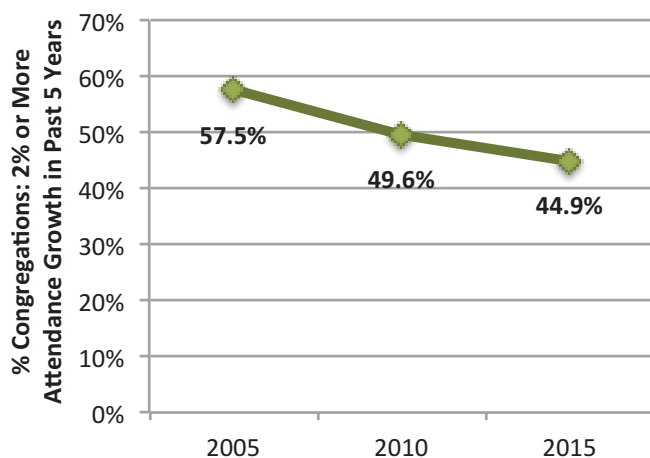
# Growth Matters: For Some Theologically, For All Organizationally

Robert Hudnut's *Church Growth is not the Point* (1975) was one of oldline Protestantism's more popular responses to the church growth movement and all the attention being directed at the oldline membership losses, which began in the mid-1960s. In retrospect there are at least three ironies in the enthusiastic response that Hudnut's book generated at the time. First, although Hudnut did not use the word, the notion of congregational vitality came into vogue in large part by oldliners trying to say what the point was. However, as seen in Figure 5, growth and vitality are as strongly related as size and vitality (as seen on page 2).

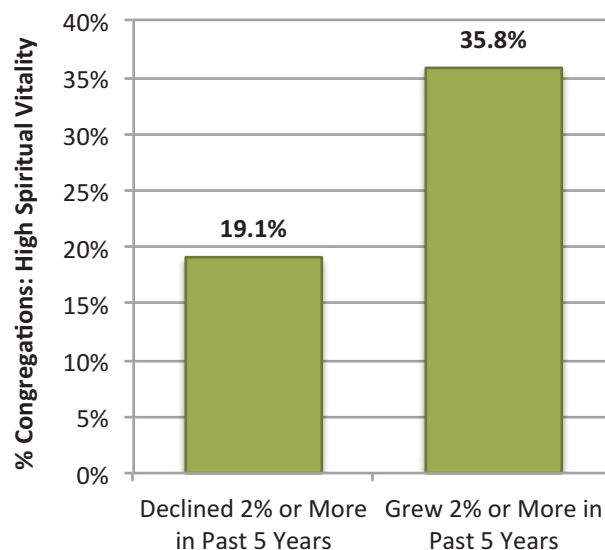
Second, and as we also noted in regard to size, the lack of growth is related to many organizational and programmatic challenges that further erode a congregation's capacity for growth and vitality. Figure 6, for example, shows that declining congregations have a much less promising track record in engaging young adults, which in turn is an obstacle to growth. At least organizationally, growth or decline is an important point.

Third, many of those denominational traditions for which growth was (and remains) the point, and which therefore dismissed Hudnut on theological grounds, are now faced with declines themselves. Even racial/ethnic congregations, which remain the most vital stream of the Christian family, have fewer growing congregations in 2015 than they did in 2010. The immigrant/minority-weighted character of most non-Christian traditions perhaps explains why their patterns tend to more closely follow those of racial/ethnic Christian groups than white majority groups.

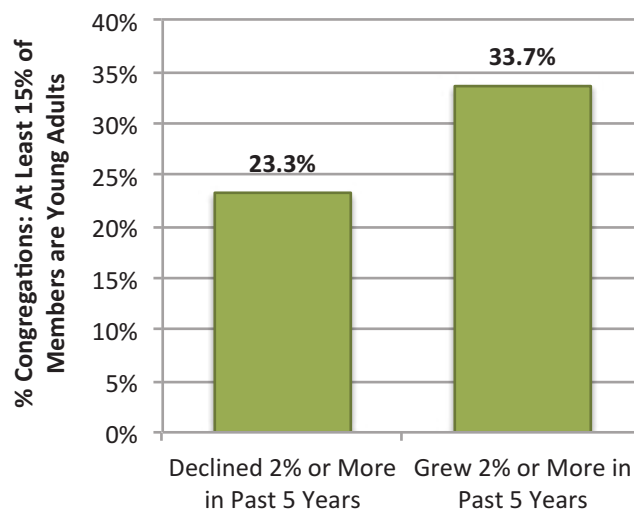
**Figure 4: Fewer Growing Congregations**



**Figure 5: Growth and Spiritual Vitality Go Together**



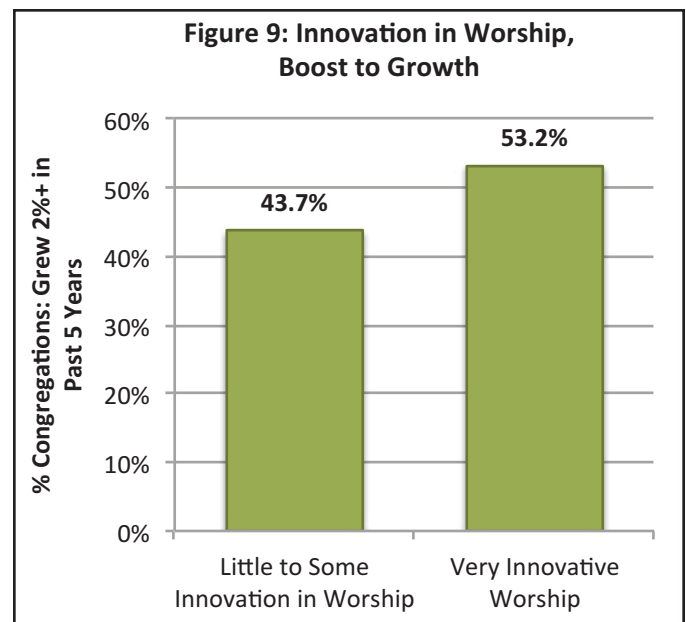
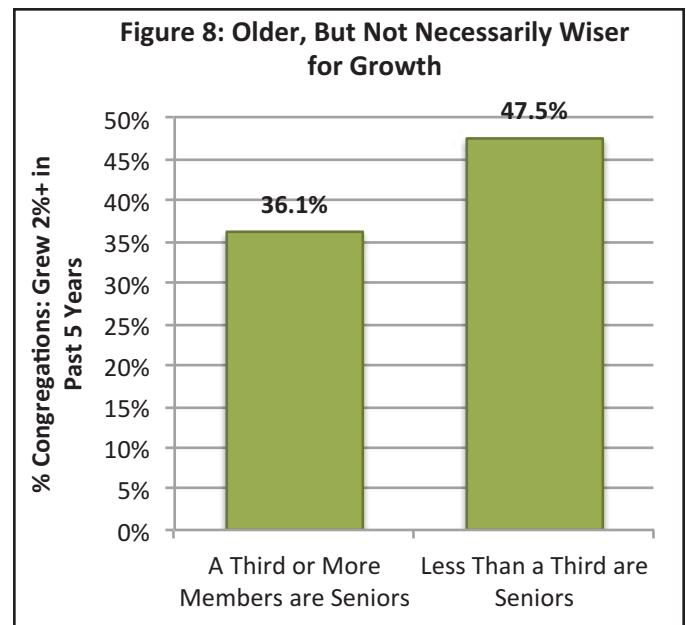
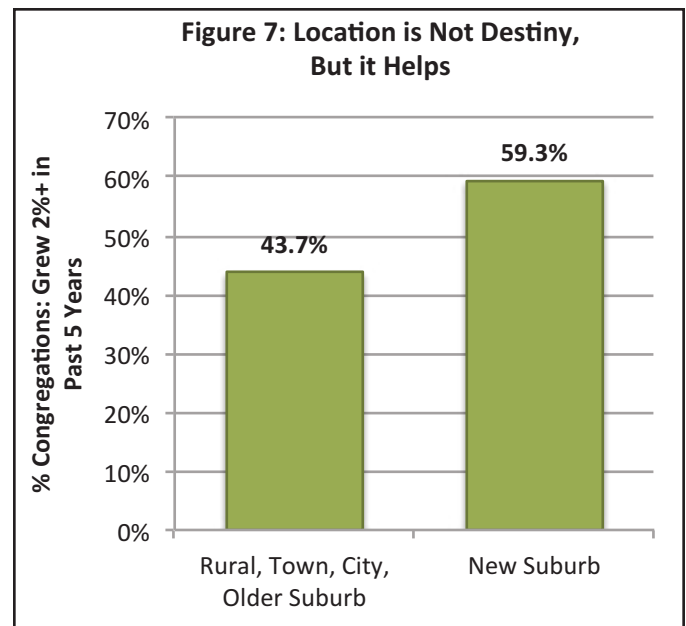
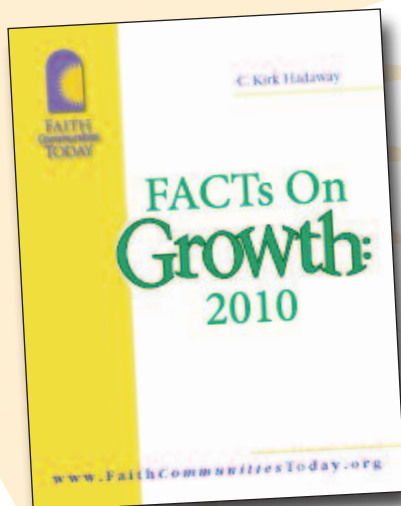
**Figure 6: Growing Congregations Engage Young Adults Better**



## Growth Matters, But What Matters For Growth?

A little over a generation ago a new idea was welcomed into the literature on growth strategies. It was the importance of distinguishing between those things over which a congregation had control (typically things internal to congregational life) and those things over which it had little if any control (typically things going on outside a congregation's doors). This distinction is pretty much taken-for-granted today, but some readers may recall that back in the heady days of the church growth movement evangelicals tended to focus on those things a congregation could do, while the oldline with the backing of the academic literature, tended to focus on factors beyond a congregation's control—like broad social/cultural value changes and declines in the birth rate. Little did people appear to realize that the interplay of both was the critical issue. For example, generational changes in music tended to make much “traditional church music” unappealing to young adults. In response many congregations over the last quarter century found that changing to more contemporary forms of worship was a stimulus to growth. The boost to growth from innovative worship is evident in Figure 9.

We mention this distinction because it is one of the organizing principles of *FACTs on Growth: 2010*, which remains one of the most succinct, yet comprehensive, research-based treatments of the factors influencing growth, and to which we refer the reader for a more detailed look at the subject than we provide here. Suffice it to note here that we highlight things a congregation can do about growth on the next page; while Figure's 7 and 8 point to the continuing power of the context. Figure 7 shows one effect of location. Figure 8 points to the generational challenge.



# What A Congregation Can Do For Growth

We saw in Figure 9 that change can boost growth. But one of the often frustrating challenges of growth is that growth itself typically causes change, and change almost always creates some tension or conflict. Old habits, relationships and routines typically require accommodation to increased numbers and new faces with new expectations.

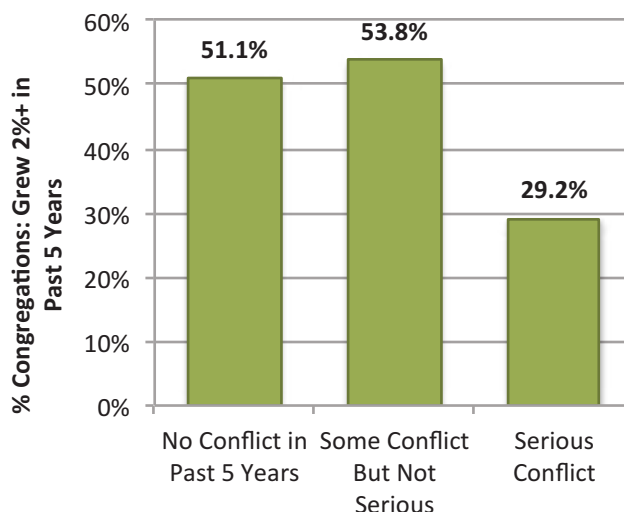
Like most people, congregations prefer to avoid conflict, and in fact, are not very good at dealing with it. We have known for some time now that conflict can be a major obstacle to growth. Figure 10 shows that this remains true in the FACT2015 survey. But the figure also hints at an important nuance. Namely that it is serious conflict that is the real culprit. Indeed, the data show that congregations with no conflict are a bit less likely to grow than those with some, but not serious conflict. Growth will likely cause some tension or conflict. It is being able to keep it from degenerating into serious conflict that is the key.

Figure 11 may seem like a no brainer. The more a congregation's laity is involved in recruitment the more likely growth is—and the effect is dramatic. But FACT2015 finds that only 14% of congregations say their laity are quite or very involved in recruitment. Laity's willingness to get involved, this suggests, is one of the key reality checks in any congregational growth strategy.

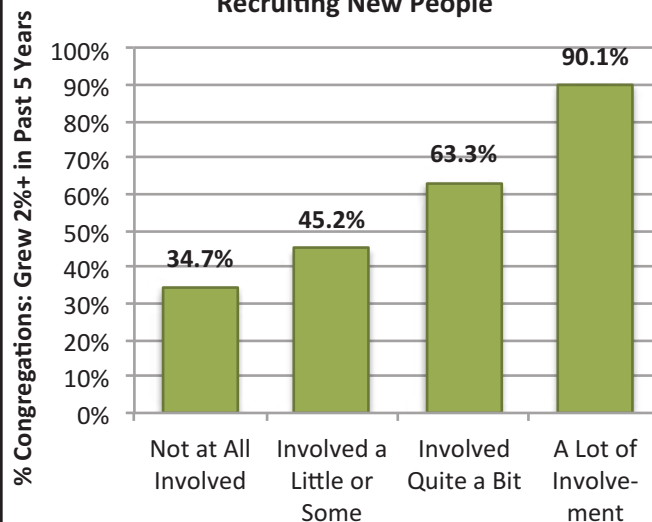
One of the broad cultural changes that came to dominance with the baby-boom generation and has become more deeply entrenched in each succeeding generation is the perception of one's life as a continual set of options and choices. Like it or not, even religion is increasingly seen as a choice. We even have a phrase for it—"church shopping."

Even if one chooses to be religious and to nurture and express their faith within a congregation, which congregation to attend is also approached as a choice from among many options. It is not surprising, then, that many find economic marketing models with their emphasis on the dynamics of choice to be an insightful perspective to bring to the dynamics of "church" growth. To the extent religion has become a consumer-oriented marketplace, it should not be surprising that congregations that stick out from the crowd are more likely to be growing, which is exactly what we find in Figure 12.

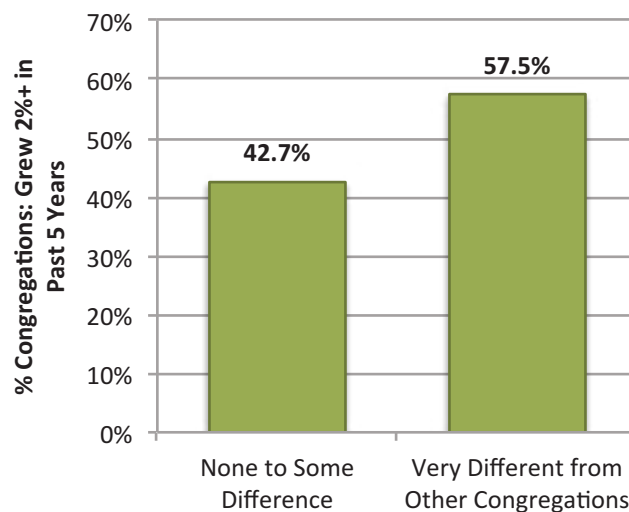
**Figure 10: Serious Conflict Crushes Growth**



**Figure 11: Get Your Laity Involved in Recruiting New People**



**Figure 12: Distinguish Yourself From Other Congregations in Your Community**



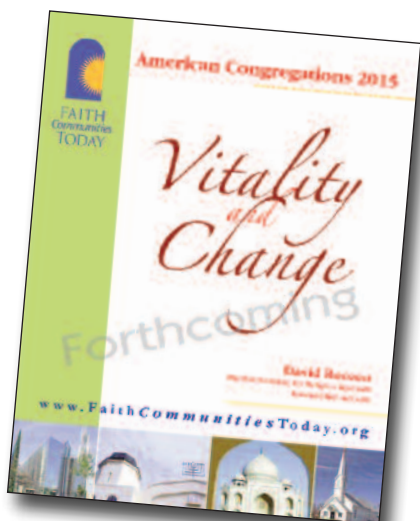


## Spiritual Vitality Trends Down, But Just A Bit

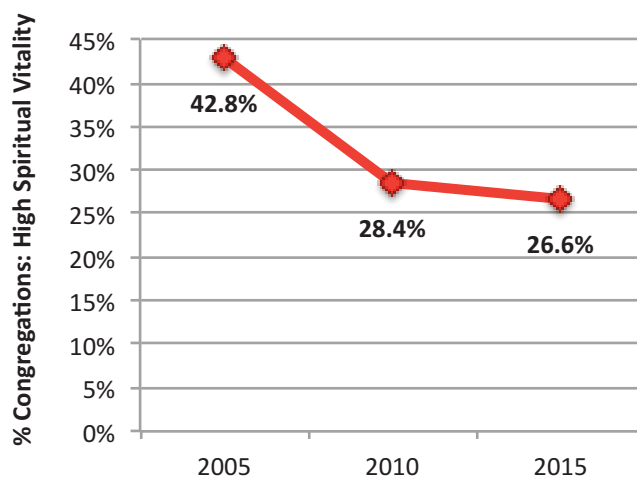
Previously we showed the close relationship between spiritual vitality and growth. It should be no surprise, therefore, to find a downtrend for spiritual vitality just as we found for growth. A close comparison of the two trends, however, suggests some potential good news—the erosion of spiritual vitality since 2010 is much less steep than the decline in congregational growth and it is considerably less severe than it was between 2005 and 2010.

Figure 14 provides solid evidence that racial/ethnic congregations remain more energized than congregations in which a majority of members are white whether looking at vitality or attendance growth.

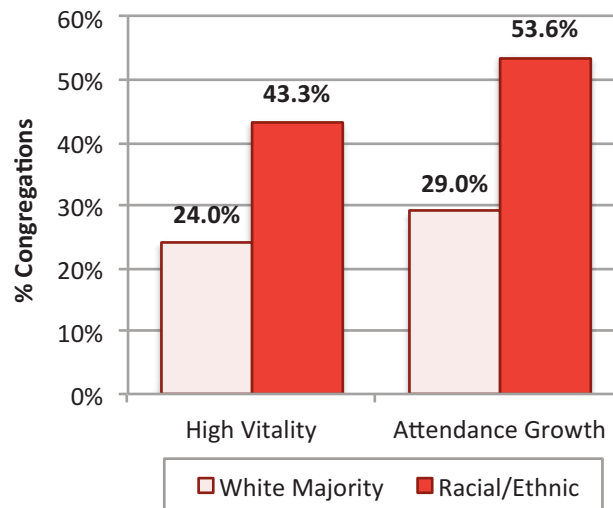
We've already noted that the notion of congregational vitality came into vogue, at least in part, as an oldline counter to the more evangelical ideal that puts growth as the primary mark of congregational faithfulness. Unfortunately, research on vitality has been definitionally vague, often contradictory, or singularly normative. Even among congregations put forth as vital, little agreement can be found. Given the potential currency of the term across congregations from a variety of theological traditions, and building on the recent work of several CCSP partners, we included a special set of questions in FACT2015. Our hope was to see if we could discern a more nuanced and research-based understanding of what it was that distinguished thriving congregations from others, and the extent to which vitality was singular or multi-dimensional. Findings from this pioneering effort will be the subject of a forthcoming publication that also examines the critical interrelationship between vitality and change.



**Figure 13: Spiritual Vitality—Not As Much**



**Figure 14: Racial/Ethnic Congregations Are Often More Vital**



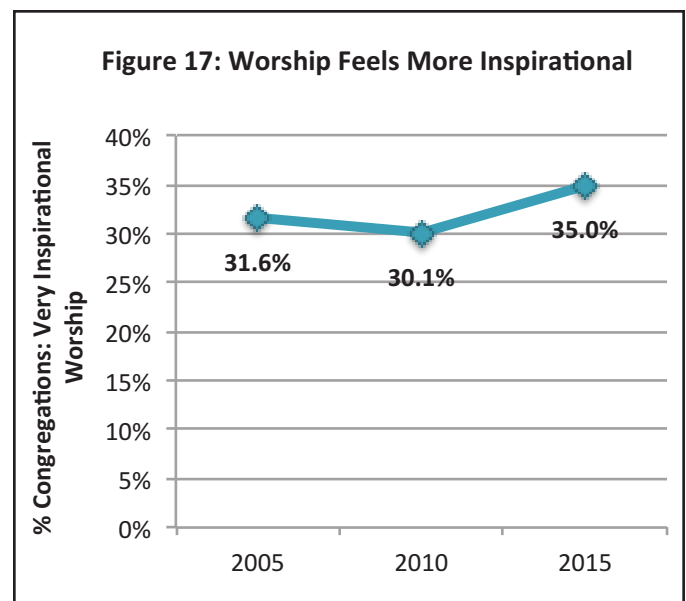
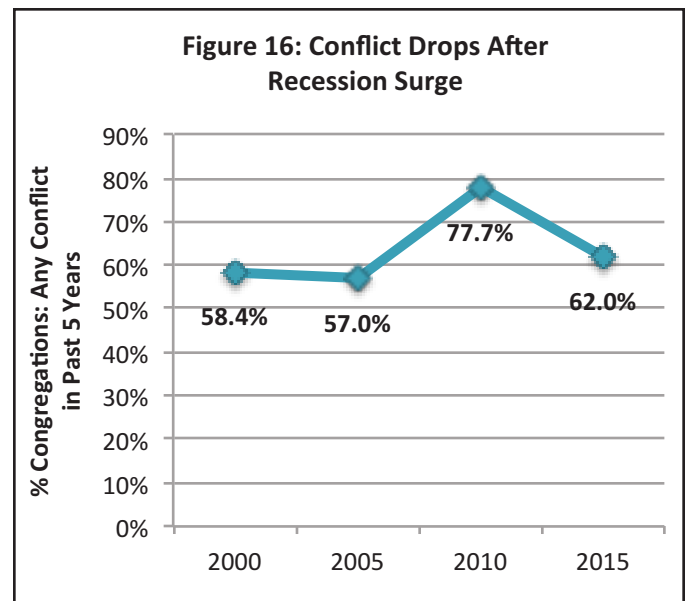
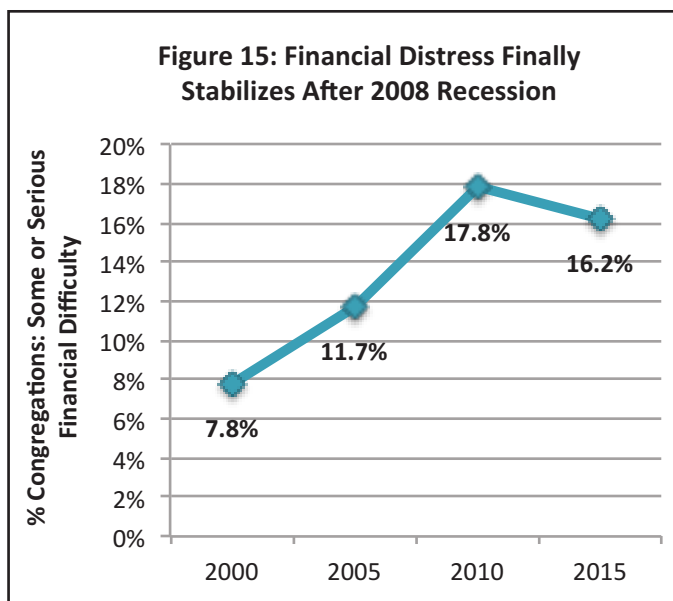
# Good News: The Downtrend In Financial Health Has Reversed

One bit of good news in FACT2015 is that, with the broader economic recovery, the sense of financial distress among American congregations has eased somewhat. This seems especially significant because with declining worship attendance, smaller congregations and continually eroding spiritual vitality there were a lot of pressures for further financial strain.

The percentage of American congregations in some or serious financial difficulty had grown well before the recession of 2008, but peaked shortly after as the negative impact of the recession trickled down and out throughout the economy (Figure 15). Indeed, our economic report on the FACT2010 survey, *Holy Toll: The Impact of the 2008 Recession on American Congregations*, found that over 2/3's of congregations reported some decline in income because of the recession, and almost 1 in 5 reported a serious drop in income.

Financial stress is bad enough in and of itself, but it frequently becomes a major catalyst for a spiraling mix of other negative effects. The *Holy Toll* report shows, for example, increased levels of conflict among congregations whose finances were negatively affected by the recession, and a less positive sense of worship. The drop in conflict between 2010 and 2015 shown in Figure 16, therefore, is not surprising—even if the overall level of conflict in congregations remains unsettlingly high. Nor is the upturn in the inspirational sense of worship shown in Figure 17 totally unexpected.

Unfortunately, the FACT2015 data on money matters is not uniformly positive. In fact, a strong case can be made





that the increased sense of financial stability found in the 2015 survey is more due to downsizing precipitated by the recession than to a return to pre-recession fiscal heights.

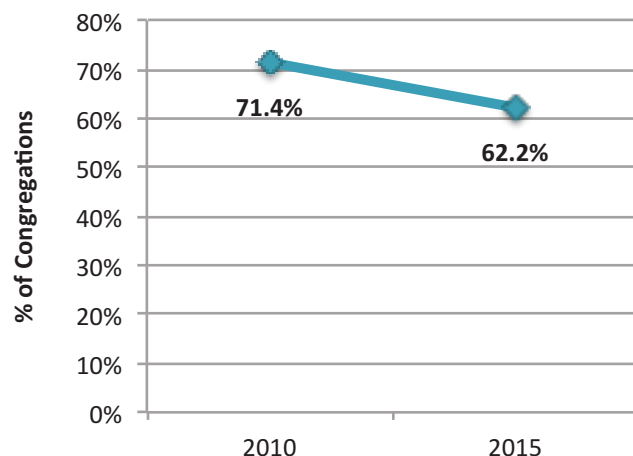
The FACT2010 *Holy Toll* report shows that dipping into savings or investments, postponing capital projects, and reducing mission and benevolence giving were among the most typical ways congregations dealt with recession induced financial shortfalls. The report also shows that staff layoffs and delays in filling positions were among the least chosen options, but still used by around 10% of congregations. The drop in congregations with full-time, paid senior or sole clergy leaders from 2010 to 2015 shown in Figure 18 (a drop of just under 10 percentage points) eerily resonates with the latter 2010 report figure.

Figure 19 makes the case even more directly that while congregations may be feeling more positive about their financial situation, it is because they have become more comfortable doing with less rather than because they have more to invest in their ministry.

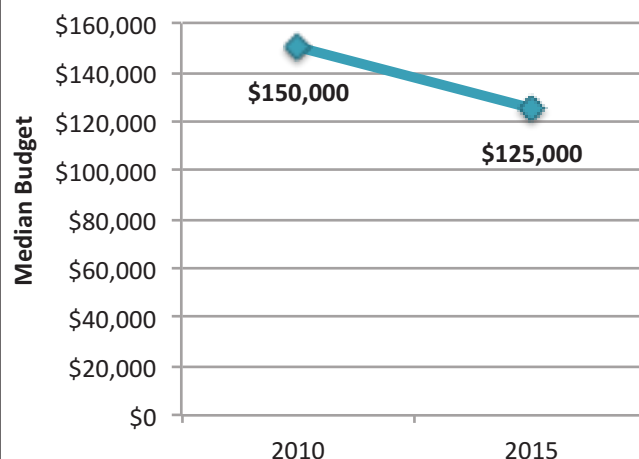
The traditional design of “church” buildings, with large fellowship halls, kitchens, and a wide array of meeting rooms, combined with limited usage during the week, provides a unique resource for a whole host of, typically, community service type activities, some run by the congregation, some not. Food pantries, AA meetings, scouting programs and homeless shelters, for example, often occupy sacred space. We also know from past studies that American congregations are the primary providers of space for child care programs. Such building use certainly provides a community service, but it is also often a much needed financial resource.

Figure 20 looks at another potential building-related source of congregational income. This figure shows that providing worship space to another congregation can also be an important financial resource for congregations. The data also shows that congregations receiving rent tend to be those with lower levels of financial health. About one-in-five congregations provide worship space for another congregation, and of these just under a third receives rent.

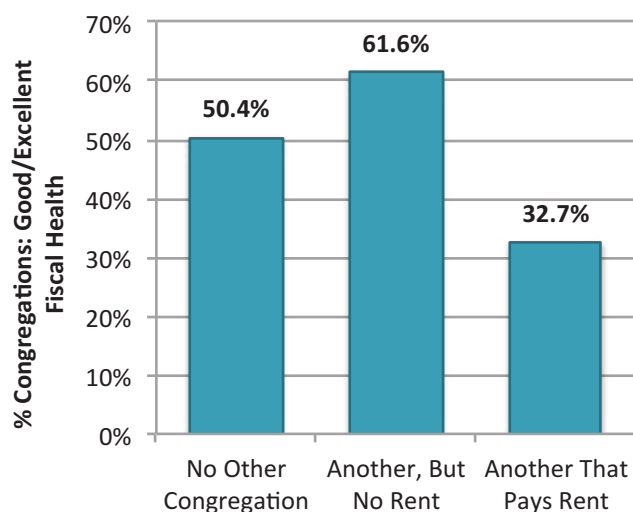
**Figure 18: Drop in Congregations With Full-time, Paid Senior/Sole Clergy Leader**



**Figure 19: Drop in Median Budget of Congregations**



**Figure 20: Paying the Rent—Does Another Congregation Worship in Your Building?**



## Not Much Change In The Sensibilities Of Worship, But Less Willingness To Change

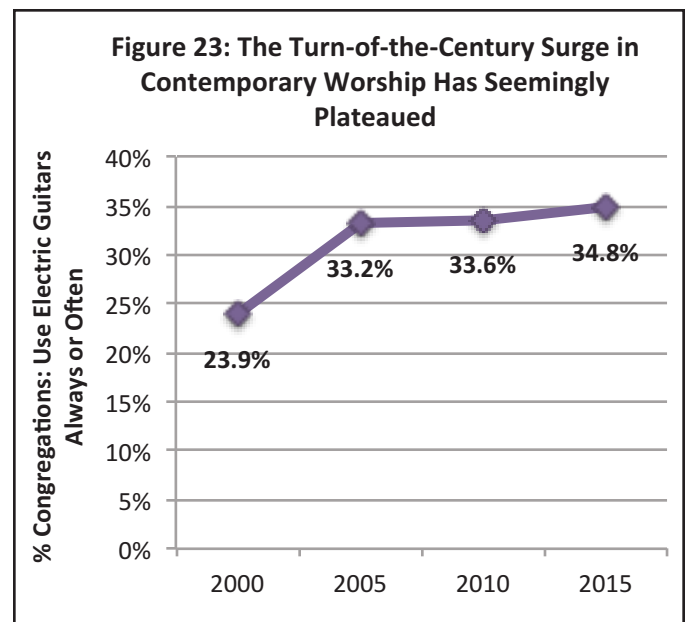
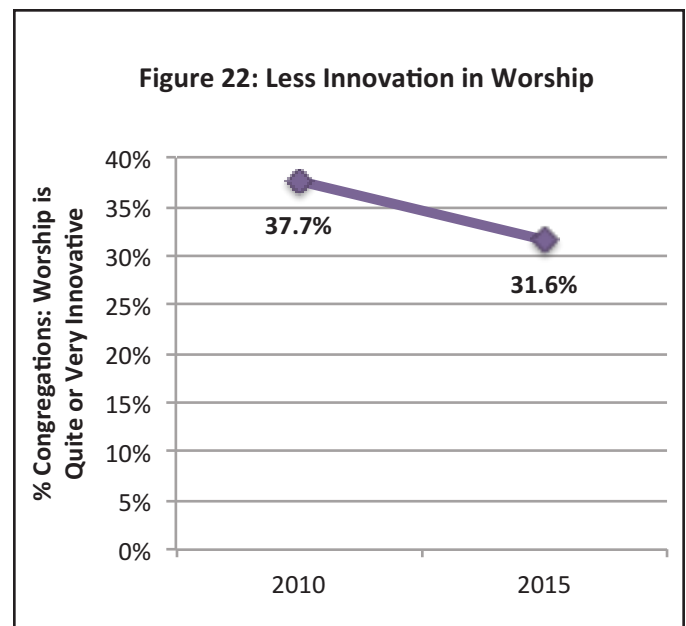
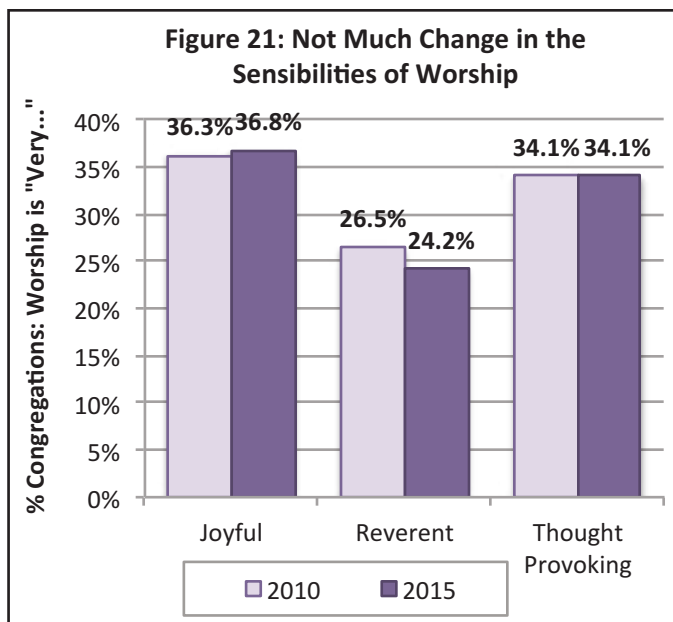
For a worshipful person it is hard to imagine a more heavenly experience than an inspirational service washing over one's soul. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find a strong relationship between the positive experience of worship and the spiritual vitality of congregations. This is no less true for FACT2015 than for previous FACT surveys. What is different in the FACT2015 data is that there is little if any relationship between growth and the positive experience of worship. Past FACT surveys have all found a significant relationship. Whether FACT2015 is a onetime anomaly in this regard or an understandable turning point in the dynamics of growth remains to be seen.

Another anomaly presented by the FACT2015 worship data is how the positive sensibilities of worship can remain either unchanged, as seen in Figure 21, or slightly up, as we saw for inspirational worship in Figure 17, at the same time that growth and spiritual vitality trended down. Perhaps the fact that growth fell significantly, while spiritual vitality just inched down, suggests that other things have become more important for the dynamics of growth than quality worship.

One strong and consistent finding is that a congregation's willingness to change worship fell from 2010 to 2015 (Figure 22). The FACT2015 question about innovation in worship, reported in Figure 22, is pretty direct. Because of the importance of the issue we doubled down, also asking if a congregation had changed the style of any of its worship services in the past five years or added a new service with a

different style. Those reporting no change or only a minor change jumped from 68.4% to 78.1% from 2010 to 2015, and those adding a new service of a different style dropped by almost half to just over 4%.

Figure 23 presents still another perspective on the slowdown in opting for a different kind of worship experience. Definitions of contemporary worship tend to be vague and subjective. So, beginning with FACT2000 we chose to use a very concrete marker, which was then very typical of, even if not totally inclusive of, the contemporary worship movement. That measure was the use of electric guitars. As can be seen in Figure 23, after an early surge the regular use of electric guitars has largely plateaued. We

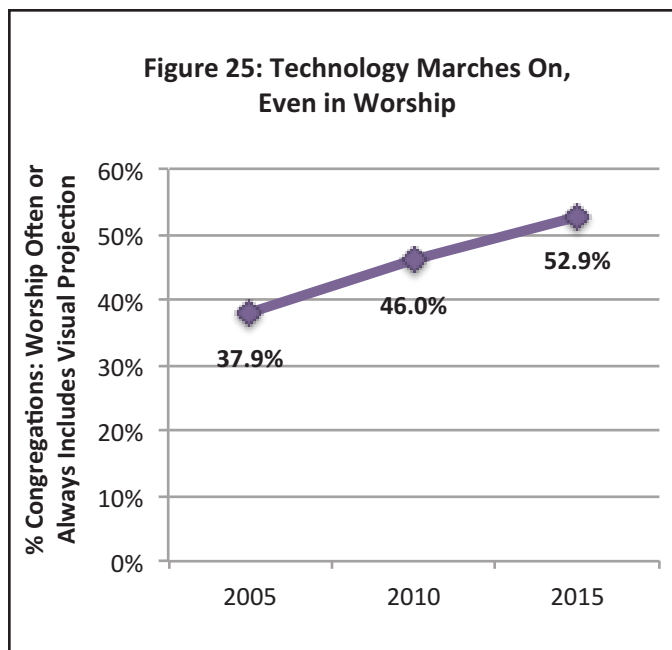
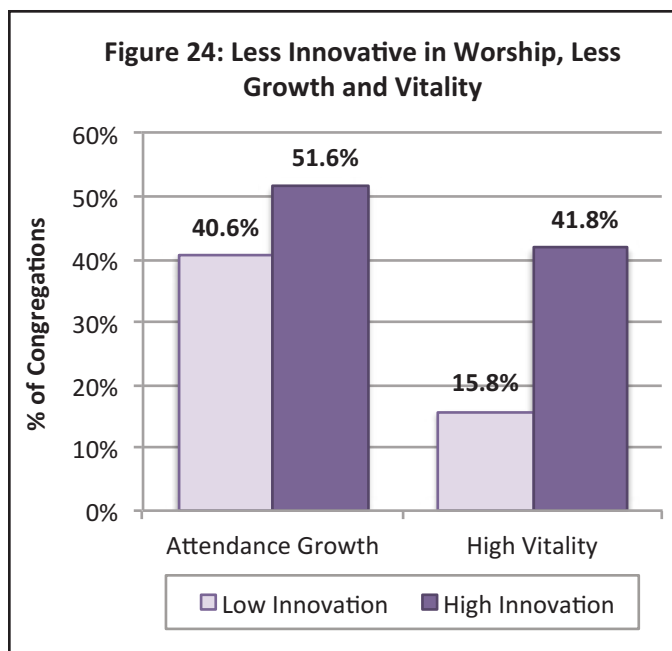
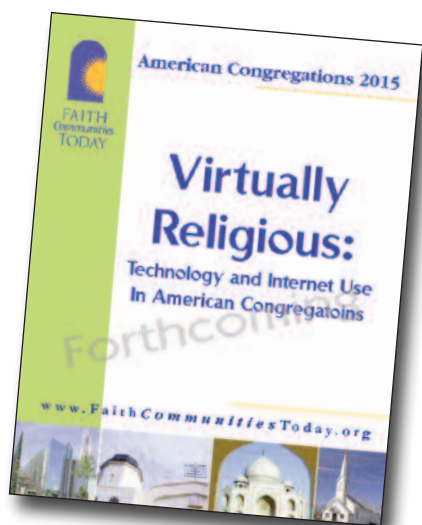


suspect this is because electric guitars are hardly considered innovative any longer in many circles, much less cutting edge.

Whatever a congregation's sense of innovation in worship, one thing has remained constant over our fifteen years of surveys—namely the strong relationship that changing worship has to both growth and spiritual vitality (as shown in Figure 24). One of the reasons for this is the relationship between innovative worship and distinguishing oneself from other congregations in one's community. Such differentiation, as previously noted in regard to Figure 12, provides a notable boost in growth.

One change to worship that continues to surge is the use of electronic technology, represented in Figure 25 by the use of visual projection equipment. Surprisingly, at least for us Luddites, is that congregations that use visual projection equipment do not see their worship as any more or less innovative than other congregations. Nor is it significantly related to growth.

Interestingly, the use of some electronic technologies is related to growth and vitality, and the use of others is not. Add in the fact that the kind of technology available to—and used by—congregations is changing so rapidly, we included a special set of questions in FACT2015 in order to deal with the issue. Electronic technology will be the focus of a forthcoming report.



## Some Erosion Of Member-Oriented Programming

Figure 26 lists five typical and key areas of member-oriented programming and shows the change for each from 2010 to 2015 in the percentage of congregations for which the program area was either a specialty of the congregation or received strong emphasis. In all instances there is a decline. The decline is minimal for mainstays like scripture or theology study, music, and youth. It is more significant for prayer groups/spiritual retreats, and young adults.

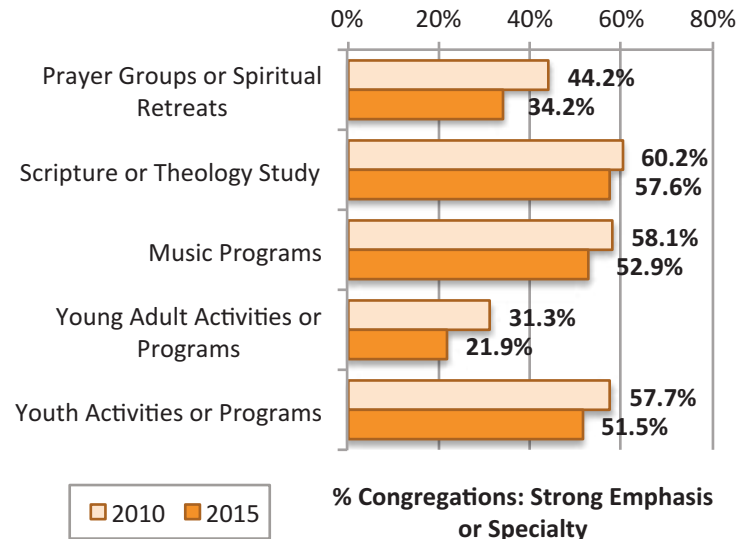
Congregational programming tends to be related to size and financial resources, and the FACT2015 data generally support this common wisdom but with some nuance. The nuance is that size and dollars are more strongly related to the emphasis given to some program areas than to others. Indeed, the data show that the relationship gets increasingly stronger as one moves down the listing in Figure 26, least strong for prayer groups and strongest for youth. In fact, the data show that prayer groups/spiritual retreats is the one program area that seems independent of size and budget.

The decline in the average size and budget of American congregations, shown earlier in this report, likely accounts for some of the erosion of member-oriented programming shown in Figure 26. The decline in prayer groups/spiritual retreats, however, must have a different source. It is consistent with the general decline in spiritual vitality already noted and a decline in the attention given to personal devotional practices found for another trend item contained in FACT2010 and FACT2015. If the three findings do stem from a yet to be determined source, it marks a potentially critical twist in the much discussed rise of being spiritual but not religious.

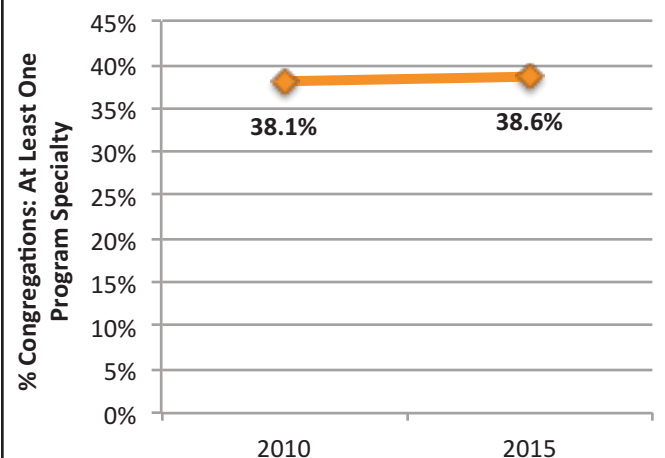
One bit of positive programmatic news in FACT2015 is that the percentage of congregations having at least one program specialty has not changed since 2010 (Figure 27). This is especially good news since such specialization is strongly related to size and budget, and therefore maintaining the level of specialization is counter-trend.

The positive contribution of specialization for growth and vitality is significant (Figure 28). Given the relationship of specialization to size and budget this points to one of the advantages that larger and wealthier congregations have organizationally. The FACT2015 data also show that part of the growth and vitality advantage of specialization accrues because it helps distinguish a congregation from other congregations around it.

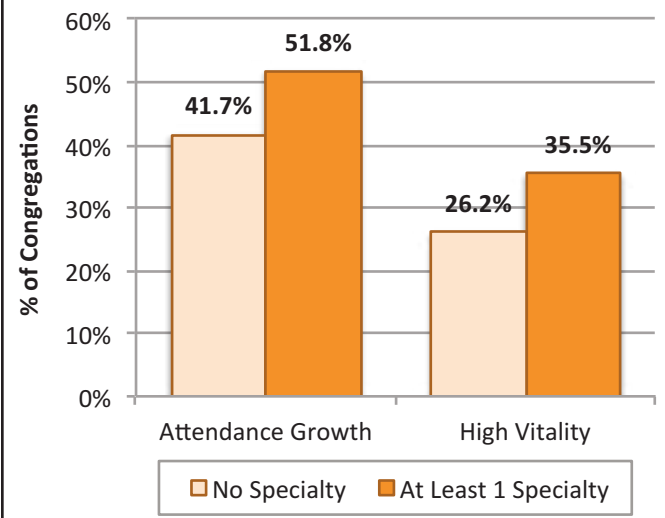
**Figure 26: Some Erosion of Member-Oriented Programming**



**Figure 27: No Change in Program Specialties**



**Figure 28: Program Specialties are a Good Thing for Growth and Vitality**

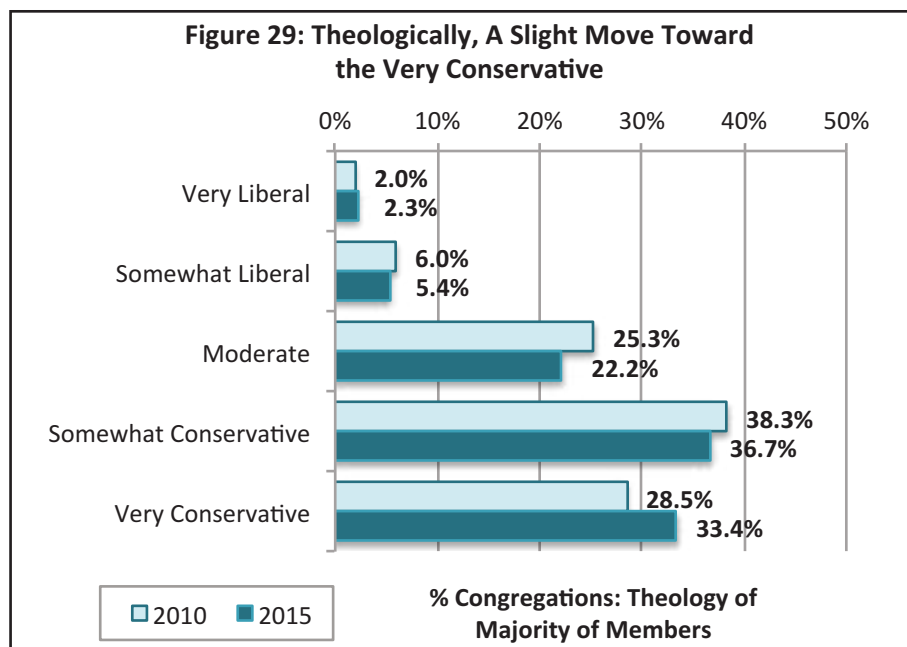
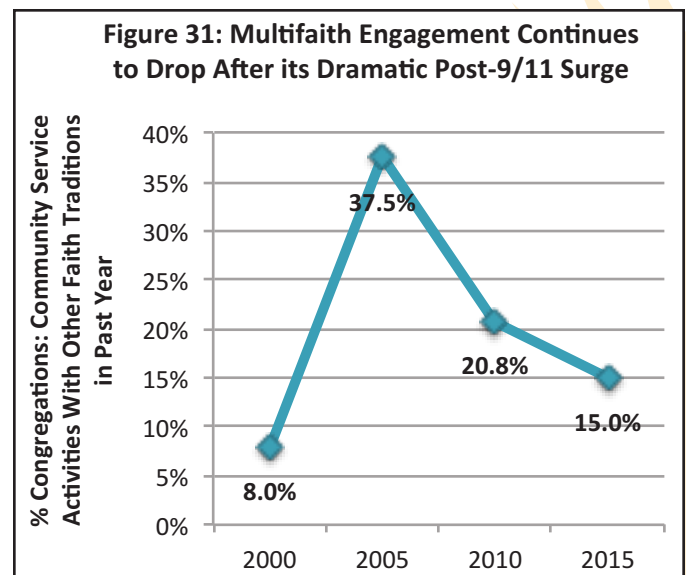
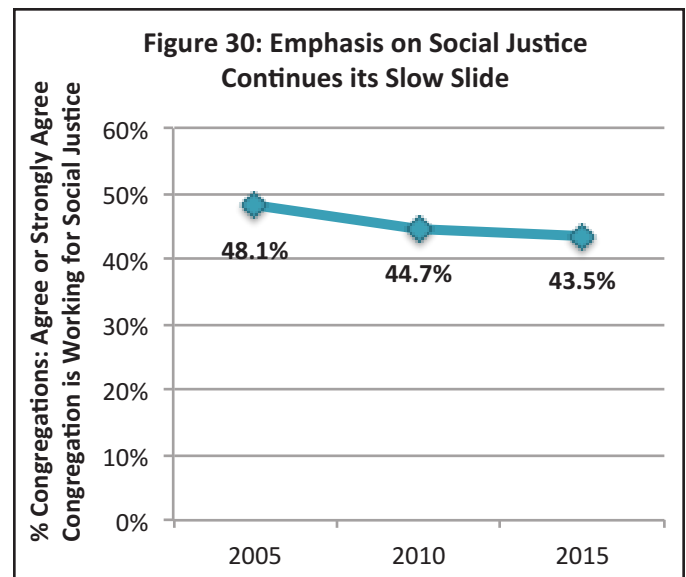


## Theologically, A Slight Move Toward The Very Conservative

In the last five years there has been a slight movement in the theological orientation of congregations from moderate and slightly conservative to very conservative, with virtually no change on the liberal end of the spectrum (Figure 29). For readers that follow the polling and commentary surrounding the current presidential primaries, the ascendance of the right should be no surprise. Similar to the current political climate, we find the conservative drift among congregations to be strongest in the south and in town-and country areas.

One consequence of the conservative theological drift is the very much related and equally modest erosion in emphasis given to social justice shown in Figure 30—since a justice orientation has been a strength of the left.

Given the relationship between theology and openness toward the theological other, a modest turn toward the conservative would suggest at least a small decrease in multifaith engagement among congregations, just as we found for social justice. But the dramatic collapse of such engagement shown in Figure 31 is way out of proportion. It therefore probably more strongly reflects, and in fact tracks with public polling data on, changing attitudes about broad geo-political circumstances. Figure 31 presents the FACT2015 results for involvement in community service activities with other faith traditions. Declines of equal magnitude are also found for educational activities and worship.





## Young Adult Ministry Is Not A High Priority For The Majority Of Congregations

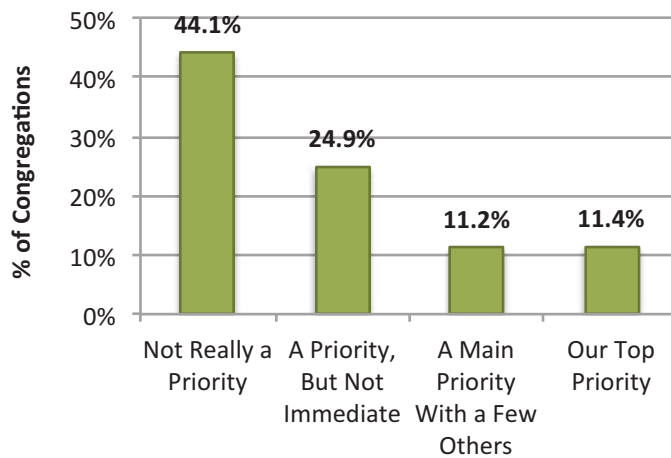
Young Adults pose a vexing challenge for congregations. On the one hand, they are particularly crucial for growth, as already noted in regard to Figure 6. On the other hand, and as recent study after study has shown, today's young adults are less religiously affiliated and less inclined toward religious beliefs and practices than ever before. The issue is so critical that the FACT project has just completed and published a set of case studies of congregations with notable young adult ministries that focuses on best practices. The 262 page book, entitled *How Religious Congregations are Engaging Young Adults in America*, is available in paperback and as an eBook through Amazon.com.

We also included a special set of questions on Young Adult ministry, again focused on best practices, in the FACT2015 survey. The results from this special module of questions will receive its own analysis and publication in a forthcoming report. As an introduction to the report on young adult ministry, here we highlight just three findings.

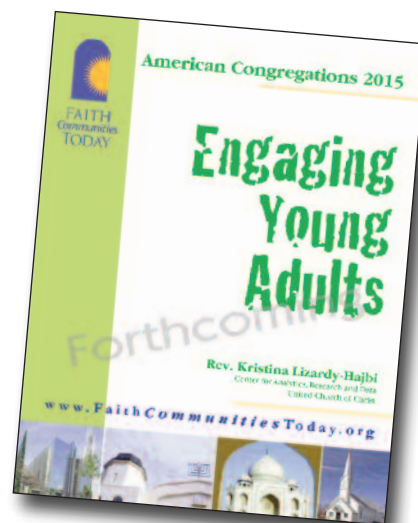
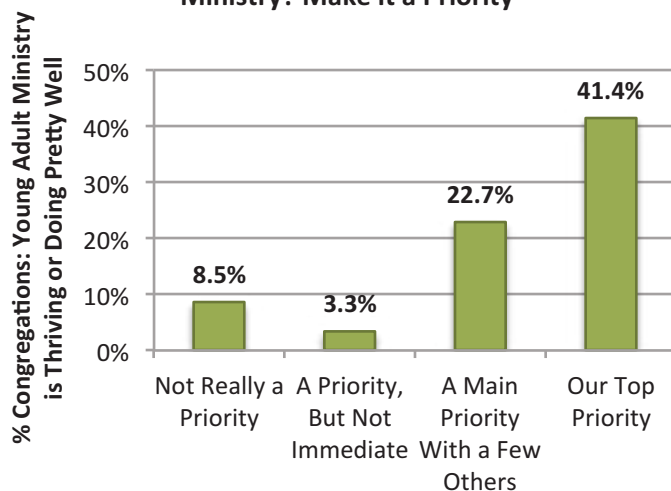
Just over 20% of the U.S. population is 18-34 years old—what we consider young adults for the purposes of the FACT surveys. Only about 10% of U.S. congregations reached this level among their regular participants in 2015, down from 15% in 2010. Not only are young adults increasingly underrepresented in our places of worship, but their growing absence is pretty much true across the board—regardless of region of the country, size of the congregation, or even town, country, city or suburban location. The growing absence is even found for congregations located in new suburbs, which are otherwise, along with racial/ethnic congregations, the place to be for growth and vitality.

The second two findings about young adult ministry previewed here are shown in Figures 32 and 33. The first is perhaps a bit surprising, if not disappointing; the second is perhaps a reminder of something that one would hope is obvious. Figure 32 shows that young adult ministry is not really a priority in nearly half of American congregations, and the top priority of only one in ten. Figure 33 shows that congregations that make young adult ministry their top priority are about five times more likely to have a thriving young adult ministry than congregations for which it is not a priority.

**Figure 32: Only Two in Ten Congregations Have Young Adult Ministry as a Main or Top Priority**



**Figure 33: Want a Thriving Young Adult Ministry? Make it a Priority**



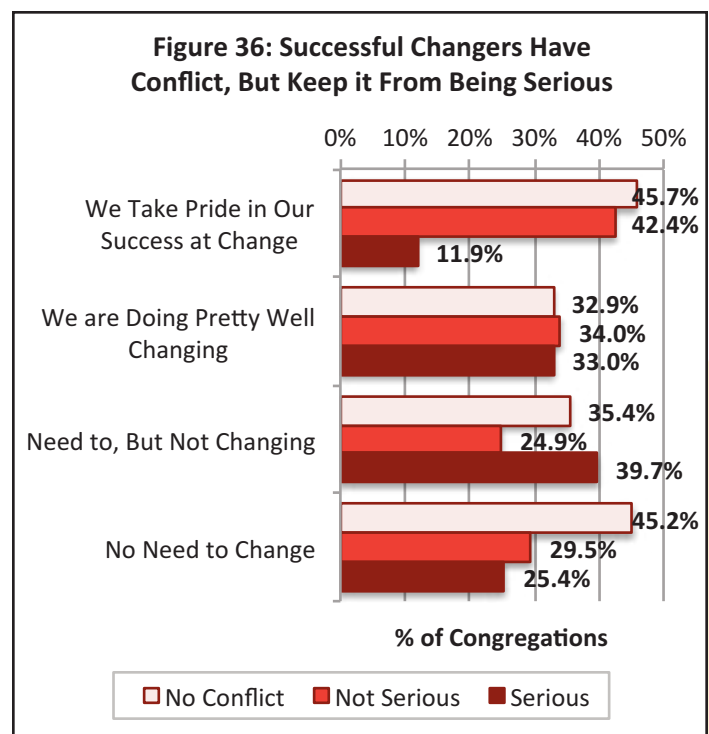
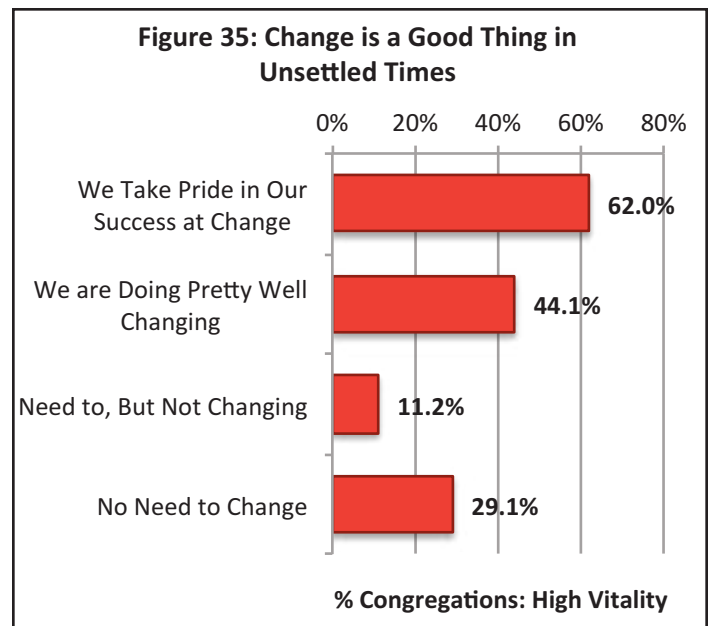
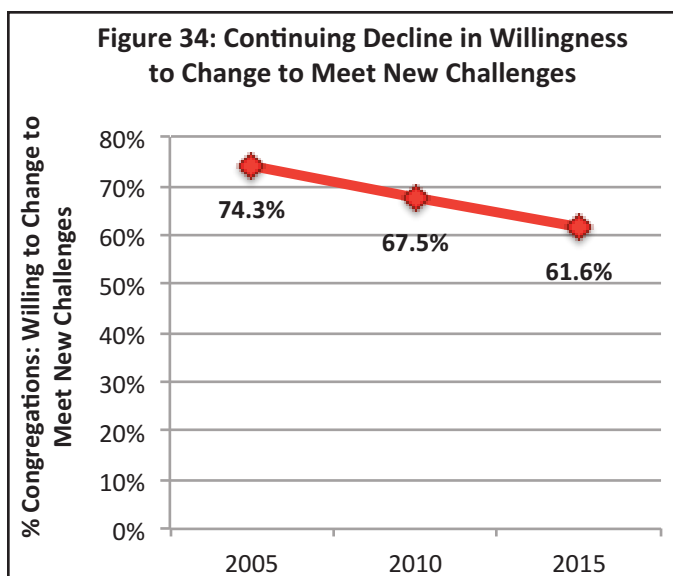


## Continuing Decline In The Embrace Of Change

Few would disagree that we live in a period of profound social and cultural change. Cultural sociologist Ann Swidler refers to such times as “unsettled.” By this she means that traditional ways of doing things typically no longer work and new strategies for action must be developed without any assurance they will work. Swidler’s perspective is helpful for understanding both the challenge of and the necessity for adaptive change faced by all American congregations. It certainly helps explain why congregations that are able to change are much more likely to have higher levels of spiritual vitality than those who struggle with change (Figure 35). Which, in turn, is why the continuing decline in openness to change, as shown in Figure 34, must be pause for concern.

On the other hand, and as already noted in regard to Figure 10, one of the reasons why congregations are wary of change must also be appreciated. Change typically comes with the tensions and conflicts of old/assuring/comfortable vs new/strange/risky. Successful change, therefore, has to manage such tensions and conflict. In fact, as shown in Figure 36, those congregations that feel they have been successful managing change do encounter conflict, but somehow keep it from becoming serious.

Change is such a critical issue for American congregations that we included a special set of questions about the issue in FACT2015, just as we did for vitality, young adult ministry, and the use of electronic technologies. And as already noted on page 6, because of the intimate connection between vitality and change, the report on the two special sets of questions will be combined in a forthcoming report.



## The Continuing Erosion Of Vitality And Growth Not Withstanding, When All Is Said And Done, More Congregations Are Thriving Than Struggling

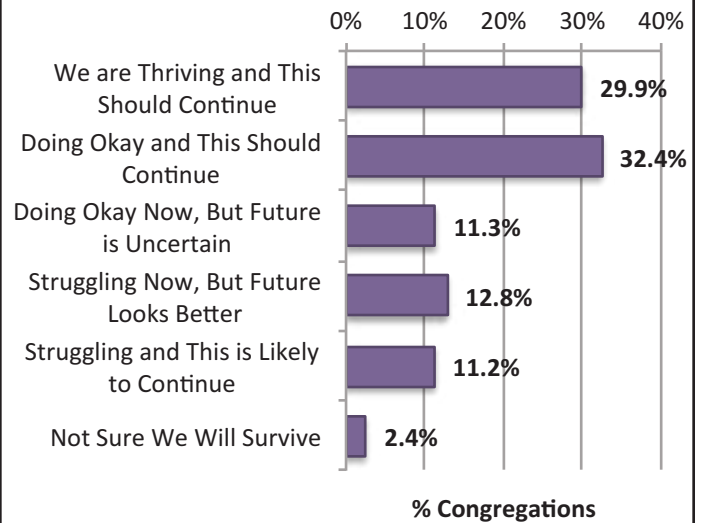
Much of this report underscores the challenges and difficulties faced by the nation's congregations. Behind many of these trends—such as declining size, diminished spiritual vitality and fewer young adults—are reasons for concern. Perhaps chief among them is the necessity for change and stronger emphasis on innovation. But the situation also calls for hope. As faith might have it, FACT2015's final survey question suggests a reason for hope. The question asked about the respondent's sense of their congregation's future from among the choices contained in Figure 37. The answers are a helpful reminder that while the overall decline is a real and persistent reality, it is not the whole story. The cup of American congregations is still more than half full.

Almost a third of American congregations view themselves as thriving and another third see themselves as doing okay, with this likely to continue (Figure 37). Only one in ten see themselves as confronting a continuing struggle, and less than 3% are not sure of their survival. Even if one discounts a potentially overly optimistic bias in faith-based organizations, the numbers are hardly a message of imminent demise.

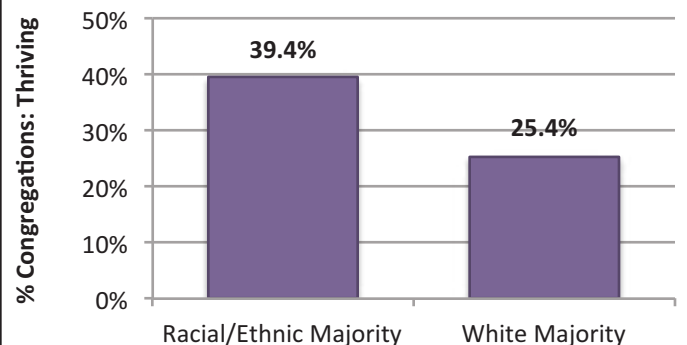
Just as important, this level of viability holds pretty much across the board, with the exception of congregations that are very small (under 50 average worship attendance) and those located in town and country settings. For these situations, the percent of congregations foreseeing continuing struggle in the future and concerned about survival roughly doubles. The data also show that the lack of financial resources, as one might expect, is the primary driver of concerns about viability. Congregations that are in some or serious financial difficulty are more than three times as likely than more solvent congregations to see themselves struggling into the future or concerned about survival.

On the positive side, Figure 38 shows yet another perspective on the current strength of racial/ethnic congregations. And we conclude with Figure 39, which offers a strong reminder about the decisive role of adaptive change for today's congregations. In a rapidly changing world, thriving congregations are nearly 10 times more likely to have changed themselves than are struggling congregations.

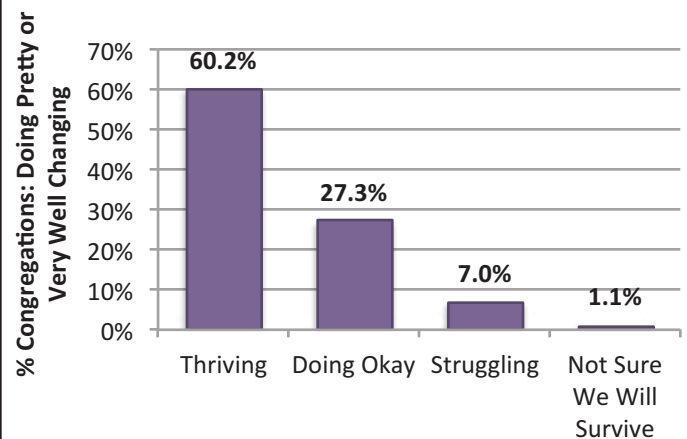
**Figure 37: When All is Said and Done, More Congregations are Thriving Than Struggling**



**Figure 38: Racial/Ethnic Congregations More Likely To Be Thriving**



**Figure 39: To Thrive is to "Get" Change**



# Appendix

## The Faith Communities Today Surveys

The Faith Communities Today national surveys of American congregations are aggregations of several national sample surveys conducted by denominations and faith traditions that are members of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP—see below). These are supplemented by a random, national “church list” sample of non-participating member congregations and non-member congregations. The aggregated national sample includes all faith groups that have congregations in the United States. The decadal 2000 and 2010 surveys include surveys from all CCSP partners, plus the non-partners sample, in each case totaling over 10,000 responding congregations. The 2005, 2008 and 2015 surveys have fewer partner-contributed surveys, and therefore smaller numbers of responding congregations—884 responding congregations in 2005, 2,527 congregations in 2008 and 4,436 in 2015.

The surveys in any given year are combined in such a way that, through the use of statistical weights, each partner denomination and faith group, and each non-partner cluster of congregations are represented in the data set proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States. The 2005 through 2015 survey data is further weighted to best estimates of national parameters for denominational family and census region, thereby improving the data's representation as true national samples of American congregations.

CCSP partners develop a common questionnaire for each survey, ranging from 150 to 200 questions. The questionnaires contain about an equal mix of continuing trend questions and items unique to a particular survey. The surveys are typically conducted by mail and/or online, although in a few instances are supplemented by telephone interviews. Questionnaires are completed by a key informant reporting on his or her congregation. The key informant is typically a congregation's senior clergy leader. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available at:  
<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/>

### FACT2015 includes surveys from:

Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America  
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Megachurches  
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod  
National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is of the U.S.  
Presbyterian Church, USA

Random “Church Lists” Supplement provided by  
FaithStreet  
Seventh-day Adventist  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
United Methodist Church

The aggregated dataset is double-weighted, as noted above. First it is weighted proportionate to the national representation of contributing denominations/groups. It is then weighted to represent denominational family by census region parameters attained from a combination of the National Congregations surveys and the *2010 U.S. Religious Census*.

## The Faith Communities Today Project

The FACT series of national surveys of American Congregations is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership. CCSP is a multifaith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The primary purposes of CCSP are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of American congregations. More information about CCSP, its partners, its publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to its monthly newsletter is available at:  
<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/>

The *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving* report was written by David A. Roozen, Retired Director, The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, and current of Director, CCSP. For a list of publications and contact information visit his web site at:  
[HartfordInstitute.org/about/roozen.htm](http://HartfordInstitute.org/about/roozen.htm)

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