

How Vital Are We?  
A Report of UCC Results from the FACT Study  
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## INTRODUCTION

This report is one in a series summarizing the findings of two major interdenominational and interfaith studies, the Faith Communities Together (FACT) and the US Congregational Life Surveys (CLS). Congregations of the United Church of Christ participated in both studies first in 2000 and again in 2008-2010. In the most recent FACT survey, denominations were invited to add questions specific to their own denomination to the common questions asked of all faith groups. The United Church of Christ used this opportunity to add questions pertaining to congregations' perceptions of their vitality. This report presents findings from those questions. Future reports will summarize findings on other topics, such as current church financial issues, involvement in community ministries, comparisons with other denominations, and changes in UCC congregations in the last ten years.

A random sample of over 1200 congregations was invited to participate in the 2010 FACT surveys, with racial/ethnic congregations oversampled so that these smaller subgroups would have enough participants for meaningful analysis. The response rate overall was 51%, with somewhat lower rates among the smallest churches and racial/ethnic churches, as is true of most surveys, and higher rates among churches in the Great Plains Region. Congregations that had lost members over the past 5 years were no more or less likely to participate than those that had gained members. Overall, the sample of 640 congregations appears to be a good representation of the denomination at large.

The FACT survey findings are supplemented by findings from the administration in 2008 of the Congregational Life Surveys to 9377 laity and 138 clergy from 143 UCC congregations as part of a larger interdenominational study. This project examined a more limited number of congregations in depth, with surveys being completed by all worshipers on a Sunday morning, another by the pastor, and a final survey describing the congregation and its programs. Because of the effort involved, only 28% of the congregations that were invited chose to participate, although almost all of those who agreed to participate completed the surveys. Participating congregations did not differ significantly from the denomination as a whole in size, location, race/ethnicity, or whether they were growing or declining.

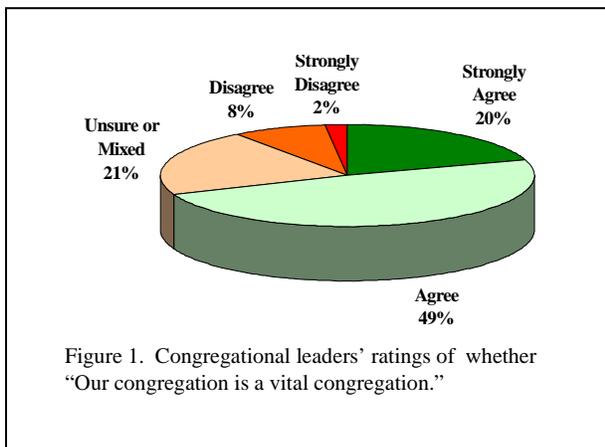
## WHAT IS VITALITY, ANYWAY?

The concept of church vitality is difficult to define and probably more difficult to capture in quantitative measures or survey questions. Like fine art, we may not be able to define it, but we "know it when we see it." Numerical growth is related to vitality, to be sure, but not all vital churches are growing, and not all growing churches are vital. It is related to quality of worship and other programs, to strength of fellowship, to engagement in mission and social witness, and

to having the resources needed to do all these things. But churches combine strengths in these areas in differing amounts, and yet each may be vital. Size and vitality no doubt interact. A vital small church may look very different from a vital large church.

Several years ago, Local Church Ministries sponsored some research on congregational vitality. Through nominations of congregations at various vitality levels and surveys of leaders in those congregations, the survey items that became part of the Vital-o-meter were developed. The following definition of congregational vitality was developed out of that project: *A vital congregation is one that makes a real difference in the lives of its members and the wider community, and is likely to continue to do so in the future.* That definition informs this analysis.

### HOW VITAL ARE WE?



When congregational leaders were asked to state whether their congregation is vital, over two-thirds said that it is (see Figure 1). 20% strongly agreed, and 49% agreed, while another 21% were either unsure or felt their situation was mixed. Unfortunately, 10% thought their congregations were NOT vital (8% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed).

Responses on many of the other survey questions help explain what respondents had in mind when they gave these ratings. For example, questions thought to be aspects of

vitality elicited similar answers, as can be seen in the green bars in Figure 2, which displays the percentages of the entire sample that strongly agreed and agreed with each statement. Responses to these questions were highly related to vitality in general. Most congregations that rated themselves as vital also agreed that these specific statements described themselves.<sup>1</sup> The green bars are shown in the approximate order in which they are correlated, with those on the top more highly related to vitality than those on the bottom, although all the items are strongly related to vitality.

Almost all leaders (84%) agreed that the congregation made a real difference in the lives of their members and families, and most of the rest (14%) were unsure or their response was mixed. Nearly two-thirds (64%) said that morale is high, and about the same said that their congregation is strongly focused on serving the wider community beyond their congregation. A majority have a shared vision and goals (53%) and a sense of excitement about the future (51%).

<sup>1</sup> Correlations between ratings on these items and the overall vitality ranged from  $r=.50$  for making a real difference in members' lives to  $r=.70$  for current morale being high, suggesting that all the questions were measuring the same concept. A correlation of  $.50$  means that how a leader answered making a difference explains 50% or one fourth of the variation in how the leader answered the vitality question. A correlation of  $.70$  means that morale explains 49% or about half of the variation in vitality. Correlations range from  $-1.00$  to  $+1.00$  and correlations in this range show a solid relationship between the two items being correlated.

In each case, most of those who did not agree said that they were unsure or mixed, with only about 12% disagreeing on most questions, only 2% on making a real difference in members' lives. Even 12% of congregations with low morale, little excitement, and no shared vision is troubling. Nevertheless, these results show that the UCC contains many vital congregations, and illustrate what vital congregations are like (they are excited about the future, have high morale, etc.).

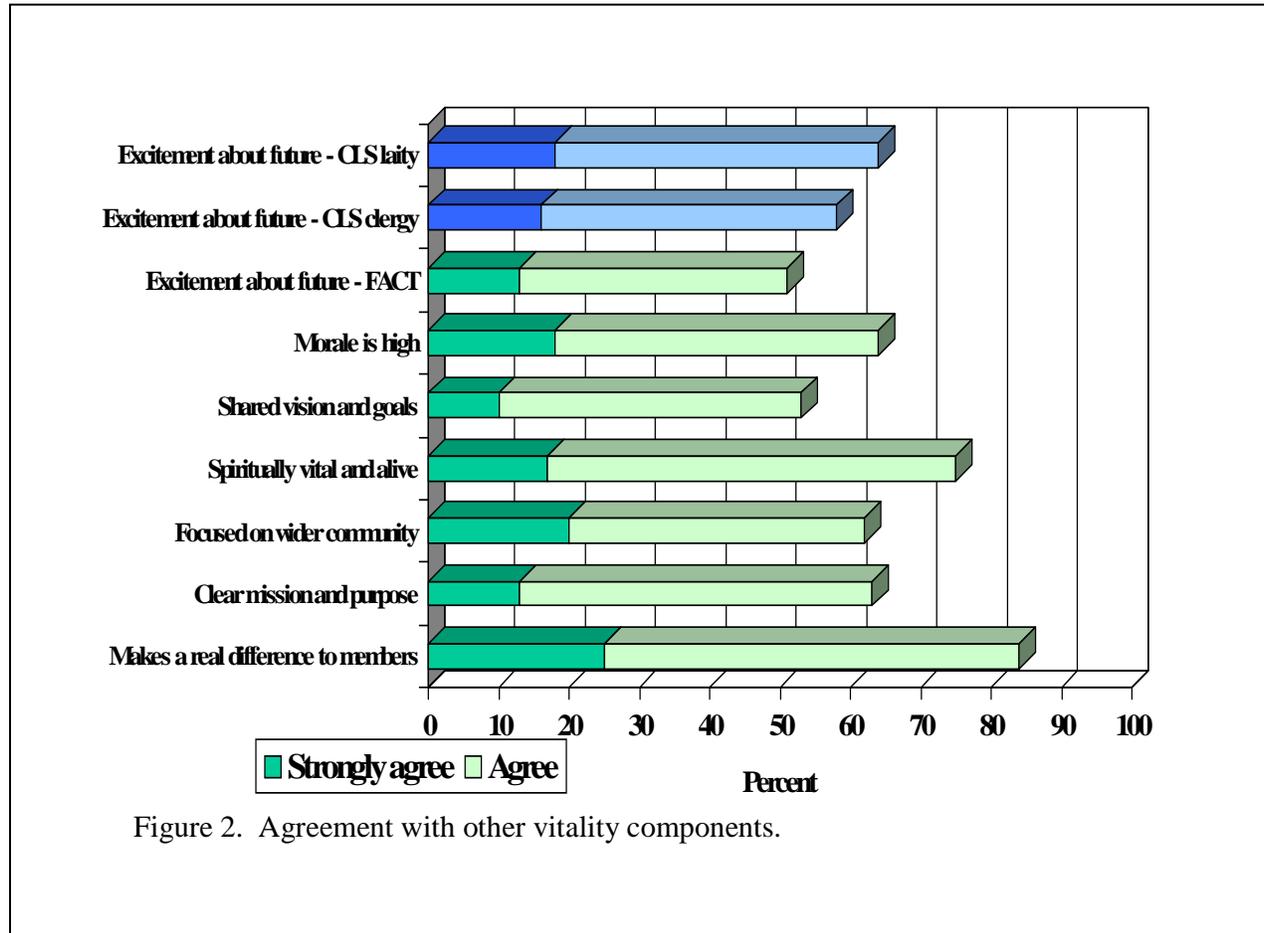


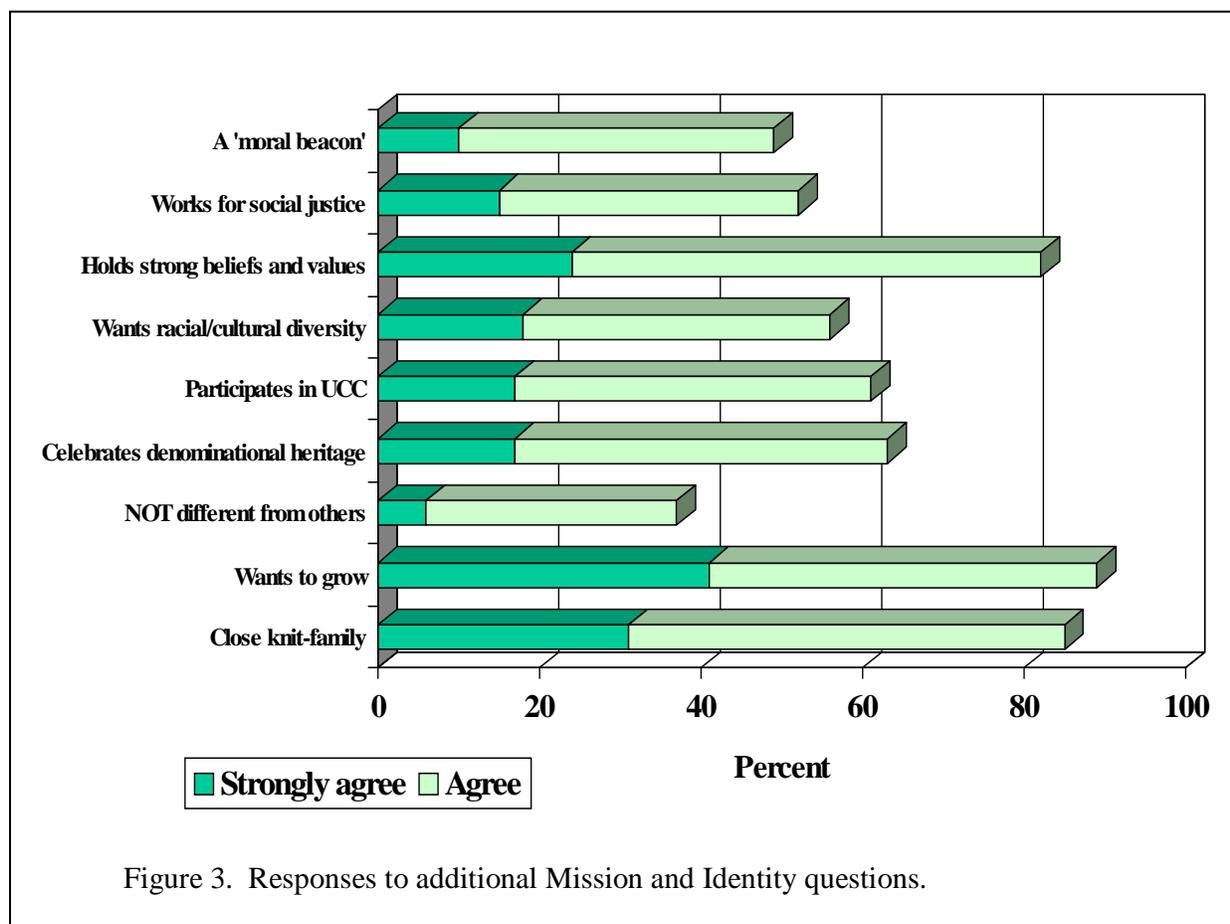
Figure 2. Agreement with other vitality components.

Results from the CLS echo this fairly positive picture of self-rated vitality, although questions about vitality, per se, were not included in that survey. More than half of both the clergy and the laity in the CLS sample agreed or strongly agreed that there was a sense of excitement about the future in their congregation (see the blue bars in Figure 2). These percentages are a little higher than those in the FACT. However, the survey was taken before the 2008 economic downturn, which might explain the difference.

The question on the CLS that was most parallel to the concept of vitality asked members to what extent the worship and other activities helped them with daily living. Over half (52%) said they help to a great extent, and another 38% said they help to some extent. On other questions that were similar to those on the FACT, a third (34%) of the laity said that their congregation has a clear vision, goals, or direction and they are strongly committed to them,

while another 30% said they are partly committed to them. Only 6% of clergy and 4% of laity said that the future direction of their church was unclear. This similarity between results for both clergy and laity and between results from two different surveys, the FACT and the CLS, suggest that these estimates are good ones. Thus, even though the vitality measure used in this report is a one-item, self-report question from a church leader who may well be biased, the high level of agreement between responses to this item and responses to other items thought to be related to vitality suggest that it is measuring more than wishful thinking in most cases.

Leaders who described their congregations as vital also rated them significantly higher than others on other FACT questions measuring a congregation's Mission and Identity.<sup>2</sup> Questions again are listed in the order of their relation to overall vitality, with the most highly related on the top. Although all these questions were significantly related to vitality, the relationship was not as strong as for the items in Figure 2.

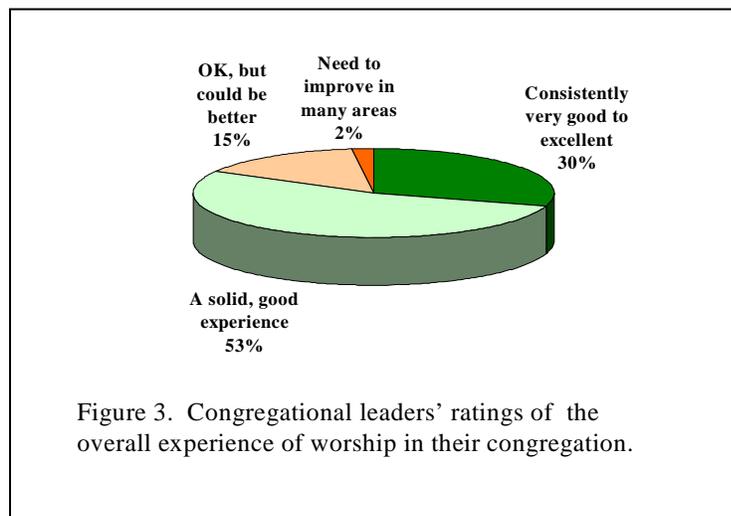


About half the UCC congregations surveyed agree that they are moral beacons in their communities, and slightly more than half say they work for social justice. Vital congregations are much more likely to agree to each of these statements than less vital ones are. Rather than

<sup>2</sup> Correlations ranged from  $r=.45$  with being a moral beacon and  $r=.42$  for working for social justice to  $r=.20$ , for being a close-knit family. The correlation with NOT being different from other churches in the community was  $r=-.24$ , indicating that vital congregations were more likely to say that they WERE different.

being alternate descriptions of vital congregations, like the items in Figure 2, these two items may represent different ways of being vital. Leaders of the vast majority of UCC congregations report that they hold strong beliefs and values, they want to grow, and they are a close-knit family. The relationship between these characteristics and vitality is only moderate, at least in part because nearly everyone claims to have them. Over half the congregations report that they want to be racially and culturally diverse, they participate actively in the UCC wider church, and they celebrate their denominational heritage. Again, agreeing with these statements was significantly related to self-reported vitality, with moderate correlations, suggesting that some, but not all vital congregations agree with them. The item with which the fewest congregations agree is the statement that they are NOT that different from other congregations in their community. Vital congregations were LESS likely than others to agree that they are NOT different from others. Because this question is worded somewhat differently from the others and some respondents may not have noticed the NOT, the results are difficult to interpret. About equal percentages said that they were different, with 10% strongly disagreeing and 32% disagreeing that they were not different.

Worship, perhaps the most important component of congregational life, received positive ratings on the FACT survey, as can be seen in Figure 3. 30% of those reporting rated worship as consistently very good to excellent, a majority (53%) said it was a solid, good experience, and only 17% said that some improvements were needed. Descriptions of aspects of worship were



similarly very positive, with 84% saying that “it is filled with a sense of God’s presence” describes it quite well or very well, and 77% agreeing that it is inspirational (data not shown). This is not surprising, as clergy probably were the respondents in many cases. It may also reflect the recent national church emphasis on strengthening worship through the *Worshiping Into God’s Future* program.

Confirmation that these strong ratings of worship are shared by the laity comes from the CLS. When asked to describe worship, 73% of the laity said they always or usually felt a sense of God’s presence and inspiration, while 65% said they rarely or never experienced boredom or frustration. Most members of congregations in the CLS reported that their spiritual needs are being met (82%) and that they have had some or much growth in their faith through their congregation (78%), in the last year.

Ratings of worship were significantly positively related to self-reported vitality<sup>3</sup>, suggesting that worship is a key aspect of vitality. Figure 4 shows that almost all leaders who said their congregation was vital also said that their worship was very good to excellent or a solid, good experience. While the majority of leaders who said their congregation was not vital or were unsure also said their worship was a solid, good experience, 30% of those who were unsure and 40% of those who said the congregation was not vital said worship was only OK or needed to improve in many areas.

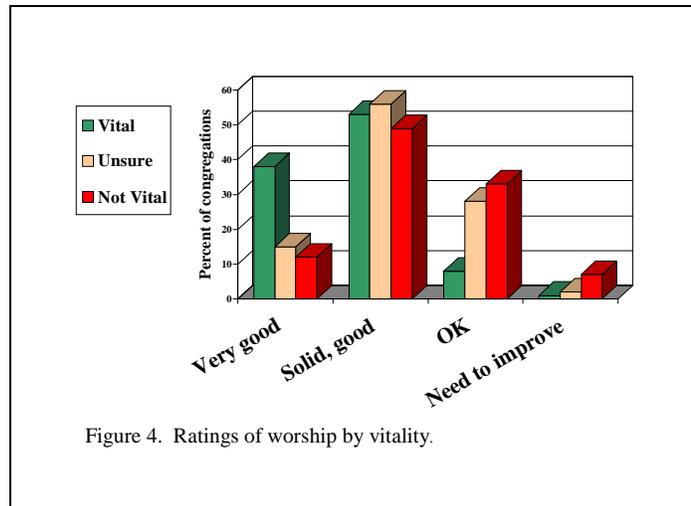


Figure 4. Ratings of worship by vitality.

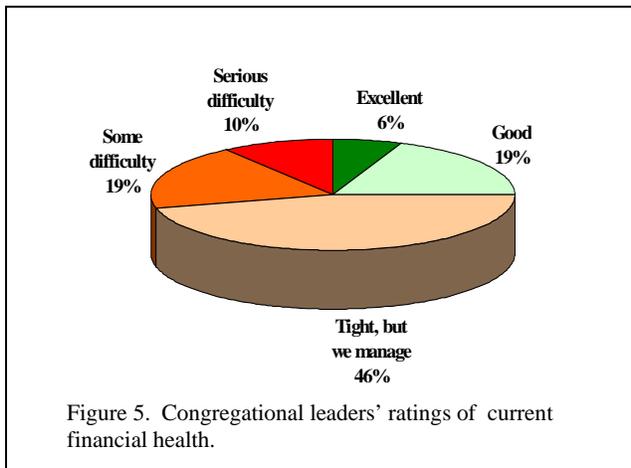


Figure 5. Congregational leaders' ratings of current financial health.

Financial health is another factor that would be expected to relate to vitality. Figure 5 displays congregations' current financial health. Ten percent report that they are having serious financial difficulty, with another 19% reporting some difficulty. Overall, current financial status was significantly related to vitality<sup>4</sup>, about the same as ratings of worship. Those who say they are not vital or are unsure are much more likely to report that they are in some or serious financial difficulty (see Figure 6), and those who say they are vital are more

likely to report that their financial status is good or excellent.

While one might think that the 10% of congregations that are in serious financial difficulty are the same 10% of congregations that disagreed that they are vital, this is not the case. When just the 10% in serious financial difficulty are examined, about a third say they are vital, a third disagree, and a third are unsure. (These 21 congregations represent a small percentage of all vital congregations. as can be seen on

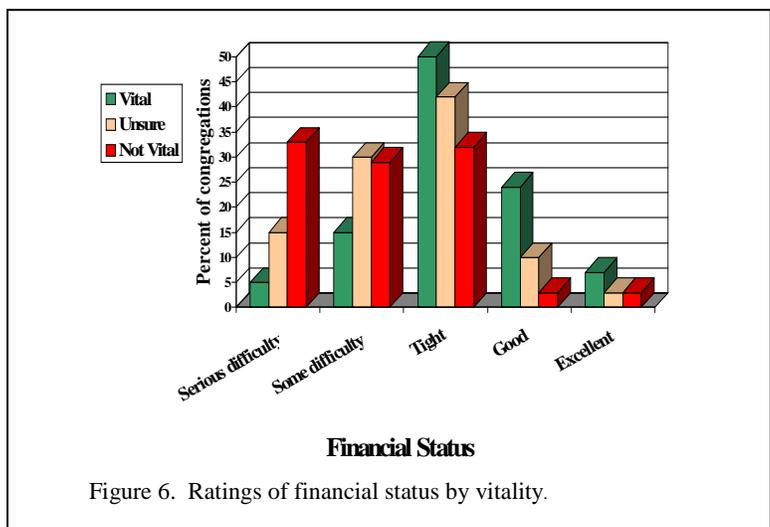
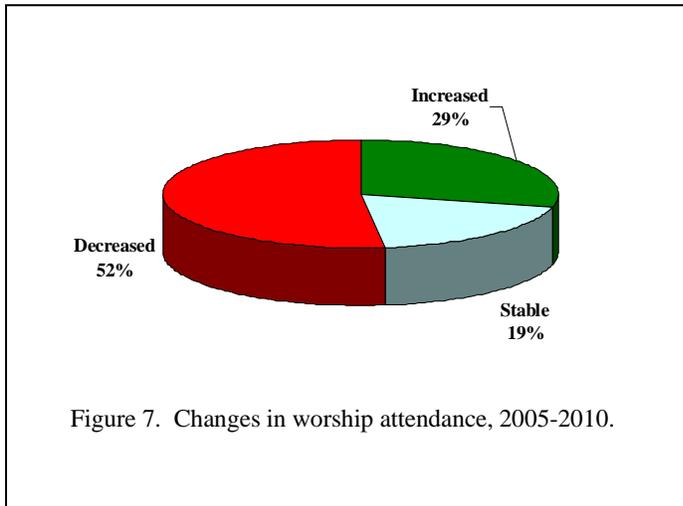


Figure 6. Ratings of financial status by vitality.

<sup>3</sup> Chi square of 119.03,  $p < .0005$ .

<sup>4</sup> Chi square of 116.16,  $p < .0005$ .

Figure 6, but they are a much large percentage of all 61 congregations in serious difficulty.) Only about 4% of those who say their financial health is good or excellent say that they are not vital, and 11% are unsure. Although having money is not crucial to being vital, it does help.



Although vitality and membership growth or decline are not the same thing, growth or decline in worship attendance (one measure of membership that was collected for 6 years on the FACT surveys) has a powerful effect on ratings of vitality. Unfortunately, the majority of UCC congregations (52%) experienced a decline in attendance of more than 5% over the past 5 years, as is shown in Figure 7. This decline is similar to that in other denominations, and in other voluntary organizations, as well.

The amount of growth or decline in worship attendance between 2005 and 2010 explained about 10% of the variation in congregations' ratings of their vitality.<sup>5</sup> As Figure 8 illustrates, congregations that grew or were stable in attendance between 2008 and 2010 were far more likely to say that they were vital than those that had experienced greater than 5% decrease in attendance. Only 13% of the congregations with decreased attendance said they were very vital, as compared to 22% and 25% of those whose attendance was stable and growing, respectively, while 28% of those with decreased attendance were unsure, as compared to 18% and 16% of the others. Decreased numbers on Sunday mornings may have made them question their feelings about the vitality of their congregations.

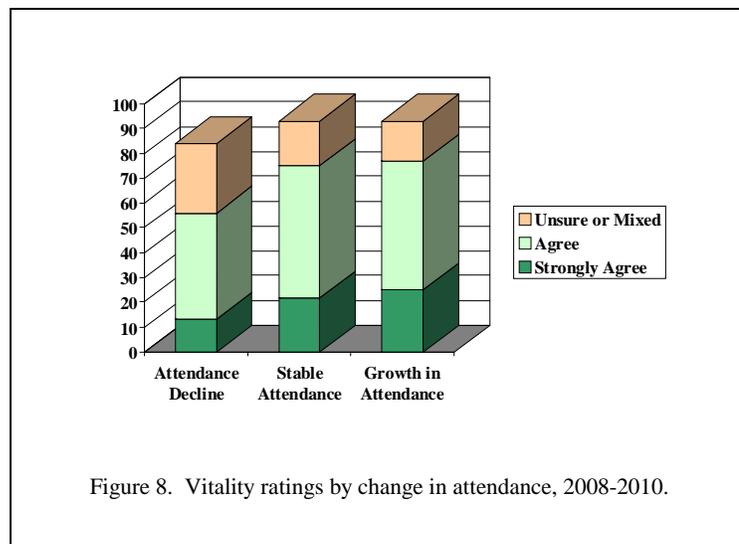


Figure 8. Vitality ratings by change in attendance, 2008-2010.

The analyses thus far found that ratings of worship, financial status, and membership growth and decline all are related to self-ratings of vitality, with other characteristics of a congregation, such as being a moral beacon or working for social justice, also being related to vitality ratings. The effect of all these factors combined in predicting or explaining vitality was

<sup>5</sup> Correlation of  $r = .312$ ;  $p < .0005$ ,  $r^2 = .097$ .

explored using a statistical technique called multiple regression analysis.<sup>6</sup> When all these items were included, they explained about half of the variation in rated vitality. The most important item was financial health, with working for social justice, being a moral beacon, and having excellent worship nearly as important. Wanting to grow, participating in the wider church and having increased in attendance were less important, while being a close-knit family, celebrating denominational heritage, and wanting to be racially and culturally diverse added little to explaining vitality ratings when these other factors were considered. This is not to say that change in attendance is not important in explaining vitality ratings, just that it does not add much explanatory power if you already know about financial changes. When having a clear mission and purpose was added to the mix, it became the most important item in predicting vitality. This suggests that while human and financial resources are important, being clear about what God is calling the congregation to be and do may be even more important in congregational vitality.

Why do we feel vital even when we are declining? Although 51% of congregations had at least stable attendance and reported no significant financial problems, 36% reported either a drop in attendance or some financial difficulty and 13% reported both. And yet 60% of congregations with either declining membership or finances and 39% with both said they are either vital or very vital, as compared with 83% of those that were growing. When these congregations with problems were compared with others, a familiar picture of decline emerged. They were congregations that are retrenching, with lower morale, less excitement, less clarity about their mission, lower ratings of worship, fewer visitors or new groups, fewer young adults and children, less focus on the wider community or social justice issues, and less growth than other congregations in every measure of congregational change. They were more likely than other congregations to report conflict where people withheld money or left over a variety of issues, including the budget, worship, programs, and actions of General Synod or the wider church. They were much more likely than other congregations to report being impacted by the recession, reporting both a greater impact and less recovery.

Even though these congregations rated themselves as less vital than others, many still agreed that they are vital. Perhaps they see their current problems as a temporary situation that can be overcome, or they continue to see an important role for themselves in their communities, even if they do not have the human and financial resources they once had. Leaders of congregations who reported that they have a clear mission and purpose and that members and pastor share a clear vision, goals, or direction for mission and ministry were much more likely than other congregations with problems to report that their congregations are vital.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The original equation yielded a multiple regression coefficient *R* of .68, with an *Adjusted R square* of .46. Addition of the item on mission and purpose increased the *Multiple R* to .71, and the *Adjusted R square* to .51.

<sup>7</sup> *r* = .55 and .58, respectively, *p* < .0005.

These congregations did not differ significantly from others demographically by region, race/ethnicity, or type of community. They did, however, differ by size, as can be seen in Figure 9. Although 11% of the 35 congregations in the sample with 500 or more in attendance had declined in attendance or had significant financial losses, none of them had experienced both problems. Congregations with one or both problems

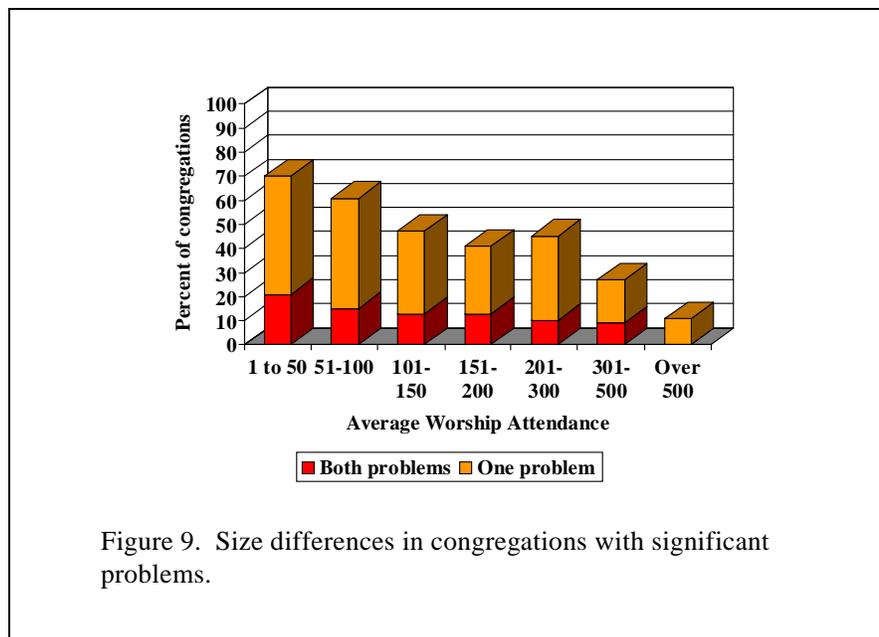


Figure 9. Size differences in congregations with significant problems.

were much more likely to have an average weekly worship attendance of 100 or fewer than were larger congregations. Larger churches that are declining in attendance or financial resources may have more other resources to buffer the affects of the decline, and the effects of declining attendance may be felt particularly as congregations drop below the number that can sustain a full-time pastor.

## CHANGE

Because the world around us is changing at an ever-faster pace, congregations that want to remain vital must change as well. And yet change is hard. People look to the church to be the one unchanging rock in their lives. Some congregations thrive on variety and change while others resist it. The FACT surveys asked about change in several ways, in two general questions -- “Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges.” and “This congregation is always ready to try something new.” -- as well as in specifics about how the congregation has changed in worship, adopting new technologies, and other ways. In addition, the CLS asked both clergy and laity whether the congregation was always ready to try something new.

Figure 10 shows that about half of both samples agree with these general statements, with those in the CLS sample agreeing a bit more than those in the larger FACT sample. FACT leaders were more likely to say that their congregation was willing to change to meet new challenges, with over 60% agreeing, than they were to say that it was always ready to try something new. Among FACT congregations, most of the remainder (24%) were unsure about the congregation’s willingness to change, while 11% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed that the congregation was willing to change.

Being always ready to try something new may describe a congregational preference for novelty rather than stability and tradition, while being willing to change may represent being

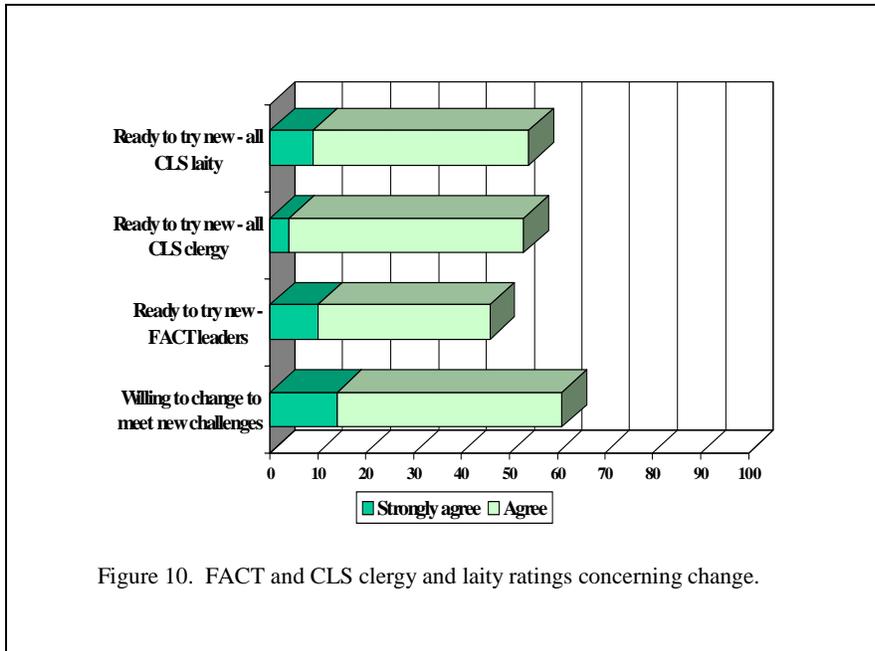


Figure 10. FACT and CLS clergy and laity ratings concerning change.

willing to respond to the need for change, whether people prefer the change or not. Among congregations described as “Very liberal” theologically, 75% were also always ready to try something new, while among the “Very conservative,” only 30% were always ready to try something new. The difference between the two groups was about the same for being willing to change to meet new challenges, 86% and 43% respectively, although

both groups were more willing to change to meet new challenges than they were to change for change’s sake. Responses to “Being always ready to try something new” and “Being willing to change” were significantly related, with most people giving the same or similar responses to both.<sup>8</sup>

In general, leaders who rated their congregations as being willing to change also reported that they had made some changes. Although they were not more likely to have begun a new service of worship, they were significantly more likely to report having made changes to worship, although differences were not large. Of course, some changes in worship could have been caused by shrinking attendance or no longer having a choir, or a new pastor with a different style, rather than in response to a need for change. However, they were also significantly more likely to describe their worship as innovative.

Congregations described as willing to change were significantly more likely than others to use email, blogs, and other electronic tools for ministry. They started twice as many small groups or new ministries in the last year than others, even when congregational size was taken into account. Congregations that were willing to change were much more likely to have become Open and Affirming (ONA) to those of lesbian/gay/bisexual/ transgender orientation (LGBT) (26%) than those not willing to change (8%), although a few of those are ONA as well. Congregations that were willing to change were more likely to have attended vitality training, and to have said that the StillSpeaking Initiative helped people learn more about the UCC and take pride in the UCC.

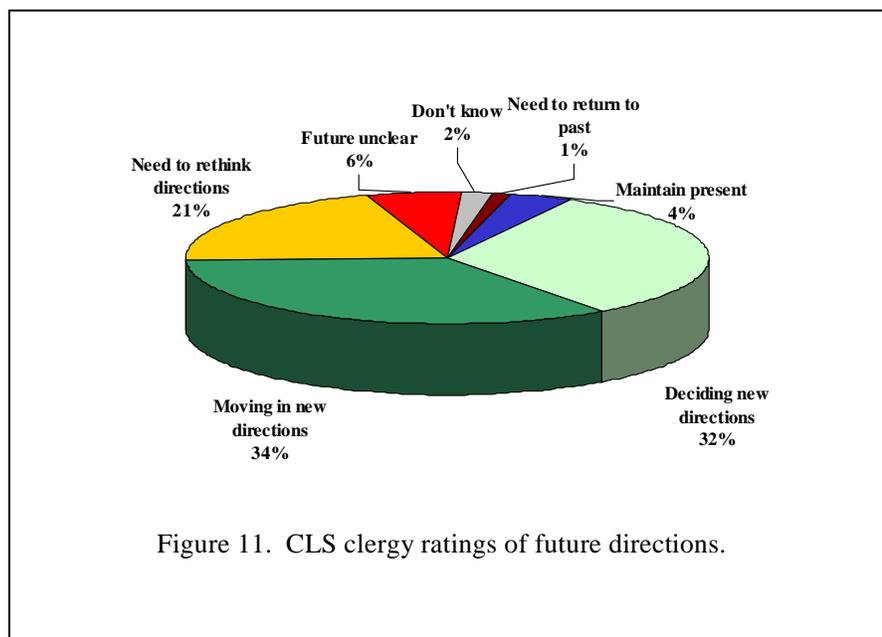
<sup>8</sup> Correlation of  $r=.62$ ,  $p<.0005$ , explaining 38% of the variation between responses to the two statements. Most leaders gave the same response to both, or an adjacent response, usually being more willing to change if needed than always being ready to try something new (e.g., strongly agree on being willing to change and agreeing on always being ready to try something new).

Congregations that were rated most willing to change were significantly more likely to report growth in several areas of church life, including spirituality, fellowship, organizational practices, stewardship, missional outreach, ability to evangelize, and making a difference in people’s lives. These congregations also had significantly greater growth in attendance, and a stable or increasing rather than declining financial position, and were more likely to have reported no conflicts in the past five years.

Although every group, size, and region of the country had some congregations that were described as willing to change, openness to change generally varied in predictable ways. Of the smallest congregations, 50% were willing to change, of the largest, 75%. Similarly, 50% of rural congregations were willing to change, as compared with 80% of those in older suburbs, and 62% overall. Those in the Western region were most willing, the West Central the least. Formerly E&R congregations were less willing than others, non-white ethnic congregations and the newest congregations were more willing.

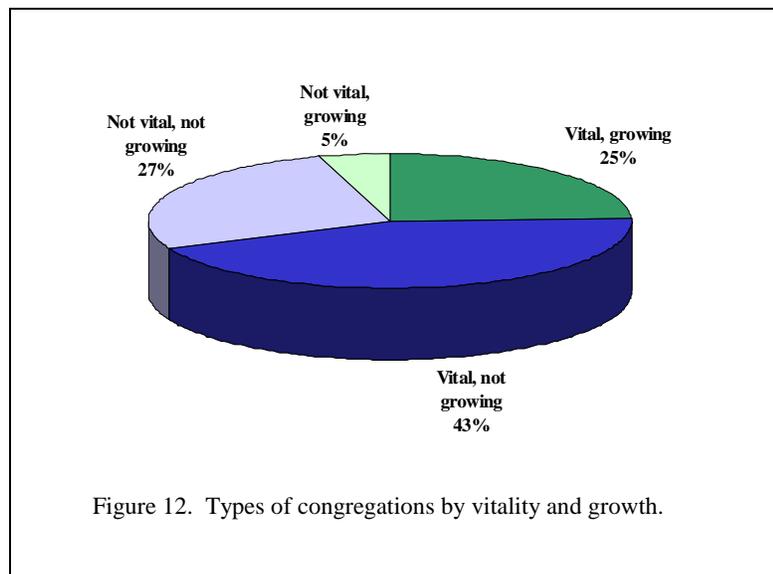
When the 87 congregations that were NOT willing to change (14% of all congregations surveyed) were examined, 25% were growing in attendance in the last two years (as compared to 31% of all congregations), 25% said that morale was high (as compared to 64%) and 34% rated themselves as vital (as compared to 69%). Others were stable (32%) in attendance or declining (43%). Leaders of 72% of these churches rated worship as good or excellent, and a few used drums (10%) and electric guitars (6%) frequently or always in worship (as compared to 12% and 9%, respectively). Some of these congregations, especially those that were stable or growing in worship attendance, may not have felt the need to change, but instead believe that they need to continue to do what they are now doing, with some success. Or they may already have made changes to worship, with enough associated problems that they are less interested in making further changes. A leader who has not tried to make a significant change in congregational life may believe that the congregation is more willing to change than one who has tried to do so. Therefore, these leaders who say the congregation is less willing to change may be more accurate in their perceptions than some of those who say the congregation is willing to change.

Results from the CLS also suggest that most congregations are struggling with how to relate to a changing society. As Figure 11 illustrates, a third of the CLS clergy say that they are moving in new directions, while another third say they are deciding about new directions. Another 21% realize that new directions are necessary. Just over 10% of these



clergy say that the future of their congregations is unclear, or they need to return to the past or maintain their present course. These results probably are an overestimate of congregations considering or embracing change, however, because congregations considering change probably would have been more likely than others to participate in the CLS, which provided resources to help the congregations change. Nevertheless, it suggests that a strong majority of congregational leaders acknowledge the need to change and are trying to implement it in their congregations.

## VITAL AND GROWING



Although over two thirds of all congregations surveyed said they were vital, far fewer congregations reported growth in attendance over the last five years. To learn more about why some vital congregations are growing and others are not, congregations were divided into four categories, vital and growing (25%), vital but either stable or declining in attendance (43%), not vital and not growing (27%), and not vital, but growing (5%), as can be seen in Figure 12. Then, the two types of vital congregations were compared.

Vital congregations that were growing differed from other vital congregations in several distinct ways. Some of them were most likely related to the process of growth itself. Vital growing congregations had a higher ratio of average attendance to members, more members who were new in the past five years, fewer members who had been part of the UCC or a predecessor denomination all their lives, as well as a smaller proportion of senior adults. These congregations had been founded more recently than others. All these characteristics are typical of growing congregations whose larger numbers of new members change the demographic mix of the membership. Financially, vital growing congregations were more likely to report good or excellent financial condition which was better than it had been five years previously. They were also more likely than vital congregations that were not growing to report that their financial condition had improved in spite of the recession or had rebounded from early losses. Again, this stronger financial position may be a byproduct of the growth in attendance.

Some of the differences between vital growing congregations and those that were not growing seemed to be related to location. Vital growing congregations were more likely to be found in the Western and Southern Regions where population growth is largest, and less common in the Great Lakes and Mid-Atlantic Regions with lower population growth rates. They were more likely to be located in newer suburbs or center city areas, and less in older suburbs,

small cities, and villages. Vital growing congregations reported more visitors, an average of nine per month rather than six for congregations that were not growing, which could also indicate a location with more newcomers, as well as greater efforts to attract them.

Some of the differences were related to efforts to change to appeal to new people. Vital growing congregations were described by their leaders as being more willing to change to meet new challenges. Growing congregations reported having more “out” LGBT members and more young adult members, although not more children. In worship, they used the organ less often than vital congregations that were not growing. They were more likely than other vital congregations to use internet technology, by contacting visitors by email, or having blogs and podcasts, although they were equally likely to have a website or use Facebook.

On other characteristics, vital growing congregations appear to be like the description of growth in the early church in Acts 2:42-47, emphasizing worship, faith development, fellowship and care for others. Vital growing congregations put more effort into worship and spirituality. The leaders gave higher ratings to their worship experience and reported that they had made recent changes in worship, although differences were not always statistically significant. Leaders of vital growing churches described various aspects of worship more positively, particularly in being joyful, innovative, inspiring, and thought-provoking. Growing congregations also were more likely to report having prayer or meditation groups, as well as Bible study groups.

Leaders of vital growing congregations were more likely than leaders of those that were not growing to say they were close-knit, spiritually vital, a moral beacon and different from others, holding strong beliefs. Leaders were more likely to report that they are growing spiritually, in love for each other, in organizational practices, understanding of stewardship and fund-raising, missional outreach, ability to evangelize, and making a difference in the lives of members and their families. They also were more likely to agree strongly that they were vital (40% as compared to 22% among those that were not growing). They also were more likely to describe their congregations as working for social justice and as being liberal theologically.

Another difference between vital growing congregations and those that were not growing was that the growing congregations invested more effort in activities that promote growth. Members were more involved in recruitment of others in vital growing congregations. Although the vital growing congregations were smaller in size than those that were not growing (average attendance of 200 as compared to 273), they had started a greater number of new groups or ministries in the last year. They were more likely to follow-up on visitors by email and by sending materials. Although they were not more likely to have more children, they were more likely to have programming for children at times other than Sunday morning. About 10% reported that a team of pastor and laity had attended Vitality Training, as compared to 5% of non-growing vital congregations.

In vital growing congregations, pastors spent significantly more time in evangelism and member recruitment, fund-raising, training lay leaders and leading small groups than they did in vital congregations that were not growing. Time spent in pastoral care, administration, and

representing the congregation in the wider church was about the same as that spent by pastors of vital churches that were not growing.

Vital growing congregations did NOT differ from non-growing ones in several other areas. They were equally likely to describe themselves as wanting to grow and to become more diverse, as well as having a strong denominational identity. Although they had more young adults, they did not have more children than non-growing vital congregations. They did not differ in recent conflict, except for conflict over the leader’s style. Both groups of vital congregations were significantly less likely to have had conflict over the leader’s style than non-vital congregations. However, 19% of vital non-growing congregations reported conflict in which some members left as compared with 8% of vital growing congregations.

### DIFFERENCES IN VITALITY

Self-reported ratings of vitality differed significantly by several factors, including congregational size, region of the country, race/ethnicity, liberal or conservative theological outlook, and even when the church was founded, although differences generally were not large.

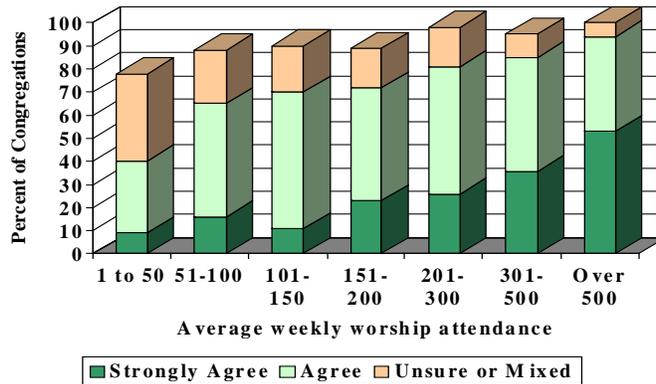


Figure 13. Vitality ratings by size as measured by worship attendance.

Congregational size made the most difference. As Figure 13 shows, larger congregations were much more likely to consider themselves to be vital than were smaller ones. In

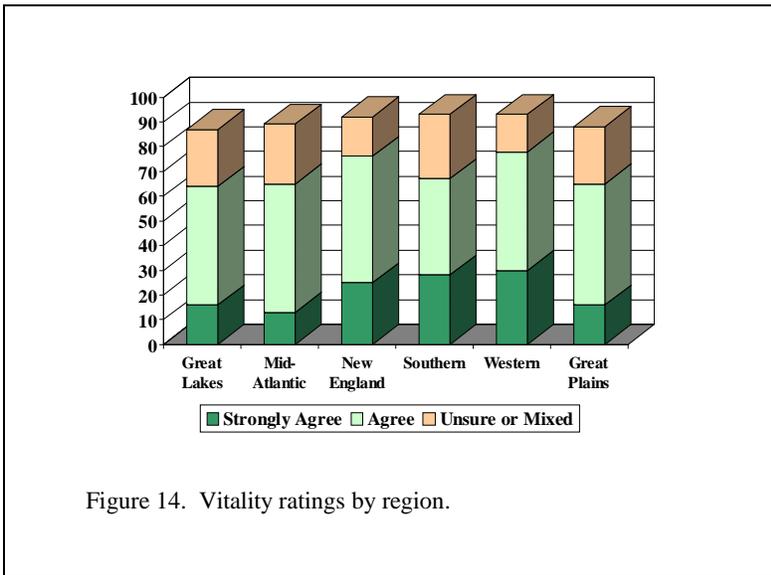


Figure 14. Vitality ratings by region.

fact, no church with more than 200 in average attendance strongly disagreed that they were vital, no church with over 500 average attendance disagreed that they were vital, and churches with over 750 average attendance all agreed or strongly agreed. The reverse was not the case, however; just under 50% of the smallest churches strongly agreed or agreed that they were vital. Similar to having financial resources, a church does not have to be big to be vital, but size helps, perhaps because, like having financial resources, it

increases the chances that the congregation will continue into the future.

Figures 14 through 16 illustrate differences in self-rated vitality by region, race/ethnicity, and when the congregation was founded. The religious marketplace differs in different regions, as do the demographics, as some areas lose or gain in population. Congregations, like individuals, often have a life cycle, being founded, growing, getting older, and declining.

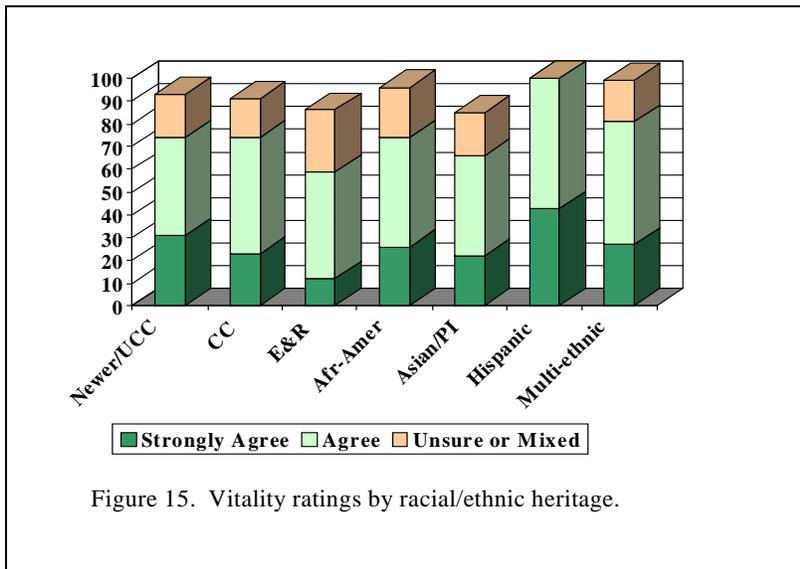
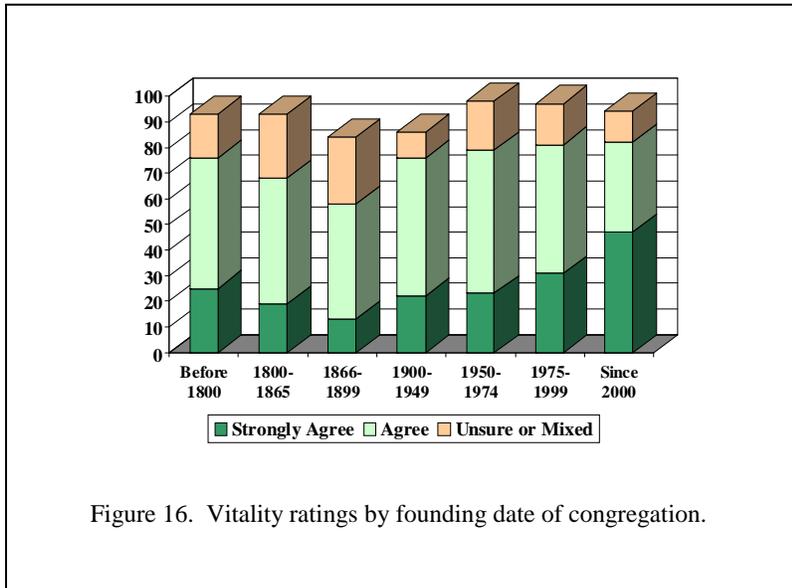


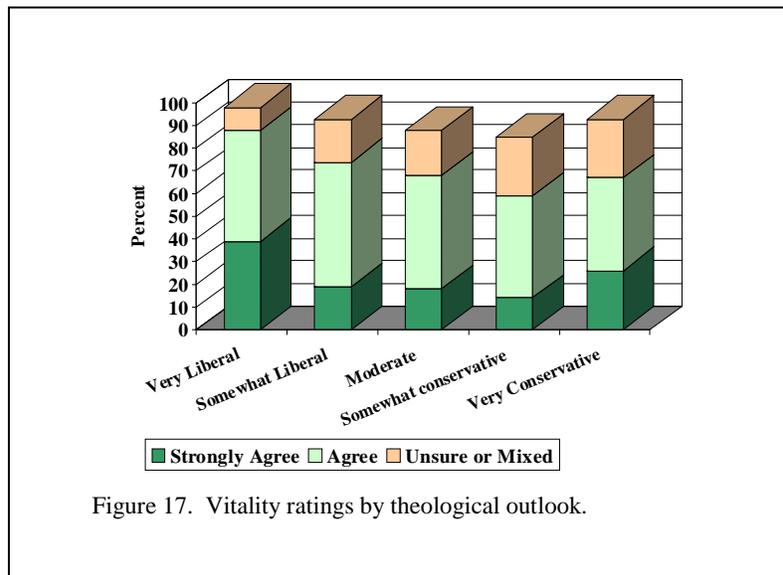
Figure 15. Vitality ratings by racial/ethnic heritage.

Congregations in the Western, Southern, and New England regions all rated themselves as more vital than those in other regions, as can be seen in Figure 14. Non-white racial/ethnic congregations also rated themselves as more vital than primarily white congregations, particularly as compared to German Evangelical and Reformed (E&R) congregations (Figure 15). (Native American congregations are not shown in the graph because too few were received for reliable statistics.)



Congregations founded since 2000 clearly rated themselves as the most vital, with vitality decreasing with age of founding, until 1865. Then the trend reverses, with vitality increasing with age of congregation. Perhaps the oldest congregations either found ways to revitalize themselves or died out. Or those that were founded in the 1600's, 1700's and early 1800's were the first churches in their communities, which continues to give them some advantage.

Theological outlook also was related to self-rated vitality, but in a complex way, as can be seen in Figure 17. Very liberal congregations were most likely to strongly agree or agree that they are vital and vitality ratings decreased with less theological liberalism. However, the very theologically conservative congregations were the second highest group in strongly agreeing that they are vital.



These factors are all inter-related, however.

Congregations in the Western region and non-white racial/ethnic congregations generally were founded more recently than others. Newer congregations and ones in the Western region are more theologically liberal than others, and historically E&R congregations are more conservative.

To investigate the factors that were most important in influencing whether a congregation rated itself as vital or not, another regression analysis was performed<sup>9</sup>. Six characteristics were included - time of founding, region, theological outlook, and race/ethnicity, as well as membership size and recent change in worship attendance. While each factor contributed significantly to how a congregation rated its vitality, the congregation's size and recent change in attendance were far more important than the other factors. A very liberal theological outlook,

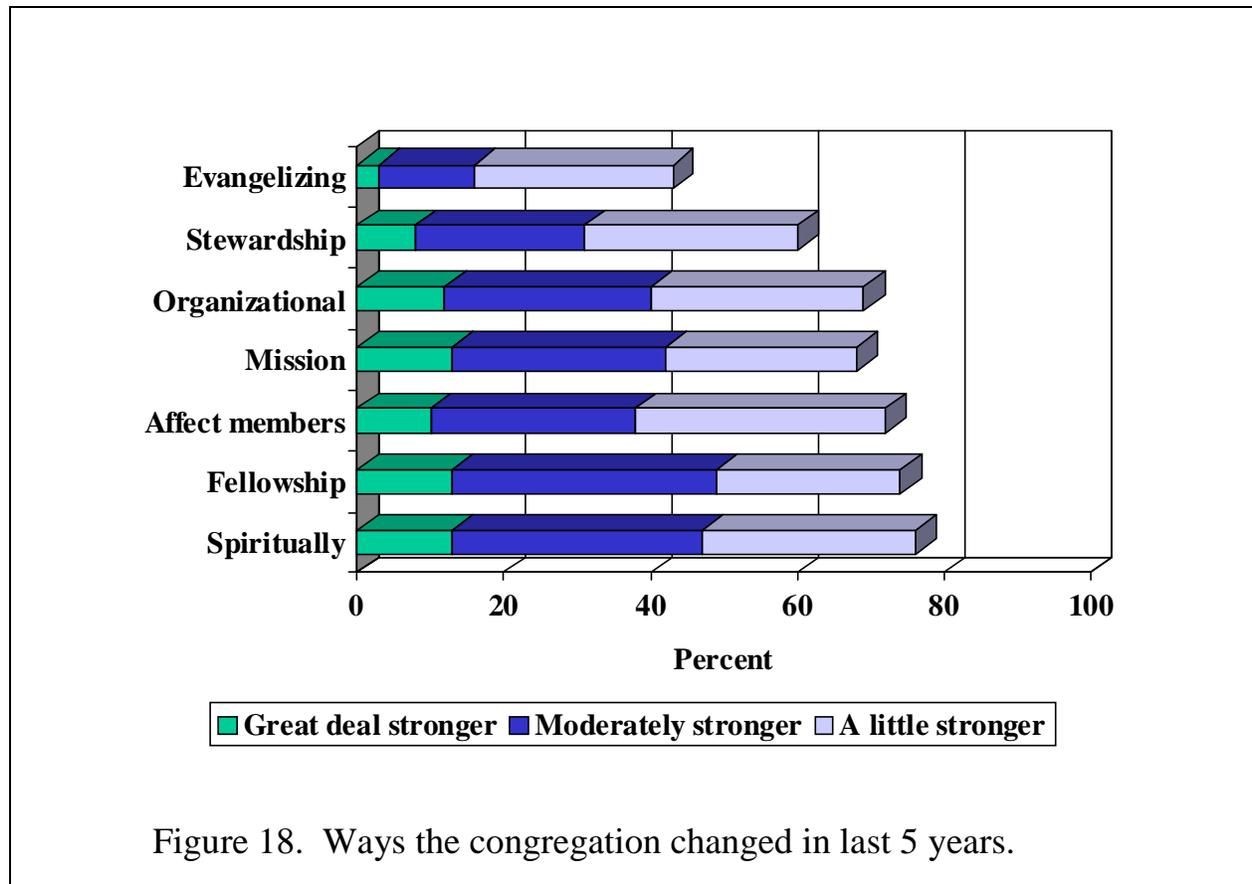
<sup>9</sup> Multiple regression coefficient  $R = .443$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .170$ .

while higher among vital churches and those that were growing in attendance, was negatively related to vitality when all other characteristics such as age of the congregation and region of the country were included, although its effect was not large.

Demographic variations in growth in worship attendance generally were similar to variations in self-ratings of vitality. Growth in worship attendance was more common in the Western and Southern regions and in non-white congregations, which have more new congregations, as well as in congregations that describe themselves as very liberal theologically, many of which are newer and located in the Western region. However, some congregations grew in every region and every racial/ethnic group, with 19% of congregations from the region with the least growth, the Mid-Atlantic region, 30% of congregations from CC heritage and 21% of those from E&R heritage reporting growth. Congregational size was unrelated to growth in attendance. Other than the newest churches, founding date had little to do with growth or decline in attendance.

### CHANGES IN ASPECTS OF CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

To measure other possible areas of growth in vitality in congregational life, survey respondents were asked to describe how their congregations had changed in the previous five years in seven different areas. While attendance may have been declining, growth was occurring in other areas of church life. Most congregations reported at least some positive change in most areas, as can be seen in Figure 18. The most growth was reported in spiritual life and in



fellowship or love for each other, with nearly half the congregations reporting that they are now at least moderately stronger. About 40% reported at least a moderate amount of improvement in organizational practices, missional outreach, and making a difference in the lives of members and their families. Unfortunately, however, fewer than a third reported even moderate growth in financial development/stewardship, and less than 15% reported moderate growth in the ability to evangelize.

Again, change was greatest in congregations begun since 2000, especially in spirituality, fellowship, and making a difference in people's lives. It was also greater in the Western and Southern regions, and in non-white racial/ethnic congregations, probably because these categories have more new congregations.

Not surprisingly, positive change in every area was related to growth in attendance over the previous 3 or 5 years, although the relationship was smallest for evangelism. The relationship was similar to the relationship between vitality and both financial condition and growth in attendance. Not all congregations whose attendance had decreased by over 5% in the last 5 years reported no change or decline in these other areas of congregational life. Over a third said they were a great deal stronger in all areas except the ability to evangelize and to make a difference in the lives of their members, in which a quarter said they were a great deal stronger. However, almost all of the churches reporting that they were not as strong in most of these areas were churches that had decreased in attendance.

Size of congregation was not related to change, with two exceptions. Congregations with over 1000 members reported more positive change than others in most areas. The smallest congregations with 50 or fewer members reported the least positive change in stewardship. This was not because they were declining more than others in stewardship, but because they were not keeping up. 54% reported no change, as compared to 36% overall, and fewer reported growth than churches of other sizes.

## SUMMARY

Results from UCC congregations participating in the FACT study relating to vitality indicate a generally positive picture with some cautions. Over two thirds of the participating congregations consider themselves to be vital, both in their overall ratings of vitality and in their descriptions of themselves as making a difference to members and the community, being open to change, and having high morale. However, 10% do NOT believe that they are vital, and these are more likely to report declining financial strength and decreasing attendance. In addition, even among congregations whose leaders say they are vital, declining attendance and financial resources are common and may threaten the long-term vitality of some.

Most congregations report increasing in strength in the last five years in areas that include spirituality, fellowship, missional outreach, and organizational practices. However, the areas in which they are least likely to report increased strength are in evangelism and stewardship and finance, the areas in which they may be facing the most serious challenges in the future.

Vitality is related to size, membership growth, and financial health, with most large, growing, and financially secure congregations rating themselves as vital. However, many small, declining, congregations that are struggling financially rated themselves as vital, as well, showing that vitality is about more than just size. Factors such as working for social justice, being a moral beacon in the community, and having excellent worship also are important in whether a congregations considers itself to be vital.

Newer, growing, non-white racial/ethnic congregations located in the Western and Southern regions have the highest reported vitality, although some congregations of every age, ethnicity, size and region are vital.

One important factor in vitality is whether a congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges, and a majority of leaders say that their congregation is willing to change. About 10 to 15% of leaders say that their congregation is not willing to change. Some of these congregations are growing, however, so they may not see any need to change.

Vital growing congregations differ from those that are vital but not growing in several ways. Vital congregations are more likely to be located in areas of greater population growth. The congregations are more willing to change to meet new challenges and include new people, and both the pastor and the congregation put more effort into activities related to vitality. These include worship and spirituality, small groups, fellowship, and working for social justice.