

# *Your Church Better*

## **11 Facts about Congregational Vitality in UCC Congregations from the Faith Communities Today Study**

**Marjorie Royle and David Schoen**

- Vitality is more than numbers. 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.
- Most UCC congregations (69%) believe they are vital. Of these,
  - 7% report excellent financial health, 24% report good financial health, and 50% say finances are tight, but they manage.
  - 36% have experienced growth in worship attendance of more than 5% over the past 5 years.
  - Almost all (91%) report that their worship is good to excellent.While these percentages are higher than those for non-vital congregations, many congregations that consider themselves to be vital are not growing numerically.
- Working for social justice and being a moral beacon in the community are also marks of congregations that describe themselves as vital, as are wanting to grow and participating in the wider church.
- Three fourths of vital congregations say that they are willing to change to meet new challenges. Of these, many have made significant changes.
  - 66% have made changes to their worship service in the last 5 years.
  - 23% have become ONA, a third of them in the last few years.
  - In the last year, vital congregations started an average of 1.6 new groups each.
  - They employ new technologies, with 89% using email regularly, 73% having a website, 41% using Facebook, 13% having blogs, 6% having podcasts, 17% providing giving options via automatic deductions and 8% having an option for on-line donations.
- Vital congregations are more likely than others to take advantage of the programs offered by the denomination.
  - More than half (56%) have engaged in some Vitality Training, with 8% reporting significant involvement (a team attending a multi-day event).
  - 40% reported that members learned more about the UCC through the StillSpeaking Campaign, 28% reported some new attendees and 4% reported a significant number of new attendees.
- 10% of all congregations say they are NOT vital, and report declining attendance, a decreasing financial base, and more conflict than others. Almost half (46%) say that their congregation is NOT willing to change to meet new challenges (as compared to 7% of those who say they are vital).
- 13% of all congregations have experienced significant decreases in both worship attendance and finances. They have 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 report more conflict where people withheld money or left the church over a variety of issues. They were much more likely than other congregations to report being impacted by the recession, describing both a greater impact and less recovery.
- Among vital congregations, those that are growing differ from those that are stable or declining in attendance in several ways. Growing vital congregations:
    - Are more likely to be in areas of population growth
    - Are more willing to change to meet new challenges and relate to new groups.
    - Have more prayer and Bible study groups.
    - Are stronger in many areas of church life, such as stewardship and organizational practices, as well as evangelism.
    - Are more likely to be engaged in justice ministries.
    - Work harder at reaching out to others, such as by participating in vitality training and following through in implementing changes.
    - Have pastors who spend significantly more time in evangelism and member recruitment, fund-raising, training lay leaders and leading small groups.
  - Worship in growing vital congregations is described as joyful, innovative, inspiring, and thought-provoking:
    - 10% never use the organ in worship.
    - 37% use drums or other percussion instruments at least sometimes.
    - 25% use electric guitar or bass at least sometimes.
    - 36% use visual projection equipment at least sometimes.
  - While leaders of newer congregations and larger ones are more likely to describe themselves as vital, vital congregations can be found in every conference, age of congregation, ethnicity, urban, suburban, or rural setting, and size.
  - Many leaders report moderate or greater increases in strength in their congregations in the last 5 years in a variety of areas, including:
    - 48% in fellowship or love for each other.
    - 47% in spiritual life.
    - 42% in missional outreach either in their community or around the world.
    - 40% in organizational practices.
    - 38% in making a difference in the lives of members and their families.
    - 31% in understanding of stewardship and ability to raise and manage money.
    - 16% in ability to evangelize or reach out to people with the Gospel.

To see more information from the Faith Communities Today Study go to

<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/>

After General Synod follow the Faith Communities Today UCC reports at

<http://www.ucc.org/vitality/>

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