

**The U.S. Congregational Life Survey:**

**Fastest Growing  
Presbyterian  
Churches**

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U.S. CONGREGATIONS

# The U.S. Congregational Life Survey: Fastest Growing Presbyterian Churches

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## Background

Over 300,000 worshippers in more than 2,000 congregations across America recently participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, the largest survey of worshippers in America ever conducted. These congregations were selected to be representative of congregations and worshippers across the country. Three types of surveys were completed in each participating congregation: (a) an attendee survey completed by all worshippers age 15 and older who attended worship services during the weekend of April 29, 2001; (b) a Congregational Profile describing the congregation's facilities, staff, programs, and worship services, completed by one person in the congregation; and (c) a Leader Survey completed by the pastor, priest, minister, rabbi, or other leader. Together the information collected provides a unique three-dimensional look at religious life in America.

To learn more about congregations that have been successful in increasing their size, we subsequently invited the 400 fastest-growing churches within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to take part in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. To identify these churches, we examined the percentage change in average worship attendance in each congregation over the previous five-year period. Congregations with missing or inaccurate data were excluded. (On average, these congregations reported 42% growth in the previous five years.) Of those invited to participate, 104 agreed to do so and 93 returned completed survey forms after giving the survey in April or May of 2002.

Responses from these growing churches are compared here to those of a random sample of Presbyterian churches that completed the same survey forms in April 2001 (47,431 worshippers in 523 congregations). While the random sample also includes some congregations that experienced growth (50% reported some growth in the previous five years; only 13% grew by at least 40%), for convenience this sample will be referred to here as "other Presbyterian churches."



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## How Do Growing Presbyterian Churches Differ from Other Presbyterian Churches?

Information from the Congregational Profile completed by each congregation provides the first way to compare growing Presbyterian churches to other Presbyterian churches. Profile data describe participating congregations and their services, programs, finances, and staff.

### Size:

- Not surprisingly, fast growing PC(USA) churches reported that their average worship attendance increased by about 36% in the previous 5 years (a median increase of about 74 people). In contrast, other PC(USA) congregations, on average, reported no change (a median increase of 0.4%).
- Growing congregations are larger than other PC(USA) congregations. The median size of fast-growing PC(USA) congregations is 230 (based on average worship attendance in 2001); for other PC(USA) congregations the median is 86.
- Similarly, growing congregations have larger numbers of regularly participating youth (75 children and youth under the age of 19 in growing churches, compared to 27 in other congregations). The *percentage* of participants who are under the age of 19 is about the same though—around one-quarter in the typical congregation are children and youth.
- Despite these size differences, the average seating capacity does not differ as much—growing Presbyterian congregations can seat 275; other Presbyterian congregations can seat 200.

### Age and Finances:

- Growing churches are younger churches. The typical growing PC(USA) congregation was founded in 1954, while other PC(USA) congregations were founded, on average, in 1884.

- Given their larger size, it is not surprising that growing PC(USA) congregations receive more contributions, and have larger budgets and more staff than other PC(USA) congregations. Contributions *per person*, though, are similar.
- Most growing PC(USA) churches (74%) but only 26% of other PC(USA) churches describe their congregation as having an *increasing financial base*.

### Spiritual Connections:

What are congregations doing to nurture the spiritual faith of their worshippers?

- Growing PC(USA) churches are more likely to offer prayer groups: 90% of growing PC(USA) churches and 70% of other PC(USA) churches have prayer groups including those that meet at certain times of the year; as part of their small group program; or in conjunction with specific classes, groups, or ministries.
- Fully 70% of growing PC(USA) congregations offer more than one worship service in the typical week. Among other PC(USA) congregations, just 39% offer more than one. This is understandable given that growing congregations are larger than others, but do not have significantly more seating capacities in their worship spaces.
- What happens in the worship service with the largest attendance? The following table shows many similarities between the two groups. Worship in Presbyterian congregations includes a sermon, singing by the congregation and a choir or soloist, an offering, and a celebration of the Lord's Supper. The largest service in growing PC(USA) churches is more likely than in other PC(USA) churches to include the Lord's Supper, singing by a choir or soloist, piano music, laughter, applause, participation by teens, drums or electric guitar music, calling out "Amen," the use of visual projection equipment, and people raising their hands in praise.

## Elements of the Congregation's Largest Worship Service

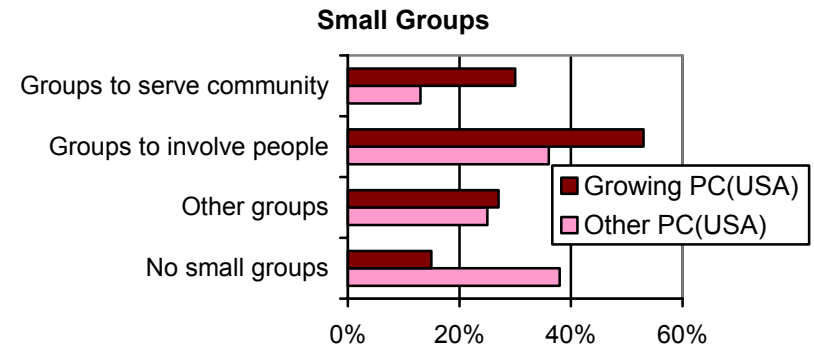
Largest Service Includes:	Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches
Sermon	100%	100%
Singing by the congregation	100%	100%
Offering	100%	99%
Singing by choir or soloist	98%	88%
Written service outline or bulletin	97%	95%
Lord's Supper	94%	89%
Use of piano	92%	81%
Laughter	92%	79%
Silent prayer or meditation	90%	88%
People speaking, reading in unison	88%	88%
Time directed at children	84%	83%
Use of hymnbooks	83%	91%
Use of organ	80%	82%
People greeting one another	77%	74%
Applause	77%	55%
Participation by teens	61%	49%
Use of drums or electric guitar	39%	13%
Use of visual projection equipment	26%	9%
Calling out "amen"	18%	9%
People raising hands in praise	18%	7%
Use of incense	1%	1%
Unplanned jumping, shouting, dancing	—	1%

- The largest worship service in growing PC(USA) churches is also *longer* than in other PC(USA) churches. The majority of other churches (62%) report services lasting up to 1 hour. In contrast, only 46% of growing PC(USA) churches have services that short. The majority (53%) report services lasting between 1 and 1½ hours.

### Inside Connections:

What programs and services do congregations offer to ensure their worshippers connect with one another and with the congregation?

- Growing PC(USA) churches are more likely to offer small groups (or cells), particularly as a method to involve people in the life of the congregation or to involve people in service to the community.



- All growing PC(USA) congregations and 92% of other PC(USA) congregations offer religious education classes such as Sunday school.
- As would be expected given their larger size, more people are enrolled in such classes in growing PC(USA) congregations—the median enrollment is 90 in growing PC(USA) churches and 36 in other PC(USA) churches. But the *percentage* of worshippers involved in religious education classes doesn't differ (typically about one-third of worshippers attend church school classes).
- Fully 85% of growing PC(USA) churches use e-mail or the Internet to communicate with worshippers. Just 57% of other PC(USA) churches do.
- Growing PC(USA) congregations are more likely than other PC(USA) churches to use specific procedures to ensure that new people are integrated into the life of the congregation (see following table). The only method that other PC(USA) churches are more likely to use is follow-up visits by clergy, lay leaders, or members.

### Ways Congregations Help Integrate New Members

Integration method:	Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches
Group or course for new members.....	70%	45%
Invitation to join a group .....	67%	43%
Invitation to serve church or community .....	66%	58%
Follow-up visits by clergy or laity .....	40%	46%
People extend hospitality .....	33%	20%
Other .....	27%	15%
None.....	3%	18%

### Outside Connections:

What efforts are congregations making to reach out to neighbors in the community and to welcome new people?

- Growing congregations use more—and different—methods to reach out to non-members. The average growing PC(USA) congregation used 8 of the techniques shown in the following table; other congregations reported using an average of 7.

### Ways Congregations Reach Out to Non-Members

Outreach method	Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches
Sent letter to recent visitors.....	97%	84%
Encouraged people to invite others.....	88%	87%
Mailed or distributed newsletters.....	76%	74%
Placed ad in newspaper or magazine .....	73%	60%
Phoned recent visitors.....	72%	52%
Established Web site.....	70%	43%
Placed ad in phone book .....	61%	45%
Visited recent visitors .....	50%	48%
Event to bring people to the church .....	48%	33%
Held event to meet neighborhood people .....	47%	41%
Committee working on recruitment .....	47%	41%
Contact people new to the area.....	37%	39%
Advertised on radio or TV .....	17%	15%
Survey of the community.....	14%	14%

- Growing congregations offer, on average, 8 of the community service programs in the following table. These programs might be designed to serve those who worship in the congregation and/or those in the local community. Other PC(USA) churches offer, on average, 6 programs.

### Congregations' Community Service Programs

Community service program:	Growing PC(USA) Churches	Other PC(USA) Churches
Emergency relief.....	91%	87%
Counseling or support groups .....	69%	46%
Arts, music, cultural programs.....	68%	38%
Programs for children and youth.....	64%	43%
Day care, before/after school care .....	56%	39%
Health programs.....	56%	33%
Other leisure activities .....	53%	48%
Programs for seniors .....	49%	44%
Hobby or craft groups.....	43%	24%
Sports or athletic teams.....	39%	20%
Other services activities .....	33%	32%
Substance abuse programs .....	23%	22%
Housing for others .....	23%	15%
Prison ministry.....	22%	13%
Care for those with disabilities .....	20%	13%
Community organizing .....	14%	11%
Immigrant support programs.....	13%	7%
Voter registration/education.....	13%	8%
Programs for unemployed people .....	11%	3%
Social justice activities.....	8%	8%
Elementary school.....	6%	3%
Animal welfare, environmental activities .....	4%	5%
Housing for seniors .....	4%	4%

- Majorities of PC(USA) congregations report that other groups not connected to the congregation use their facilities at least weekly (77% of growing churches; 67% of other churches).
- Growing PC(USA) congregations are somewhat less likely than other Presbyterian congregations to be affiliated with a local

association of congregations (growing churches: 53%; other churches: 60%).

- Majorities of PC(USA) congregations of all types report that their concern is general and that they do not focus on one age, language, or interest group.
- While 16% of growing Presbyterian churches reorganized or started new worship services in the previous five years for distinct age, race, ethnic, or interest groups, only 10% of other congregations did so. Likewise, 14% of growing churches and 10% of others started new services for people who don't usually attend ("seeker services").

### Identity Connections:

How do congregations perceive their identity?

- Similar percentages in each group describe the *theological* position of their congregation as more on the *conservative side* (growing churches, 48%; other churches, 45%). About 40% in each group describe it as *right in the middle*.
- The largest group of both growing PC(USA) congregations (47%) and other PC(USA) congregations (51%) describe their congregation's *political* position as *more on the conservative side*. About 40% in each group describe it as *right in the middle*.

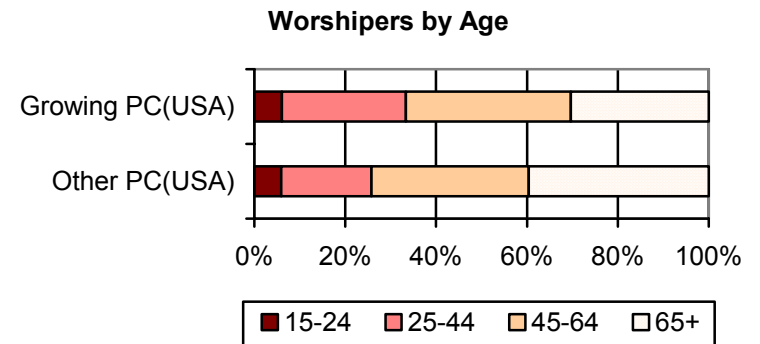
### How do Worshipers in Growing Presbyterian Churches Differ from Worshipers in Other Presbyterian Churches?

Now let's look at the responses of attenders who completed surveys in worship in these congregations. What do their answers tell us?

### Demographics:

Who worships in growing Presbyterian congregations and how do they compare to worshipers in other Presbyterian churches?

- Worshippers in growing Presbyterian churches are younger than worshipers in other PC(USA) churches. In growing Presbyterian churches, 30% of worshipers are over the age of 65, and the average age is 52 years. In other PC(USA) congregations 40% are over 65, and the average age is 58.



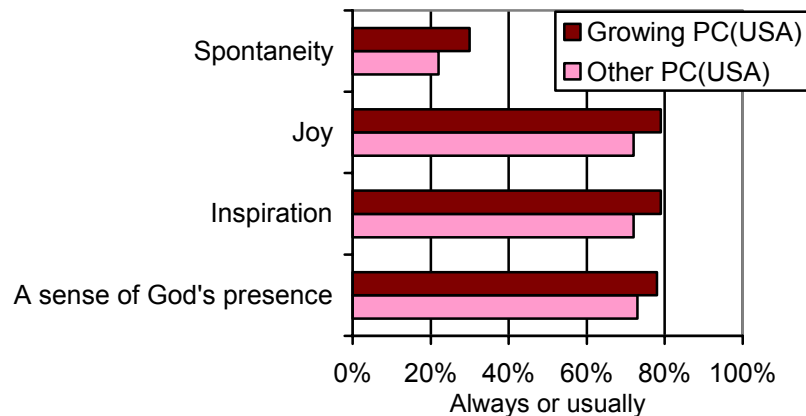
- This age difference also drives differences in several other areas: employment status, marital status, family composition, and family income. Because they are typically younger, worshipers in growing PC(USA) churches are more likely to be employed (53% are, compared to 48% in other PC(USA) churches), more likely to be married (75% vs. 70%), less likely to be widowed (7% vs. 12%), more likely to be living in a household with children (47% vs. 38%), less likely to be living alone (12% vs. 17%), and more likely to report household incomes of \$75,000 or above (41% vs. 29%).
- Worshippers in growing Presbyterian churches are more likely to be college educated (55% have at least one college degree) when compared to worshipers in other PC(USA) churches (49%).
- Worshippers in growing Presbyterian churches are similar to worshipers in other PC(USA) churches in terms of their gender (about six in ten are female), race-ethnicity (more than 90% are white), number of children (85% have children; typically between one and three children), and country of birth (96% were born in the U.S.).

## Spiritual Connections:

Spiritual Connections are made through worshipers' private devotions and their participation in congregational activities such as worship. Do growing Presbyterian congregations do a better job of nurturing their worshipers' faith?

- Worshipers in growing PC(USA) churches are more likely than others to report a specific moment (or moments) of faith commitment or conversion—29% in growing churches have had such conversion experiences, while 23% in other churches have done so. Those in other PC(USA) congregations are more likely to report they have “had faith for as long as I can remember” (36% in growing churches; 42% in other churches).
- Worshipers in growing PC(USA) churches are more likely than worshipers in other PC(USA) congregations to report *much growth* in their faith in the previous year—growth that they attribute to activities and services of their current congregation. While 37% in growing churches experienced such spiritual growth, one-third (33%) in other churches did.
- This growth may be associated with their somewhat different experiences in congregational worship. Worshipers in growing churches are more likely than those in other PC(USA) churches to experience a sense of God's presence, inspiration, joy, and spontaneity during services.

**Frequency of Experiences During Worship**



- The musical preferences of those in growing PC(USA) congregations differ from those in other PC(USA) congregations. In both groups, the style of music most preferred in worship is traditional hymns—68% in growing congregations and 77% in other churches favor this style. But those in growing congregations have more varied musical tastes: 40% (vs. 34% in other congregations) prefer praise music or choruses, 26% (vs. 22%) favor contemporary hymns, and 15% (vs. 11%) like other contemporary music or songs. (Note that worshipers could choose two from a list of ten musical choices.)
- Like worshipers in other PC(USA) congregations, about two-thirds of those in growing churches spend time every day or most days in private devotional activities such as Bible reading, prayer, or meditation.
- More than 80% of PC(USA) worshipers (regardless of whether their congregation is growing or not) believe their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation. Similarly, about 90% of all PC(USA) worshipers report that their congregation's services and activities help them with everyday living.

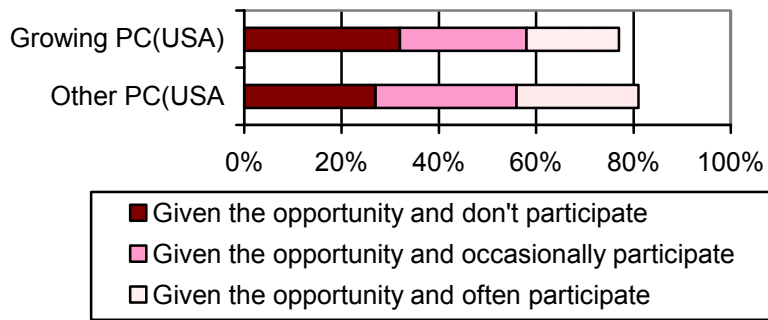
## Inside Connections:

Worshipers connect with others in the congregation through group activities (such as church school, prayer and study groups, and fellowships and clubs), serving in leadership roles, and financial support. How are worshipers in growing churches involved in their congregations?

- Fewer worshipers in growing PC(USA) congregations hold at least one leadership role there. One-half in growing churches (49%), but 57% in other PC(USA) congregations, serve on the governing board, leadership group, or other committee; lead or assist in worship; teach church school; lead or sing in the choir; or serve as the officer or leader of a women's, men's or youth group.
- A smaller percentage of worshipers in growing Presbyterian congregations report occasionally or often participating in congregational decision making (45% vs. 54%). Nonetheless,

large majorities in both samples report having been given the opportunity to be involved in the congregation's decisions (77% in growing churches; 81% in others).

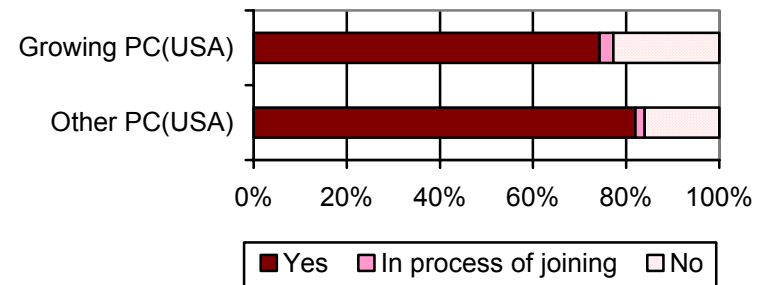
### Involvement in Congregational Decision-making



- Worshippers in growing PC(USA) congregations are somewhat less likely to be involved in other congregational activities outside of worship. While 60% of worshippers in growing churches participate in their congregation's small groups, 64% in other PC(USA) congregations do so. Examining participation in three types of small groups shows that participation in fellowships and social groups is lower in growing churches than in other PC(USA) churches: 37% of worshippers in growing churches and 41% in other churches are involved in such groups. Smaller or non-existent differences exist for the other types of groups (church school: 29% in growing churches and 32% elsewhere; prayer and Bible study groups: 27% in both types of churches).
- Participation in congregational activities is more likely to be increasing among worshippers in growing churches. One-third in growing PC(USA) churches (33%) and 29% in other PC(USA) churches say they now participate more in activities of the congregation than they did two years ago. Worshippers in other PC(USA) churches are more likely to say their participation is about the same as two years ago (49% in PC(USA) and 42% in growing PC(USA) churches).

- Growing congregations are likely to include larger percentages of worshippers who regularly attend but are not members. In the typical PC(USA) congregation, 82% of worshippers at least 15 years of age are members. In growing congregations, three-quarters are members, and another 14% say they regularly attend there but aren't members. In both types of congregations, 2% to 3% are in the process of joining.

### Are You a Member Here?



- Some worshippers in growing congregations lack the strong sense of belonging that worshippers in other congregations express. While 73% of worshippers in growing congregations feel a strong sense of belonging to the congregation, in other congregations 77% have that feeling.
- Similarly, people who worship in growing Presbyterian congregations are less likely to have close friends in the congregation. About 70% in growing PC(USA) churches and 75% in other PC(USA) churches say that some or all of their closest friends also attend there.
- Financial support connects worshippers to the congregation and its mission. About half of worshippers give at least 5% of income to the congregation (52% in growing churches and 54% in others). In both groups of Presbyterian churches, about 16% of worshippers give 10% or more of income.
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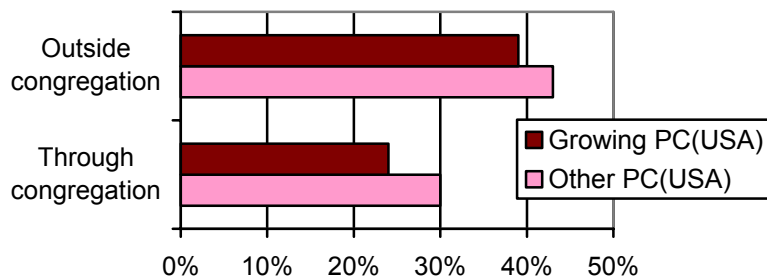
the congregation (52% in growing churches and 54% in others). In both groups of Presbyterian churches, about 16% of worshippers give 10% or more of income.

### Outside Connections:

How do worshippers in growing Presbyterian congregations connect to the community and to non-members? Outside Connections consist of inviting others to attend, caring for neighbors, and welcoming new people.

- More than half of worshippers (56%) in growing Presbyterian congregations have invited someone to worship in the past 12 months. In contrast, 47% of worshippers in the other Presbyterian congregations have done so.
- Community service activities help many worshippers and congregations connect with their communities. Compared to other Presbyterian churches, a smaller percentage of worshippers in growing Presbyterian churches are involved in such activities. This is true both for community service through their congregations and for service activities through groups that are not connected to their congregations.

**Involvement in Community Service and Justice Activities**



- New people are those who started attending the congregation in the last five years. Not surprisingly, growing Presbyterian churches have a much larger percentage of new people (49%)

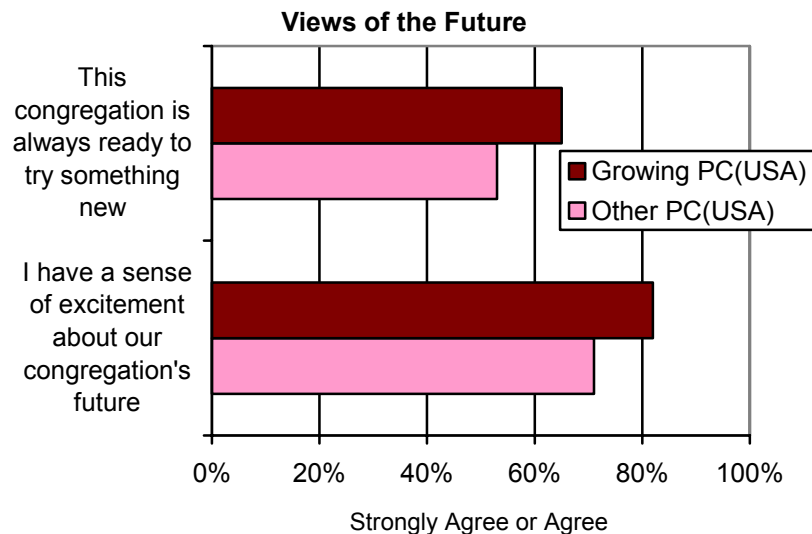
than other PC(USA) congregations (29%). Congregations where almost half of worshippers are new in the last five years are very different from those where only three in ten are new.

- New people come from four different backgrounds: (1) first-timers, who have never regularly attended anywhere; (2) returnees, who are coming back after not attending for several years; (3) switchers, who previously participated in a congregation of another denomination or faith group; and (4) transfers, who were participating in another PC(USA) congregation immediately prior to coming to their current congregation. New people in growing congregations are somewhat more likely to be switchers (40% are) than in other Presbyterian churches (where 35% are).
- Large majorities in both samples agree that “this congregation is strongly focused on serving the wider community beyond the congregation.” In growing Presbyterian congregations, 86% endorse that belief. In other Presbyterian congregations, fewer (81%) believe it’s true.
- Despite being more likely to have invited a friend to worship, people in growing churches are no more likely to be involved in their congregation’s evangelism or outreach activities. Between 15% and 18% in the typical congregation take part in such programs and activities.
- As in other Presbyterian congregations, most worshippers in growing ones travel 10 minutes or less to attend worship services. Six in ten can get there within 10 minutes; eight in ten travel no more than 15 minutes to worship.

### Identity Connections:

Worshippers have an individual identity based on their age, education, and other factors described in the first section on demographics. Worshippers also have an impact on the congregation’s identity, which includes what they value, their beliefs, and their dreams for the future.

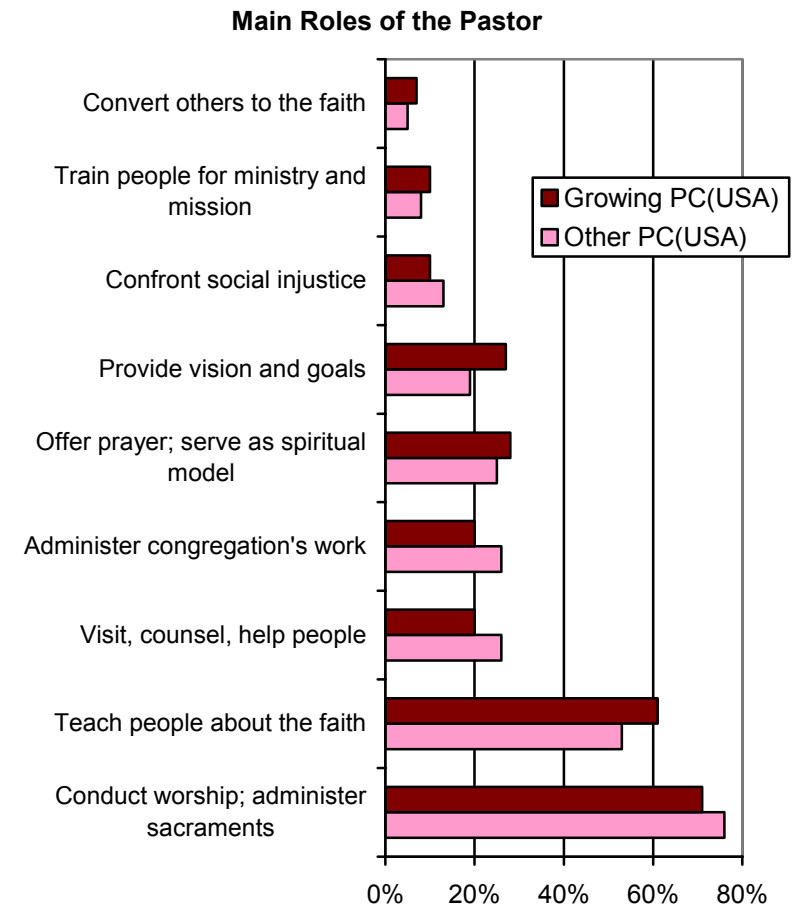
- Growing congregations have a more positive outlook on the future. Their worshipers are more likely than worshipers in other PC(USA) congregations to say they “have a sense of excitement about their congregation’s future” and to say that their “congregation is always ready to try something new.” In addition, 65% of worshipers in growing churches say the congregation is deciding on or moving in new directions. The figure in other PC(USA) congregations is only 60%.



- Eight in ten worshipers in growing Presbyterian churches and 71% in other PC(USA) congregations say their congregation has “a clear vision, goals, or direction for its ministry and mission.” Furthermore, 74% in growing churches and 65% in other churches are committed to those goals.
- Worshipers in growing churches also view their leaders differently. Larger majorities in growing congregations see a good match between their congregation and the pastor (92% do in growing congregations; 85% do in other congregations). Further, in growing congregations more worshipers describe their pastor’s role as “inspiring others to take action” (58% in growing

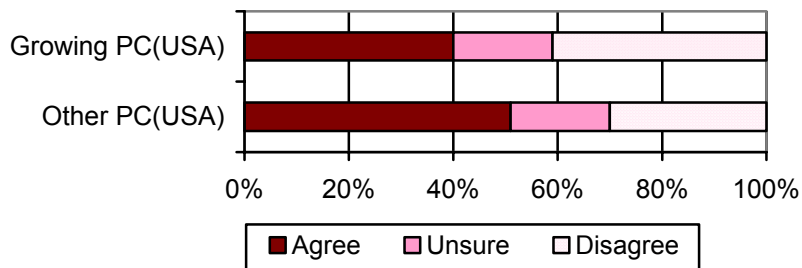
churches; 48% in others) and fewer describe it as “acting on goals that people here have been involved in setting” (16% vs. 20%).

- Worshipers’ views about their pastor’s roles also vary. Worshipers in growing churches are more likely than others to believe the main roles of their pastor include teaching people about the faith and providing vision and goals. Worshipers in other congregations are more likely to believe their pastor’s roles include conducting worship, visiting people, and handling administrative work.



- About 80% of worshipers in both types of congregations say their pastor takes into account the ideas of worshipers either to a great extent or to some extent.
- Worshipers in growing Presbyterian churches are less likely to endorse an embracing attitude toward other religions. Half of people in PC(USA) congregations (51%), but only 40% of those in growing PC(USA) congregations agree with this statement: “All the different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.”

**All Religions are Good Ways to Help People Find Truth**



- When asked to pick from a list of 14 items the three that they most value in their congregation, worshipers in growing PC(USA) churches and in other PC(USA) churches select the same three most often: sermons and preaching, traditional worship and music, and sharing in the Lord’s Supper. The item that ranks fourth for people in growing Presbyterian churches is ministry for children and youth; for people in other Presbyterian churches, it’s practical care for one another in times of need.
- Perhaps because of the value they place on youth ministry, a larger majority of worshipers in growing PC(USA) churches (69%) than in other PC(USA) churches (63%) are satisfied with what their congregation offers for children and youth.

## Conclusions

In reviewing the many differences between growing PC(USA) congregations and other congregations in the denomination, keep in mind that these differences are not necessarily the factors that *cause* congregational growth. Some differences may be the result of having grown, and others may be the result of factors that are unrelated to congregational growth. Congregational life is not simple, and it is rare to find a situation where one element alone is the cause of something so complex as congregational growth.

Congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) that are *growing* have certain strengths when compared to other PC(USA) congregations. Their worshipers:

- Are more likely to experience spontaneity, inspiration, joy, and God’s presence during the worship services in their congregation.
- Are more likely to have invited someone to worship in the last year.
- Are more satisfied with their congregation’s programs and activities for children and youth.
- Are more optimistic about their congregation’s future and committed to the congregation’s mission or goals.
- Are younger and earn more than worshiper in other PC(USA) congregations, and they are more likely to have children living at home.

Nonetheless, growing PC(USA) congregations face a number of challenges. Their worshipers:

- Are less likely than those in other Presbyterian congregations to be participating in small groups and leadership roles in the congregation, and less likely to be members. For many, attending worship is their primary connection to the congregation.
- Are less likely to have friends in the congregation.

- Are less likely to be involved in congregational decision-making.
- Are less likely to be involved in serving the community either through their congregation or through groups and activities outside their congregation.

What efforts can growing congregations—and other congregations—take to ensure that their worshipers are fully integrated into the life of the congregation? How can your congregation ensure its worshipers don't go out the “back door” or become inactive members?

### **What Matters?**

We've all heard the statistics about the membership decline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since 1983, the denomination has experienced a net loss of 679,259 members, or almost 22%. The average congregation size (mean) fell from 268 members to 221 in that period.

Yet this doesn't capture the whole picture. Many PC(USA) congregations have experienced significant membership growth in recent years. This brief report provides a snapshot of some of these growing congregations. We invite Presbyterians in all types of congregations to learn from the voices of worshipers in growing congregations. Can we resist the tendency to obsess about our current problems? Can we use the strengths of these congregations as inspiration for creating a more positive future? We believe all congregations have strengths. How can your congregation use what we've learned to help it capitalize on its unique set of strengths?

### **Want to Know More?**

Several other resources from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey are also available:

*A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* (Woolever and Bruce, 2002) presents the first comprehensive portrait of congregational life in the United States. The book can be ordered from Westminster John Knox Press by calling 1-800-277-2872.

*A Field Guide to Presbyterian Congregations* (Woolever and Bruce, 2002) compares Presbyterian congregations that participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey to all congregations that participated and is available for \$7.50 from Research Services, 1-888-728-7228 ext. 2040. Learn about the unique strengths of PC(USA) congregations!

*Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths in U.S. Congregations* (Woolever and Bruce, 2004) details the specific strengths evident in vital congregations. It can be ordered from Westminster John Knox Press (call 1-800-277-2872).

The Web site for the U.S. Congregational Life Survey provides background information and additional findings from the survey ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).

### **How Does My Congregation Compare?**

Compare *your congregation* to the national average, to the Presbyterian average, or to the average of growing Presbyterian churches by taking a snapshot of all your worshipers. Your congregation can take part in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey to learn more about who worships there and what they value, to deal with change when your congregation is growing or declining, to get ready to call a new pastor, or to renew or re-evaluate your strategic plan.

Call 1-888-728-7228 ext. 2040 to get information about using the U.S. Congregational Life Survey in your congregation, or see the section titled “Can My Congregation Take Part?” on our Web site ([www.UScongregations.org](http://www.UScongregations.org)).



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