

Views from pews on strong congregations: Small congregations rank highest in congregational participation

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Certain assumptions have long been made about what makes for the strongest congregational life—for example, that megachurches provide the best worship experience or that the best churches generally make children’s ministries a priority.

But a new study by two social scientists shatters many such notions and finds a wide variety in the strengths of the nation’s congregations. “Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations” is the latest phase of published research on results of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey of 2,000 congregations and their 300,000 worshipers taken in April 2001.

Whereas many surveys on congregations have been based on the impressions of a minister or other key leaders, this study determined congregational strengths based on the perspectives of parishioners. “The view from the pew is just different,” said coauthor Cynthia Woolever, professor of sociology at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research in Hartford, Connecticut.

She and coauthor Deborah Bruce found that small congregations had many of the ten strengths they examined, far more than mid-size and large churches. Congregations with fewer than 100 worshipers and mid-size congregations of 100 to 350 worshipers are “unsung heroes,” she said, receiving higher average scores for strengths such as growing spiritually and caring for children and youth than larger congregations.

“Congregations that are very small often feel they just can’t do good work,” said Bruce, associate research manager in the research services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “This [study] certainly refutes this.” Despite being

limited in clergy—some small congregations do not have full-time pastors—these churches ranked highest in congregational participation, sense of belonging, sharing faith and empowering leadership.

The researchers found that the sole strength for which large congregations received the highest average score was welcoming new people. But regardless of a congregation's size, welcoming newcomers alone is not the sole answer to church growth, they said. "Chances are, if they can't find something there that's meaningful, they're not coming back, so just getting them in the door is not enough," said Bruce.

Woolever and Bruce found that conservative Protestant and historically black congregations scored higher on most of the ten strengths studied than mainline Protestants and Catholics did. The one area where mainline Protestants led the pack was in focusing on the community. "Historically, liberal and moderate Protestants—that's where they have seen their ministry," Woolever said.

She and Bruce found that across denominations, most worshipers did not rank caring for children and youth as a top priority. "It may be that some congregations have just given up on that, and it's unfortunate because I think that's one of the things that congregations can do really well," said Woolever.

Despite the generalizations that can be made about different categories of congregations—large and small, theologically conservative or liberal—there remains great diversity from one house of worship to another, Woolever said.

"We really try to stress that every church has its unique combination of strengths, and they should focus on those strengths and build on [them]," she said. *-Adelle Banks, Religion News Service*