

Why an Emphasis on Congregations and Leadership?

A Short Review of the Data

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The Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates there are about 350,000 religious congregations in the U.S. and that the number is always changing as new congregations begin while others close. About 90 percent of these congregations are Protestant, about 7 percent are Roman Catholic, and about three percent are other religious groups. ELCA congregations represent about 2.7 percent of the total.

Every one of these congregation in the U.S. is facing a rapidly changing environment. This environment is, at best, ambivalent about its relationship with “organized” religion. About 20 percent of the U.S. population regularly attends worship services. The clear majority of these regular attenders are conservative evangelicals or Roman Catholics, but attendance even within those groups is declining. In 2005, the median size of a congregation in the U.S. was 129 (90 in the ELCA). By 2010, it was 105 (78 in the ELCA) and by 2015, it was 80 (67 in the ELCA).

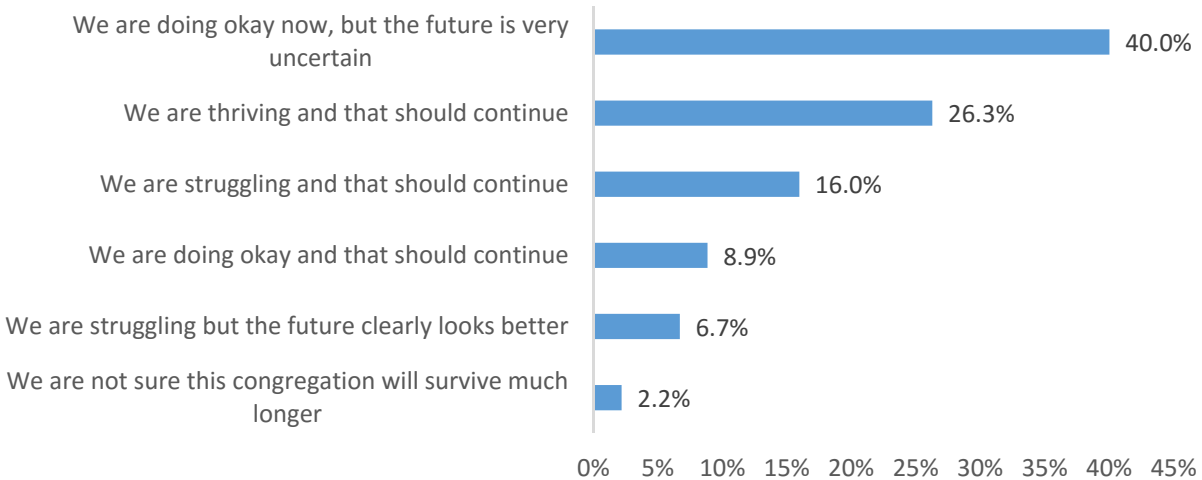
For Protestants in the U.S., congregations have been the foundation of mission work. Congregations proclaim the Gospel, teach discipleship, raise up leaders, reach out and assist in their local communities, and provide the greatest portion of financial support for domestic and global work done by denominations. The ELCA Constitution defines a congregation as “a community of baptized persons whose existence depends on the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments and whose purpose is to worship God, to nurture its members, and to reach out in witness and service to the world. To this end, it assembles regularly for worship and nurture, organizes and carries out ministry to its people and neighborhood, and cooperates with and supports the wider church to strive for the fulfillment of God’s mission in the world” (9.11.).

Congregational Vitality, Membership, and Finances

The rapidly changing environment in the U.S. has directly impacted the vitality of congregations. Declining membership directly impacts the resources available to congregations to accomplish their purposes. Financially, smaller congregations simply have higher costs per member. In 2015, 39 percent of the ELCA’s congregations with 50 or fewer in worship (N=3,520) took in less than they spent. In contrast, one percent of the congregations with 501 or more members ran a deficit.

In 2015, ELCA congregations were asked “Which of the following best describes this congregation’s future?” (N=6,644) Forty percent of the responding congregations chose, “We are doing okay now, but the future is very uncertain.” Sixteen percent responded, “We are struggling and that should continue.” Two percent responded, “We are not sure this congregation will survive much longer.” These data clearly suggest renewed attention to congregations is warranted.

Which of the Following Best Describes this Congregation's Future?



Leadership

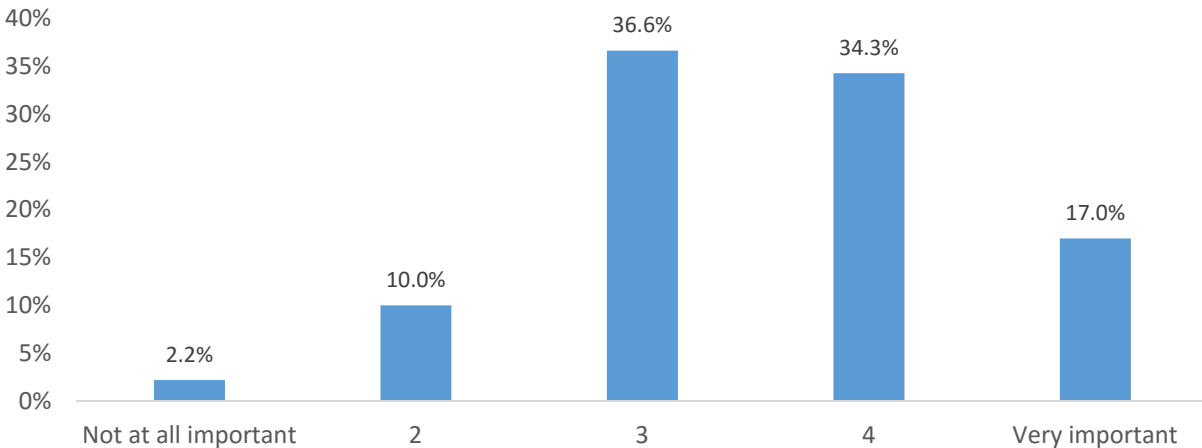
In this changing environment, effective congregational leadership is critical. This raises two issues. First, will there be enough leaders? Table 1 shows projections for the next few years. The number of retirements will likely be considerably higher than the number of ordinations. It is also likely that the number of congregations with the financial resources to adequately compensate a pastor will decline, but there will be congregations with adequate resources unable to find a pastor.

Table 1: Retirements, Ordinations, and The Number of Congregations that Can Afford a Full-time, First-call Pastor (actual figures through 2015, with projections for 2016 through 2019)

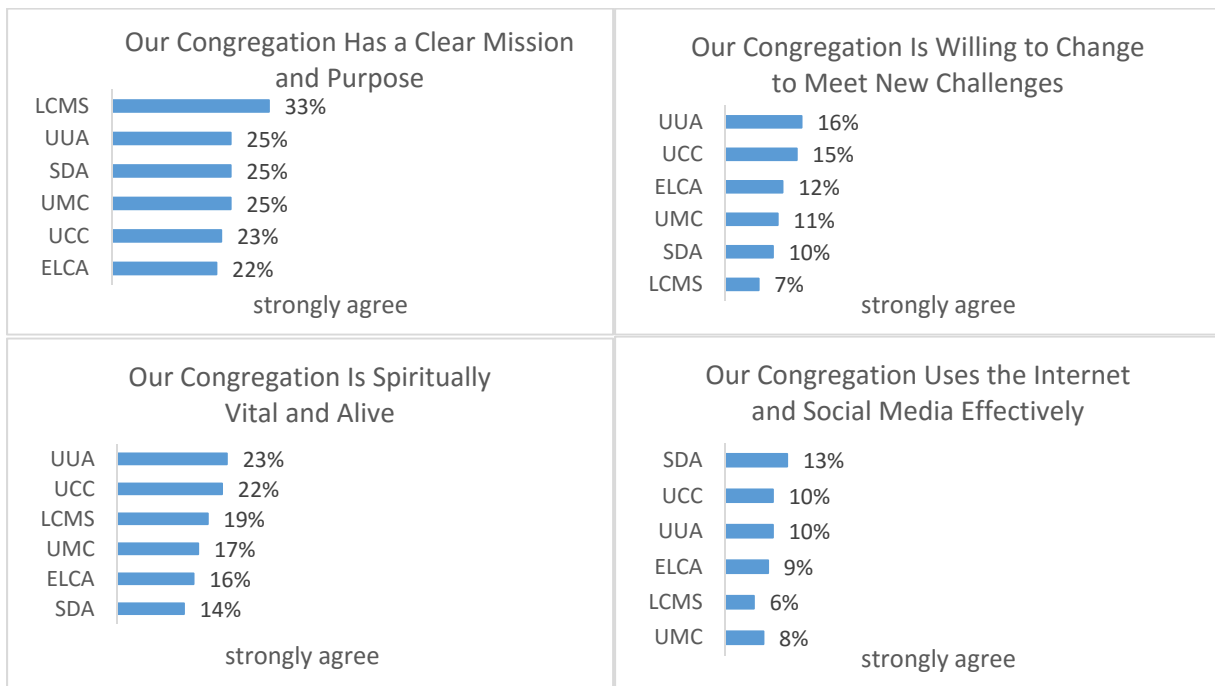
	Retirements	Ordinations	Difference	Congregations	Can Afford a Pastor	Number of Pastors Serving Congregations
2010	315	300	15	10,008	7,638	7,625
2011	335	297	38	9,638	7,411	7,408
2012	388	278	110	9,533	7,385	7,255
2013	447	225	222	9,464	7,365	7,062
2014	432	257	175	9,392	7,383	6,868
2015	455	249	206	9,326	7,278	6,713
2016	449	213	236	9,260	7,173	6,477
2017	436	212	224	9,194	7,069	6,253
2018	422	210	212	9,128	6,966	6,041
2019	404	207	197	9,062	6,864	5,844

The second leadership issue is tied to congregational priorities and how they are influence or impacted by leaders. In a 2015 survey of ELCA pastors serving in congregations, pastors were asked, “When assessing ministry, how important are each of the following to you personally?” Figure 2 shows the results. About 12 percent of pastors indicated seeing steady growth in membership was not important (1 or 2 on the scale), but 34 percent said it was important (4) and 17 percent said it was very important.

How Important Is Seeing Steady Growth in Membership and/or Attendees for You Personally?



At the same time, when compared to other congregations, ELCA pastors are less likely to “strongly agree” that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose, that their congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges, that their congregation is spiritually vital and alive, or that their congregation effectively uses the Internet or social media.



A focus on leadership is needed to further assist pastors in engaging the changing religious environment with an emphasis on the skills that will enhance their ability to positively impact the deeply embedded cultures of many ELCA congregations.