



Congregational Vitality among Evangelical Churches in Canada

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Church Health and Congregational Vitality

What is a healthy evangelical church? How do you measure church health? I begin this article by briefly examining various efforts to understand congregational vitality, beginning in the 1960s with the “church growth” movement, which gave way to an emphasis on “church health,” which in turn was replaced with an emphasis on “missional church.” Using the Canadian Evangelical Congregations Study (CECS), I then attempt to get at qualities of vital congregations. The CECS consisted of 50 face-to-face interviews with pastors from across Canada, and then 478 phone interviews with lead pastors in evangelical congregations in 2009. The response rate for these interviews was roughly 40%. The congregations were from five major evangelical denominations in Canada – Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), the Mennonite Brethren (MB), the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), and the four Baptist Conventions: the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches, the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Québec, the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, and the French Baptist Union / Union d’Églises Baptistes Françaises au Canada. (For more information about this study, see Reimer and Wilkinson, 2010.)

With regard to church health, there was little agreement on what it is, or whether it can be measured at all. At the start of this project, we ask two respected theologians how to measure church health. This was their joint reply:

Because the Church is the presence of the divine-human Christ on earth and His infinitely beautiful bride, it is impossible to measure her health. We are particularly concerned that theological categories not be taken over by (neutral) empirical measurements. These measurements lead us away from theological concerns and assume that we can find some other, neutral ground on the basis of which to measure the “health” of the Church. For example, we might be tempted to measure the health of the church by the presence or absence of a nursery, youth group, or hospitality committee. Each of these categories may be seen as transcending any theological viewpoints that exist (infant baptism or the meaning of the Eucharist). (Allert and Boersma, 2009)

Of course, these theologians are correct. One cannot measure the health of the Church (big C). Nor can one operationalize the work of the Holy Spirit. Such things are beyond human capacity and definitely beyond the social sciences.

Yet churches (small c, by which I mean congregations) are also institutions, like factories or banks, even though they are much more than that. They depend on (fallible) human actors to maintain their buildings, pay their budgets, run their programs, and define their goals. The tension between the divine and the human is built into any discussion of the church. Princeton theologian Darrell Guder states:

Sociological and organizational interests inform much of the contemporary discussion of the North American church. The results of those studies are informative and have helped us . . . While the church is always a real, human, social organism, it is also the body of Christ, a community grafted into the life of God in its baptism and by the action of the Holy Spirit. Elements of it are true that are not made visible by the categories and presuppositions of the sociologist. (1998, 12–13)



The social sciences have a long history of measuring the socially constructed part of institutions, often called institutional vitality or effectiveness. This is what I attempt to do here. Thus, I use the terms “congregational vitality” to focus on the institutional strengths and weaknesses of this human enterprise.¹ It should be clear that any attempt to comprehend, much less quantify, the work of God’s Spirit in and through the bride of Christ is impossible (and arrogant to the extreme). The theologians’ warning that scientific measurement can “lead us away from theological concerns” should give us all pause. Readers should be aware, then, of the limitations of such research, and should not allow empirical measurements to replace theological categories.

Even among those who agree that something like church health is empirically measureable, there are differences of opinion on how it can be operationalized. Starting with the church growth literature, Inskeep states that there are two streams within “church growth” research: religiously-committed researchers, such as church growth consultants or denominational employees, and social scientists from within academia. For the former, measurement of church growth/health probably began in earnest with the Church Growth Movement, started by Donald McGavran, dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965 (see McGavran’s *Understanding Church Growth*, 1970). McGavran’s successor at Fuller, C. Peter Wagner, listed six irreducible presuppositions on which church growth was founded:

1. Non-growth displeases God;
2. Numerical growth of the church is a priority with God and focused on new disciples rather than decisions;
3. Disciples are tangible, identifiable, countable, people who increase the church numerically;
4. Limited time, money, and resources demand that the church develop a strategy based on results;
5. Social and behavioural sciences are valuable tools in measuring and encouraging church growth; and
6. Research is essential to maximum growth. (Towns, 2004)

Since McGavran’s principles of church growth were influential internationally, the emphasis on empirical measurement and numerical growth has lasted over time. Others have built on the tradition of measurement but have attempted to balance what is perceived to be an overemphasis on numerical growth. These include, among others, Lyle Schaller, the Alban Institute, and Natural Church Development (NCD). The missional church movement has also de-emphasized quantitative growth, emphasizing instead “incarnational” outreach with the goal of community transformation. I will look at these latter two in greater detail because the pastors and church leaders we interviewed indicated that they are currently influential in the five denominations we studied.

NCD was founded in 1989 by Christian Schwarz with the goal of helping churches “of all denominations experience qualitative and quantitative growth” ([NCD](#), 2012). Now, they claim that 40,000 churches have conducted NCD surveys and they have national partner organizations in 70 countries. In their view, church health and growth is natural, just as plants grow and multiply naturally. “We should not attempt to ‘manufacture’ church growth, but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church. It is our task to minimize the obstacles to growth (the ‘environmental resistance’) – both inside and outside the church” (Schwarz, 2006, 14). Schwarz recognizes that external factors affect church growth, but since they are difficult to control, one should focus on internal organic health. Based on extensive data from thousands of churches over ten years of research, Schwarz promotes eight essential qualities of healthy churches:

¹I do not intend to imply that “church health” research is more focused on theological issues or “immeasurables” like the work of the Holy Spirit. I only wish to use a term that better captures the limited scope of this research.



1. empowering leadership;
2. gift-based ministry;
3. passionate spirituality;
4. effective structures;
5. inspiring worship services;
6. holistic small groups;
7. need-oriented evangelism; and
8. loving relationships. (Schwarz, 2006)

Many of these eight characteristics are evident in my congregational vitality scale below.

The Missional Church Model

Missional church proponents reject the centrality of numerical growth. They insist that healthy churches are those that fulfill their divine mission to be God's sent people in their context (Guder, 1998). In an article titled "The 'Missional Church': A Model for Canadian Churches?" Presbyterian elder David Horrox (2012) writes,

The church should stop mimicking the surrounding culture and become an alternative community, with a different set of beliefs, values and behaviors. Ministers would no longer engage in marketing; churches would no longer place primary emphasis on programs to serve members. The traditional ways of evaluating 'successful churches' – bigger buildings, more people, bigger budgets, larger ministerial staff, new and more programs to serve members – would be rejected. New yardsticks would be the norm: To what extent is our church a 'sent' community in which each believer is reaching out to his community? To what extent is our church impacting the community with a Christian message that challenges the values of our secular society?

If one's definition of church health centres on growth, then measuring church health is pretty straightforward. But how does one quantify a "sent" community? How does one measure community impact or individual transformation? Empirical tools seem ill-suited for such a task.

Missional leadership specialist Reggie McNeal (2009) says that three main shifts are required for churches to transition into missional churches:

1. from internal to external ministry;
2. from program development to people development; and
3. from church based to kingdom based in terms of leadership agenda.

Many pastors and church leaders we interviewed spoke of such a shift in their church or churches, and many others used "missional" language. It was clear from our interviews that evangelical leaders think healthy churches are missional churches. For example, a CRC denominational leader described healthy churches as those that exist *for* the community they serve, which is what makes them healthy. He gave examples of healthy churches that were "engaged missionally" in their community and where attendees were selling their homes and moving into the communities where the church serves. A PAOC leader described successful churches as "missional" churches or those that "engage their community." Here is a quote from an MB pastor in Ontario:



[Our mission] is focused around Isaiah 61:4 which speaks about rebuilding the inner city, we have four main values that we beat to death: the incarnational one, which is to be people of presence, in [our neighbourhood]; we have a relational value; a missional value; and a transformational value – those are the four values that we adhere to.

Themes of being oriented outward and relationship-driven instead of program-driven, and having an “incarnational” presence in the community were common.

Social Scientists and Congregational Vitality

While these missional themes are “external” in the sense that they are community-focused, they do not emphasize the same external factors as the social scientists examine. In fact, social scientists would argue that what is happening (in the community and country) outside the church is more important than what is happening inside the church (Inskeep, 1993).

The external factors emphasized by the social scientist stream include, first, *national trends* such as cultural attitudes toward church, or demographic trends such as immigration patterns and birth rates. Second, they look into *local contextual factors*, such as whether the community around the church is growing or shrinking. A third set of factors are related to the religious *denomination or tradition*. For example, some denominations emphasize evangelism more than others, and some are able to maintain a higher commitment level among affiliates than others. Of course, the social scientists recognize that factors internal to the church, including leadership and worship, matter as well, but research shows that these external factors have a greater impact on church vitality or growth (Roozen and Hadaway, 1993). A thorough literature review is impossible here, but I will present two common sets of theories among social scientists today.

Many proponents of “rational choice” or “market” theories of religion argue that churches and denominations have vitality if they are strict.² Originating with Dean Kelley in the 1970s (see *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 1972), this theory has been developed by Stark, Finke, Iannaccone, and others. Strict churches, or churches that are in tension with the society, are more likely to grow because they offer higher rewards (such as rewards from a highly responsive, personal God) but at high cost (a God that requires devotion and separation from the world). High-cost religion results in a committed laity, because they maintain tension with the world, which makes “heavenly” rewards more appealing than “earthly” ones. Strict churches also screen out “free-riders,” or those who attend but don’t contribute. Free-riders compromise the overall value of the rewards enjoyed by a church’s committed members. Since growing churches need resources such as volunteer time and money from their congregants, those churches that are demanding are more likely to grow because of the sacrificial giving of its more committed laity (Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark, 1995; Stark and Finke, 2000).

The “organizational ecology” theories focus on factors external to the congregation. These supra-organizational factors include the number of similar organizations in the area, since churches, like all voluntary organizations, compete for the time and money of people in their “market niche.” If there are many similar congregations nearby and a congregation fails to establish its own unique niche, it is less likely to survive. Churches, then, are more likely

²Rational choice theories fit into the third set of external factors, since denominations or traditions as a whole tend to be strict, even though there is some diversity within denominations. Also, strictness, or tension, has an external focus in that it is always in relation to other religious denominations and the culture as a whole. For example, Catholics may have little tension with Canadian society, but would have much greater tension in Iran.



to grow if they are in an area where there is an ample population of potential affiliates in their “niche” without too much “niche overlap” with competing congregations (Baum and Singh, 1994; Hannan, Carroll, and Polos, 2003; Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Scheitle, 2007).

Organizational ecology postulates that churches will tend to have a curvilinear growth pattern, as they balance the tensions between legitimacy and competition. As they start, they lack legitimacy because they are relatively unknown, so growth is slow. In mid-life, growth is faster because of increased legitimacy and low competition. Then, as other congregations recognize the opportunities in the area, competition increases, and thus growth slows. Ultimately, some congregations die off and are replaced by congregations that are better fit for the changing environment (Scheitle and Dougherty, 2008).

Both of these theories are bolstered by substantial empirical support. The upshot is that external factors matter.

Since external factors are so important, evangelical churches can show great vitality but end up closing because of external factors such as a shrinking local population or a glut of similar churches nearby. Another church can grow quickly mainly because of internal birth rates or because they have many Evangelicals moving to the area. Consider, for example, that the lion’s share of North American church growth, evangelical or otherwise, has been shown to be directly related to birth rates and immigration (Bibby, 2011; Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, 2001; Roozen and Hadaway, 1993). Now that birth rates among Evangelicals are shrinking and immigrants are not primarily from Christian countries, growth does not come as easily.

In spite of the importance of external factors, many studies, whether scientifically or religiously motivated, ignore them. This is mainly because they interview or survey those within the organization itself (as we did for the CECS). In addition, the church can do something about the internal factors, but little about external factors (unless they relocate).

One such internal factor measured in all the operationalizations of church health I reviewed (Schwarz, 2006; Bellamy et al., 2006; Macchia, 1999; Woolever and Bruce, 2004) was “empowering” leadership. Studies of other organizations, such as hospitals and schools, agree that good leadership is necessary for healthy organizations (e.g., Arnetz and Blomkvist, 2007; Korkmaz, 2007). In their extensive research on organizational health, Quick et al. (2007) state: “We suggest that the healthy leader is at the heart of organizational health, is the touchstone for organizational health, and is the seed that gives rise to individual and organizational health” (193). Furthermore, this is the factor emphasized by denominational leaders we interviewed. All but one mentioned pastoral leadership as primary when asked about the qualities of healthy churches (or failing churches). Naturally, then, measures of church vitality should pay attention to leadership, including vision, empowerment of laity (to work in and develop their gifting), and innovation.

The Congregational Vitality Scale

In my view, the best work on church organizational vitality comes out of Australia, where around 400,000 attendees from 7000 churches and 22 denominations (the majority of Christian churches in Australia) have participated in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). Churches are surveyed every five years, starting in 1991, so they can track changes in vitality over time. The NCLS surveys both attendees and leaders in each church (NCLS, 2012). Over fifteen years, the NCLS team has identified nine core qualities of vital churches, along with three attendance measures. The three attendance measures are young adult retention, number of newcomers, and net attendance change (people joining minus people leaving or deaths). The nine core qualities are as follows:



Internal Qualities

1. Faith – measured by attendees’ belief that their faith as grown, private devotional practices, and importance of God;
2. Worship – measures the vibrancy of worship and preaching in the congregation;
3. Belonging – attendees’ sense of belonging, including frequency of attendance at worship and other church activities;

Inspirational Qualities

4. Vision – “If there is one core quality that stands out as making a powerful difference in church vitality, it is the presence of a clear and compelling vision” (NCLS, 2006, 15). This includes commitment and confidence in the church’s vision and goals;
5. Leadership – inspiring and empowering leadership and moves people toward action. This includes perceptions of leaders and clear structures;
6. Innovation – the church is open to new ways and ideas, and leaders encourage innovation;

Outward Qualities

7. Service – involvement of affiliates in church-based and community-based service;
8. Faith sharing – this includes inviting people to church, evangelistic activities, and talking about your faith at home;
9. Inclusion – welcoming new people, open friendship circles, and following up on those who are drifting away. (Bellamy et al., 2006)

Seeking a balance between internal, leadership and external factors, I followed these nine core qualities in the creation of the congregational vitality scale, to the degree that our survey allowed. I also added a few items that were pertinent. The wording of the items that make up the scale is given below, along with how the items is measured.³ The resulting 20-item congregational vitality scale shows strong statistical qualities.⁴

Participation and Belonging

1. Everyone enthusiastically participates in congregational singing (SA–SD);
2. Percentage of regularly participating adults who participate in a small group once a month or more (recoded into quartiles);
3. Percentage of regularly participating men who volunteer in some capacity in this church (recoded into quartiles);

³SA–SD refers to a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, moderately agree, neutral, moderately disagree, strongly disagree. Quartiles divide percentages and other continuous measures into four groups, so that they better fit the scale.

⁴The scale varies from 27 to 70, with a fairly normal distribution. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .782, which means the items are suitable for scale formation. It does not correlate with church size, urban/rural setting, ethnicity, gender, racial/ethnic makeup of congregation, or poverty/wealth, which could indicate a demographic bias to the scale. Other demographic correlates are easily explained, as I note below.



Vision and Leadership

4. The vast majority of lay people are *not* aware of the goals and direction of this church (SA–SD, reverse scored);
5. The lay leaders are committed to this church and fully endorse its mission (SA–SD);
6. The participants in this church are pessimistic about its future (SA–SD, reverse scored);
7. I am worried about the long-term future of this church (SA–SD, reverse scored);
8. Church priority? Encouraging people to serve according to their gifts (very high, somewhat high, not a priority);
9. I think we have problems with communication between the clergy, lay leaders, and the congregation (SA–SD, reverse scored);

Innovation

10. In general, this congregation is wary of change and innovation (SA–SD, reverse scored)

Service

11. Does this congregation have any organized effort, committee or designated individual whose purpose is to provide help to members or regular participants, for example, by cooking meals for a new mother or someone who just got home from the hospital, or providing financial assistance to someone who needs it? (yes, no);
12. Church priority? Serving the poor and needy in the community? (very high, somewhat high, not a priority);

Faith Sharing

13. Church priority? Maintaining an active evangelism and outreach program, encouraging members to share their faith? (very high, somewhat high, not a priority);
14. Attendees frequently invite unconverted friends and family to this church (SA–SD);

Inclusion

15. Does this congregation have any organized effort, committee or designated individual whose purpose is to follow up on newcomers and visitors? (yes, no);
16. Does this congregation have any organized effort, committee or designated individual whose purpose is to reconnect with those who used to attend this church but have not done so for a while? (yes, no);
17. Newcomers find it hard to form friendships with people in this church (SA–SD, reverse coded);

Growth – attendance and finances

18. Compared to two years ago, that is, this time in 2007, has the total average attendance increased, decreased, or remained about the same? (decrease, same, increase);
19. How would you describe your congregation's financial health currently? Would you say it is "excellent," "good," "tight but manageable," "in some difficulty," or "in serious difficulty"?



Job satisfaction

20. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is completely dissatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied, how would you rate your overall job satisfaction right now? (reduced to a 5-point scale).

The final two items, financial health and job satisfaction, are not included in NCLS core qualities. I added these because institutions require both adequate volunteers and finances for vitality; they are necessary but not sufficient for vitality. Healthy leaders are also necessary but not sufficient for a vital organization; thus I included the job satisfaction item. These items fit well with the rest of the scale.

A few qualifiers are in order before presenting the results. Recall that all the questions below were asked of the lead pastor. This is an important limitation, as laity were not surveyed. Second, the correlates of congregational vitality are partly a function of the questions used to measure vitality itself. For example, if a measure of congregational vitality includes measures of numerical (quantitative) growth instead of measures of (qualitative) growth in spiritual maturity, then numerically growing churches will appear more vital, and church qualities that correlate with numerical growth (such as number of baptisms, or evangelistic programs) will be more important predictors. I presented all the questions above that make up the scale so that the reader can draw his/her own conclusions about the validity of the vitality scale. Finally, statements made in this paper are generally about statistical findings, and are not intended to be interpreted as value judgments. For example, just because an item is (or is not) statistically correlated with the vitality scale does not mean it is endorsed (or discouraged) by the author.

Findings

According to the baseline measures of growing numbers and financial well-being, evangelical churches in our sample tended to be doing pretty well. Nearly half (45.6%) claimed their average weekly attendance had increased over the last year (35.8% no change, 18.6% decreased). Over half (51.7%) of pastors stated that their financial situation was “good” or “excellent,” and only 13.4% said it they were in “some” or “serious” financial difficulty (the remaining 34.9% said their finances were “tight but manageable”). In spite of the economic recession in Canada during the time of our interviews, one-third (35.9%) said that giving had increased as compared to a year ago, while 44.1% said their finances had remained about the same.

Table 1 presents some of the correlates of the congregational vitality scale. For a quick primer on understanding correlations statistically, see the appendix to Reimer (2010). The scale is moderately correlated with denomination and region. Specifically, the Atlantic region is negatively correlated with vitality while BC is positively correlated. In Atlantic Canada, there are many small, old, rural congregations (mostly Baptist). These congregations lack vitality partly because people, particularly young people, are moving to the cities or out West seeking greener economic pastures, leaving these churches with fewer and older participants. Churches in BC are younger – in terms of the year the congregation was founded – than in any other region, especially Atlantic Canada (see Reimer and Wilkinson, 2010). Younger churches tend to be better situated in growing areas, such as cities. However, I want to be clear that there are many vibrant rural evangelical churches in Canada. Rurality is not correlated with congregational vitality. In fact, if church age is controlled,⁵ the negative correlation between vitality and the

⁵In this paragraph, I control for different variables by a statistical technique called “partial correlation,” which measures the correlation between two variables once I remove the effect of other variables, or hold those variables constant.



Atlantic region disappears, as does the positive correlation in BC. In comparison, controlling for rurality has little effect on regional differences. Regional differences in vitality, then, are largely a function of church age.

The MB and PAOC denominations show weak-to-moderate positive correlations with congregational vitality. The MB correlation is related to age of congregation as well, as MB churches tend to be younger and well-located (see Reimer, 2011). The PAOC correlation is not so easily explained. After searching out several demographic possibilities to no avail (since PAOC churches are at least as likely to be rural and old, and have poor, less educated constituencies), I noted that congregations with exuberant worship have greater vitality (or are perceived by pastors to have greater vitality). For example, vitality is positively correlated with spontaneity in worship, raising hands, altar calls, praise bands, drama or dance, etc., as we see in table 3. This is true even among churches that are not PAOC.

Table 1. Demographic and Identity Correlates of Congregational Vitality

	Correlation with Congregational vitality scale
Region- Atlantic	-.124**
Region- BC	.103*
Denomination- PAOC	.116*
Denomination- MB	.108*
Demographics- % age 18-29	.248***
Demographics- % college educated	.304***
Demographics- year church was founded	-.154***
Identity- Missional	.368***
Identity- Purpose driven	.336***
Identity- Evangelical	.236***

Source: CECS 2009.

Significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Regarding the demographics of the people in the pew, churches with younger and highly educated attendees show greater vitality. Churches have less vitality, on average, when they have a high percentage of attendees over the age of 65, or a high percentage of attendees with high school education or less. This relationship exists even when rurality, Atlantic region, and age of congregation are controlled. It should not surprise us that the presence of young adults is important to vitality. In fact, the NCLS measures retention of young people separately in their measure of vitality because of its importance (see above). Education is correlated with volunteerism and with what sociologists call “social capital” and “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). This capital provides resources for investment in social settings, just as economic capital gives the owner resources in the economic sphere. Education provides capital in the form of knowledge, relationships, confidence, etc., that are assets in churches just as in other settings. The fact that vitality is related to education, but not wealth, is a good reminder that the “value” that people add to a church is not primarily economic. Vital churches value and invest in people regardless of their economic capital.

The vitality scale is positively associated with three congregational identities. Pastors were asked, “In terms of overall identity or culture, how well do you feel the following terms describe this congregation? Does this term



describe this congregation very, somewhat, or not very well?" Missional, evangelical, and purpose-driven identities are strongly and positively correlated with vitality. Charismatic, fundamentalist, seeker sensitive, cell, liturgical, and emergent church identities are not. Of course, we do not know what these terms mean to the pastors, but it is likely that their understanding is limited. The missional and purpose-driven identifications show the strongest correlations. I suspect this is partly because a church with clear, compelling vision or purpose, and with strong external outreach, has higher vitality, as we shall see below. Also, vitality is correlated with measures of outreach.

Table 2. Vision and Priorities Correlates of Congregational Vitality

	Correlation with Congregational Vitality Scale
Mission shapes priorities/goals of the church	.367***
Strengthening relationships	.356***
Building volunteer leadership	.355***
Providing worship services that appeal to visitors	.317***
Promoting deeper spirituality	.315***
Promoting co-operation between churches and community	.276***
Providing care and counselling services	.195***
Helping members get ahead financially	.185***
Promoting faith development in children/youth	.174***

Source: CECS, 2009.

Significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

In table 2, it is no surprise that churches that are mission-driven have higher vitality. CECS respondents were asked if their church had a mission statement. If they did, we asked, "In your view, does this mission or purpose statement shape the priorities and goals of this church at the present time, or not?" We also asked if they set short-term goals, if these goals were measurable, if they set dates for evaluation of goals, and if there were people held accountable for implementing them. Most of these measures were correlated with vitality, but it is noteworthy that having a mission statement is not nearly as important (correlation of .161) for vitality as having a mission statement that shapes the priorities and goals of the church presently (correlation of .367). Setting short-term goals was also important (correlation of .233) for vitality.

Pastors were asked, "As you know, congregations operate according to certain values or priorities, even if they are not explicitly stated. In your view, what are the actual priorities of this church, based on how they function, even if they are different from your priorities?" Table 2 shows the priorities that are positively correlated with vitality. The strongest correlations are with the items "strengthening marriages and family relationships," "building volunteer leadership," "providing a worship service that is welcoming and comfortable to non-churched visitors," and "promoting deeper spirituality through the spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, meditating on scripture, etc." Although "helping members get ahead financially" was the lowest rated of the sixteen priority questions (less than 5% of pastors considered it a very high priority in their church), it nonetheless was correlated with vitality (I am not sure why). Note that the priorities of evangelism, encouraging people to serve in their gifts, and serving the poor or needy are not included here because they are part of the vitality scale itself. Priorities that do not have a significant correlation with vitality include protecting people from the negative influences of the world, promoting the faith development of children and youth (probably because 80% churches consider this a very high priority, so there is little variance in the item), working to preserve traditional morals, providing counseling/care for members,



enhancing the beauty of the church building and grounds, preserving ethnic culture/language, and teaching the theological distinctives of our religious tradition.

Table 3. Worship Correlates with Congregational Vitality

	Correlation with Congregational Vitality Scale
Time for laity to share in worship services	.225***
Time spent mingling/socializing	.135**
Raising hands or clapping	.284***
Praise band	.259***
Drama or dance in services	.237***
Spontaneous activity	.211***
Altar call	.195***
Speaking in tongues	.129**
Dialogue between pastors/laity	.107*
Communion	.106*
LCD projector	.092*

Source: CECS, 2009.

Significance: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

Table 3 shows that the vitality scale is correlated with “a time for laity to share testimonies or prayer requests,” and the amount of time spent mingling or socializing during (or after) the main service. In addition, questions related to enthusiastic (and charismatic) worship show positive and significant correlations, as mentioned above. Regression analyses (not shown) show that the most robust items (those that remain significant after controls are added) include the first two items in the table (participation in worship and time mingling), and drama or dance, and raising hands or clapping. Other variables, such as speaking in tongues or spontaneity, become insignificant. Of course, many non-charismatic evangelical churches have drama or dance in their services, and have worshipers clap or raise their hands during worship. This suggests, I think, that exuberant (charismatic) worship is not as important as participatory worship. At minimum, we can conclude that vibrant worship and lay participation in worship are important to vitality.

Table 4. Conflict and Co-operation Correlates with Congregational Vitality

	Correlation with Congregational Vitality Scale
Recent conflict in the church	-.126**
Formal means to handle conflict	.222***
Co-operation with a Christian community organization	.213***
Co-operation with a non-religious community organization	.182***
Co-operation with another evangelical church	.157***
Co-operation with Christian but non-evangelical church	.108*

Source: CECS, 2009.

Significance: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.



Most churches face conflict from time to time, and 29% of our sample said yes to the following item: “In the last five years, has this church experienced conflicts that caused a significant number of the active lay participants to leave the church?” While there is a negative correlation with recent, serious conflict ($-.126$), I expected the correlation to be much stronger. More important than recent conflict, it seems, is the way conflict is handled. Congregations who said they have a “formal procedure for handling conflict within the church” have higher vitality. One can speculate that such formal procedures are healthier for the pastor, who often has to personally mediate conflict when no formal procedures are in place. Recall that the lead pastor answered all the questions on this survey.

Co-operation with nearby organizations is often good for vitality, but not all types of co-operation. Pastors were asked whether or not they had co-operated with certain institutions within the previous year. Co-operation with Christian or non-religious community organizations were both positively correlated with vitality (table 4). Again, these final two items suggest that a focus on community outreach is good for vitality. Co-operation with (what the pastor perceived to be) another evangelical church, or a Protestant or Catholic church that is not evangelical, is moderately and positively correlated with vitality. However, co-operation with a non-Christian congregation (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.) is not.

Table 5. Pastoral Support Correlates of Congregational Vitality

	Correlation with Congregational Vitality Scale
Staff/volunteers to help in areas of weakness	.201***
Friends to share personal struggles with	.199***
Number of other pastoral staff	.190***
Expenditure on salaries	-.156***
Expenditures on local outreach	.143**
Expenditure on building and grounds maintenance	-.118*
Expenditure on missions	.113*

Source: CECS, 2009.

Significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

If readers accept the idea that healthy leadership is necessary for healthy churches, then pastoral support items should be correlated with congregational vitality. Table 5 looks at the financial and relational support for pastors as correlates of vitality. If a church has staff or volunteers who work in areas where the pastor is weak (not gifted), those churches enjoy higher vitality. Note that the positive effect of “staff/volunteers to help in areas of weakness” remains even if we control for the number of staff at the church. Pastors with close friends tend to be in churches with higher vitality. Having more staff is positively correlated with vitality (.190), but the staff can be volunteer, not paid. In fact, once we control for the number of staff, having paid staff instead of volunteer staff is actually negatively correlated with vitality ($-.114$, a significant but moderately weak correlation). Since high levels of lay volunteerism is a strong predictor of vitality, it is likely that this does not indicate anything negative about paid staff, but rather the benefits of committed lay volunteers. The conclusion is obvious: healthy pastors are supported pastors, and pastoral health is important for congregational vitality.

Regarding finances, churches that spend a higher percentage of their budget on salaries have less vitality. This does not mean that paying church staff less is good for vitality, but that channelling resources outside the church, toward foreign missions and community outreach, is good for vitality. Churches where the majority of funds stay inside the church, in the form of building maintenance or salaries, have less vitality.



Conclusion

With so many correlates of congregational vitality, which are the most important? The question is best answered by a statistical technique called stepwise regression, which removes those items that do not remain significant when all predictors are placed in the model. Basically, I entered all the correlates listed in the tables above and let this statistical technique remove the weaker predictors and leave the strongest ones. In the final model, I entered the ten strongest predictors with controls for denomination, region, and age of congregation. Here, in order, are the strongest predictors of the congregational vitality scale, our top ten. Remember that those items that are part of the scale are not included here, but are obviously important to vitality as they are used to measure it.

1. Missional – this is #1. If the pastor views his/her church as missional, this has the greatest positive effect on vitality of any item in our survey. Churches that are focused on their community and world are more vital according to the vitality scale;
2. The mission statement shapes current priorities and goals – the key question is not whether the church has a mission statement, but whether the mission statement is currently shaping the priorities and direction of the congregation. Churches with a clear and compelling purpose have greater vitality;
3. Percentage who give regularly – Obviously, a committed laity is key to congregational vitality, and financial giving is part of that commitment. Since many of our measures of average lay commitment are part of the vitality scale (percentage involved in small groups, percentage of men who volunteer) the percentage of attendees who give regularly comes in third;
4. A priority on building volunteer leadership – churches that are vital focus on lay development and discipleship, not only getting people in the pews. Lay participation and leadership is important, as several correlates above indicate;
5. Priority of a worship service that is oriented toward visitors – worship that is comfortable for visitors is positively related to vitality. Note that the worship service that attracts visitors may not be the only or primary worship service, but services that are comfortable to visitors promote vitality;
6. Percentage over age 65 – an aging congregation decreases vitality, even if having some seniors is good for a church. The point is churches with a healthy supply of young (and educated) adults tend to show greater vitality;
7. A time for laity to share testimony and prayer requests – this item predicts vitality, possibly because testimony encourages the congregation, and praying for individual needs helps people connect and feel cared for. It is also important to get laity visibly involved in worship and other areas of the church. Laity should serve according to their gifting;
8. Percentage college-educated – having college-educated laity is related to vitality, possibly because of their volunteerism and leadership capabilities (or capital). Again, the correlates of vitality indicate the importance of developing “people” resources over “material” resources;
9. Percentage aged 18–29 – As noted in #6 above, keeping and engaging young adults is important to vital congregations;
10. Evangelical – an evangelical identity is a positive connection to vitality, possibly because churches that were described as “evangelical” were evangelistic.

These top ten (and the rest of the correlates discussed above) indicate that vital churches are missional; they have healthy leadership that motivates laity toward a clear, shared purpose or vision; they are committed to developing their human resources; they successfully integrate young and educated adults; and they have vibrant worship that



is comfortable for visitors. These findings are not surprising because they dovetail well with much larger studies, such as NCD or NCLS research.

What this “top ten” list is missing, like most studies in this area, is the importance of external factors. In previous research, I conducted face-to-face interviews with roughly 200 Christian clergy in the United States and Canada. From these interviews I noticed that evangelical pastors and leaders rarely spoke of local external factors, much less often than mainline Protestant or Catholic pastors/priests. They seemed to be less aware of local external factors. Mainline Protestant leaders looked into local demographics before starting a church or planning outreach strategies. They spoke of gathering information about local population growth, local immigration patterns, the race, age, education and income of the people in the community. In comparison, evangelical pastors and leaders knew less about community demographics. Of course, internal factors are important (as are spiritual considerations), but Evangelicals will do well to consider such external factors. In comparison to local demographics, evangelical leaders I have talked to are more aware of cultural issues (such as the increasing apathy towards institutional religion), and some national-level demographics (such as urbanization and immigration), which are also important. Local external factors would provide an important additional piece to understanding congregational vitality.

Judging from the emphasis placed on empowering leadership and a compelling missional vision in this and other studies, it is very possible that nothing is more important to congregational vitality than strong and healthy leaders. In light of clergy shortages among mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations, Evangelicals have been fortunate to have proportionally more pastors and Christian workers. However, shortages may be coming.⁶ All five of the denominational leaders we spoke to were concerned about future leadership. Pastors were aging and there are not enough new candidates to replace them. Leadership development is, or should be, the priority of congregations and denominations. Retaining present clergy is also crucial. Future congregational vitality depends on it.

⁶Hiemstra notes that evangelical churches are less likely to have fulltime staff and more likely to have part time or unpaid staff. This may indicate a growing shortage of clergy. See Hiemstra, 2011.



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