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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTH IS ALWAYS PLURAL

What are the common denominators among churches that do effective ministry? Do they all have a thriving youth group? Or a large membership? Or great facilities? No! Strong, healthy, and effective congregations of all types thrive in many different kinds of circumstances. In all congregations, something already works well. The getting-stronger congregations focus on those strengths.

A Language of Strengths

The words that people use to describe healthy or thriving congregations number in the hundreds. Often their language about effective ministry reflects who they are and their theological orientation. Through research with thousands of congregations, we discovered ten areas of strength in American congregations.¹ Surprisingly, leaders and worshipers possess acute awareness of where they believe they are failing and often little recognition of where they are succeeding. Of course, not a single congregation showed strength in all ten areas. Rather, the typical congregation possesses three to five strengths. Further, the specific cluster of strengths makes a unique multiple-strength fingerprint.

What Are the Qualities of a Strong Congregation?

More than half a million worshipers in over 5,000 congregations (randomly selected from throughout the United States) completed a survey during worship services. From their descriptions of how they experience their congregation, we identified ten areas of strength. The data revealed a strong church is one that

- fosters spiritual growth. Worshipers say that they are growing in their faith because of their participation in the church. They feel that their spiritual needs are being met in the congregation.
- provides meaningful worship. Worshipers describe how they often experience God's presence in worship services and they think that worship helps them with everyday life.

- promotes participation in congregational activities. Beyond worship services, many worshipers are involved in leadership, decision making, service, small groups, mission projects, and outreach.
- develops a sense of belonging. Worshipers sense that they are part of a community and enjoy many close friends in the congregation.
- cares for children and youth. Attractive offerings for young people bring satisfaction and support to families. Ministry for children or youth is a valued aspect of the congregation.
- focuses on the community. Many worshipers are involved in social service or advocacy work either through the congregation or with community groups.
- helps worshipers share their faith. Worshipers take part in evangelism activities, share their faith, and invite friends or family to worship.
- welcomes and assimilates new worshipers and participants.



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- benefits from empowering leadership. Leaders inspire others to action and take into account worshipers' ideas.
- looks to the future. Many worshipers are committed to the congregation's goals and vision. They believe that the church is always ready to try new things.²

A strong congregation also values the best of the past and builds on that to create a vision for the future.

Playing to Strengths

Congregational leaders often ask what is working well for another congregation. Such inquiries reflect limited awareness of and unproductive coping with their own congregation's uniqueness. Facing the reality of your church's one-of-a-kind mission requires courage. The perception of risk is accurate. The nature of congregations is to avoid failure, yet pursuing distinctive strategies move a church toward greater strength.

Religious leaders like the tempting idea that one key factor will insure church vitality. The notion that a single essential resource will give a congregation the decisive advantage is false. Examples of touted trump cards include congregational size, worship style, worship music, leadership style, or mission orientation. But there is no evidence that such a single winning factor exists.

Another variant of the peddled one-trick solution is the idea of naming the congregation's weakest area and then making efforts to improve it. Unfortunately, this version is based on the myth that weaknesses can be fixed and unintentionally disempowers a congregation by causing their leadership to focus on some aspect of its system that may never become one of its strengths.

Research demonstrates that all congregations have multiple strengths and require these building blocks to be effective. For example, a congregation that excels in serving the community but lacks any other strength is little more than a social service agency. Just as a congregation that excels in providing a sense of belonging where people care deeply for one another but lacks other strengths is little more than a social club. Congregational leaders must focus on multiple strengths to do all that is expected of people of faith.

If congregational leaders can move beyond their current mental maps, they can see the opportunities for their church by building on its strengths. Church strengths are always multiple, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Thus, the strength-building process entails:

- Identifying and appreciating our congregation's present strengths
- Dreaming of how we can build on these strengths
- Examining and prioritizing action possibilities for building on our strengths
- Pursuing selected options to create a stronger future

Are Congregations Really That Different?

The range and richness of congregational life is impressive. Yet there are some broad patterns that suggest congregations are more alike in some ways than in others. Three strengths pop up as the most common expressions of effective church life:

- Providing meaningful worship: current attendees tend to be satisfied with their worship experience
- Promoting participation in the congregation: the range between the highest and lowest percentage of worshipers engaged in activities across all congregations is fairly small
- Fostering spiritual growth: worshipers describe their growth in faith in highly similar ways

If congregations tend to be more alike in these three ways, they are most different when it comes to the percentage of new people (those who started attending in the past five years) in their midst. Obviously, the long-term effects of failing to attract and assimilate new people have huge consequences. However, churches draw newcomers only when they show signs of vitality in multiple areas.

Avoiding Myth Traps

Myths lure us to beliefs we want to be true. Believing myths is its own reward because it allows us to avoid change. By using the same old methods, we get the same old results. Myths immobilize and trap us into dead ends, blocking us from fully living out our church's ultimate mission: What is God calling us to be and do?

Strong congregations exhibit imagination, intelligence, heart-felt enthusiasm, and courage. Their members ask, What gives us joy? What are we really about? What are we going to courageously seek?

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2004).

2. Congregations can discover their strengths with the U.S. Congregational Life Survey and resources (www.USCongregations.org).