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**American Congregations 2018**

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# Vital Congregations

**Linda Bobbitt**

Congregational Vitality Project  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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# Vital Congregations

## Linda Bobbitt

### Introduction

What does a congregation mean when they describe themselves as spiritually vital? How does a congregation become vital? What is the relationship between vitality and sustainability? Does the answer depend on the faith tradition?

This study asked leaders from 10 different faith traditions to answer these questions. We found remarkable similarities across all traditions while also discovering the unique perspectives of each. Their answers illustrate distinct understandings about the way people interact with God and different perspectives of God’s promise of hope for the world.

### About the Study

Faith traditions that participated in the 2015 FACT survey were invited to go deeper by identifying particular congregations that described their spiritual vitality as either very high or medium. Using this criterion, congregations were selected by researchers from each tradition. Leaders from those congregations were interviewed (via phone) by independent researchers at the University of Northern Colorado’s Social Research Lab. Each tradition had different levels of participation (see Table 1). Researchers also invited two “experts” (e.g. researcher, spiritual or denominational leader) from each faith tradition to respond. This study reports the findings from those interviews.

#### About Faith Communities Today (FACT)

The FACT series of national surveys of American Congregations is a project of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP). CCSP is a multifaith coalition of denominations and religious groups hosted by Hartford Seminary’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The primary purposes of CCSP are developing research-based resources for congregational development and advancing the public understanding of American congregations. More information about CCSP, our partners, our publications, the FACT surveys and how to subscribe to our e-newsletter is available at: [faithcommunitiestoday.org](http://faithcommunitiestoday.org)

#### About the Author

Linda Bobbitt is creator and manager of the [Congregational Vitality Project](#) and researcher with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Table 1

Faith Traditions Studied	Interviews
Baha’i	5 congregations
Church of the Nazarene (NAZ)	1 congregation, 2 denominational leaders/experts
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	6 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
Jewish	4 congregations, 1 denominational leader/expert
Latter-Day Saints (LDS)	3 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
Orthodox Christian	11 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA)	4 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
Quaker/Friends	6 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
United Church of Christ (UCC)	8 congregations, 2 denominational leaders/experts
United Methodist Church (UMC)	2 congregations

# What is a spiritually vital congregation?

Each respondent was asked what it meant to be a spiritually vital congregation. Remarkably, leaders from each tradition gave very similar responses which lent themselves to a single broad definition or description of a vital congregation: Spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a common purpose of divine origin. The divine may be experienced through personal spiritual experiences, through encounters with others in their faith community, and through people outside their congregation. It is the recognition of the divine origin of their purpose that sets faith communities apart from other benevolent or social organizations (e.g. nonprofits, social action groups, social clubs, etc.).

Respondents further agreed that in spiritually vital congregations, people experience the divine in ways that are transformative. **The common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them.** In this way, transformation within individuals gives life and energy to the larger faith community which is itself transformed. A transformed faith community transforms the world around them. Without this kind of multi-layered transformation, the congregation seems inauthentic.

The following graphic (Figure 1) describes the difference between how low and high vitality congregations engage both within the congregation and with the world around them.

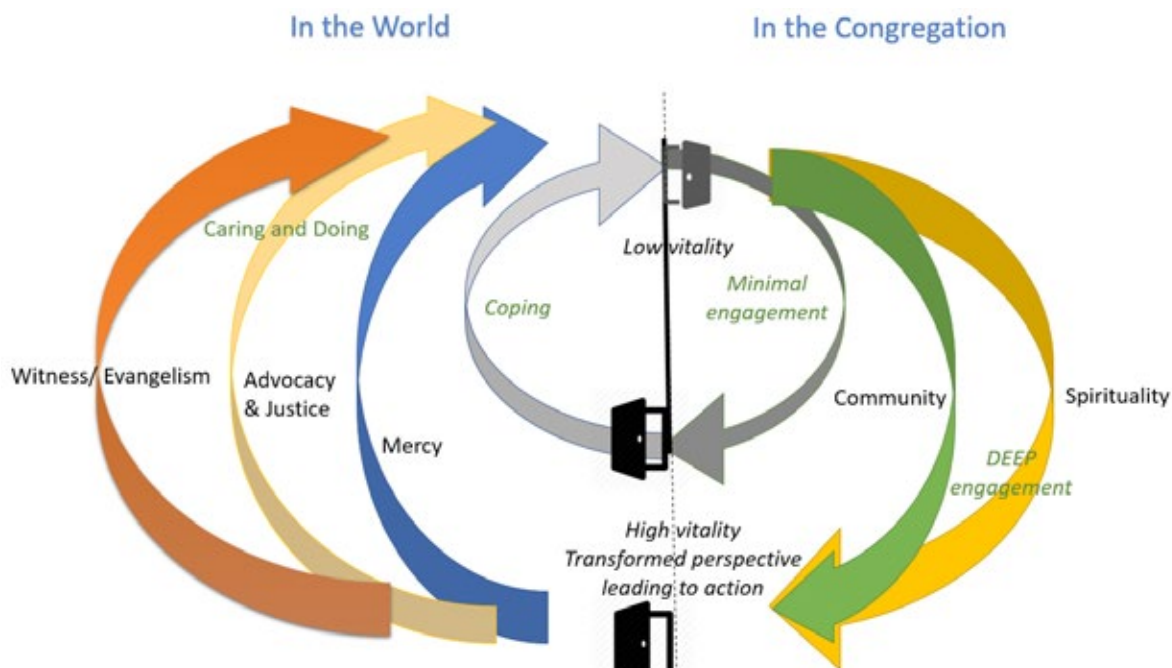


Figure 1: Congregational Engagement

This graphic shows the flow of individuals as they move between the congregation and the rest of their lives outside the congregation. People enter the congregation, have spiritual and/or communal experiences and then re-enter the world, where they also engage before returning to the congregation.

Low vitality congregations (grey loop) have people who participate minimally. People engaged in this way are primarily asking “How can the congregation or God help me?”. When they re-enter the world, they may feel comforted or refreshed, but their way of viewing and engaging with the world has not changed. The line between the two worlds is thick. This is the kind of experience many respondents called “inauthentic”.

In high vitality congregations (brightly colored outer loops), people are drawn deeper into their faith and/or community in ways that transform their perspective about themselves and the world around them. When they re-enter the world, they see things in a new light (some would say they see the world from God’s perspective) and this changes how they view and engage the world around them. People begin asking “How can I help God?” and they take steps to change the world around them. In doing so, the line between the congregation and the rest of the world may be blurred if not eliminated.

All the faith traditions recognized a flow between the congregation and the world, and the necessity of deeper engagement for transformation to occur. However, there were differences in how respondents from each tradition engaged the two sides:

1. God calls people to come to the congregation SO THAT they are transformed. With new eyes, they go out into the world to engage as they deem contextually appropriate (through acts of mercy, advocacy/justice or witness/evangelism). (This was most often seen in Orthodox, Nazarene, PCUSA, and UMC congregations.)
2. People engage deeply with their tradition and with one another SO THAT they find meaning in their lives. This sense of meaning sends people into the world, often with a focus on justice (Jewish congregations).
3. God calls people to come to the congregation and get transformed SO THAT they transform the world by sharing God’s love through mercy, justice and evangelism. (This was most often seen in Quaker, UCC, ELCA, and Baha’i congregations.)
4. The congregation (often via missionaries) calls people from the world SO THAT they can come to know God within their congregation’s community (LDS congregations). This perspective is distinct from #1 because, while other faith communities bring God to the world, LDS brings the world to God.

Here these themes are applied broadly to each tradition. Yet the relationship between what happens inside and outside the congregation is not always so straightforward. The following example points to deeper interactions within a faith community.

*“I have a steady worship core that never misses, that is engaged in what is going on in worship and Bible study, that kind of thing. I have a larger part that isn’t quite so steady in that aspect of it but are really committed to outreach in the community (outside the congregation). There is some overlap there but I can divide them into almost two separate groups in a way.” (ELCA)*



Later in the interview, this pastor described how the spiritually deep but less outwardly engaged people feed a larger sense of spiritual vitality which is taken up by others in the congregation. Those are the folks who live out their faith through action in the neighborhood. In this way, the congregation as a whole is vital both within and outside the building, but individual members engage different aspects of that vitality differently. The pastor described how he intentionally works to keep the two sides bound together so that the congregation moves beyond the experience of individual members and focuses on the larger experience of the faith community.

## What helps a congregation's vitality?

For a congregation to shift from minimal to deep engagement, several things must be present. Leadership, relationships and practices were described as key to creating and sustaining a vital congregation.

**Relationships:** Building strong, respectful and loving relationships among members, and between leaders and members was key in every faith community. Most faith traditions also emphasized the importance of building relationships between the congregation and community around them. While some traditions emphasized mercy ministries (giving from the congregation to society), others focused on building more mutual relationships where both congregation and society gave and received from one another and worked toward common purposes. How respondents viewed their relationship with the world had to do with how they understood God's vision for the world and expectations of them.

**Leadership:** The role of leaders varies considerably across faith traditions. Quakers have no designated leader, but do designate a clerk who records and reflects back meeting notes with the group. Other traditions use trained lay leadership to teach and lead spiritual practices and discussions (e.g. Latter-day Saints and Baha'i), whereas some traditions ordain professional leaders (e.g. protestant denominations, Jewish and Orthodox). Traditions with professional leaders more often looked to those leaders as the agents that would engage their congregation to create or sustain vitality. Those without professional leaders were more likely to look toward the collective congregation "we" as people with agency.

While the role and qualifications of leaders varies, similar traits were named across traditions. Leaders should be capable of sharing vision and building consensus or motivation and be willing to experiment and try new things (within the restrictions of the tradition). They should have an attitude of servanthood and humility, be trustworthy, patient, loving, good listeners, and work well with others. They should be committed to developing their own spiritual lives and experience a strong sense of God's call to them to be leaders. Leaders were expected to model spiritual practices and appropriate behavior.

**Practices:** Each tradition had a variety of practices designed to cultivate faith and action among members. Some traditions emphasized spiritual practices to form deeper faith which would hopefully turn into action. Other traditions focused on taking action in the neighborhood or

world outside the congregation. Most faith traditions did a combination of the two. Participating in worship, scripture studies, small groups, personal prayer, etc. were common ways for people to go deeper into their faith. Volunteering in the community (with or without other congregants), speaking out for justice and sharing faith with others were some of the ways people lived out their faith in the world. It was understood that participating in either or both of these activities not only expressed faith, but also deepened it.

## What hurts a congregation's vitality?

Respondents named many things that had negative impacts on a congregation's vitality. These are things that keep most participants at the minimal level of engagement.

In general, leaders agreed that if a congregation wasn't focused on God's mission/purpose then they would not be vital. Many causes for this lack of focus were described. The most common challenges had to do with people's inward focus (on themselves) which was manifested in many ways.

Some talked about unhealthy dynamics and conflicts among congregants. Others described members as focusing on the wrong things (e.g. money, membership, obsession with the past, stuck in old patterns, worldly concerns, personal prejudices including racism, etc.), and several mentioned the difficulty congregations can have with change.

*"Change management is always a barrier for any leader in any organization. If we don't have a personal relationship with God, then it's not going to motivate us to help other people to be vital, not only in the community, but within the congregation." (UMC – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 2)*

Some leaders talked about the fact that congregations are less of a priority today compared to other things happening in society. They noted the many distractions of society luring people away and sometimes described people's busy lives which are focused on work and family rather than their congregation.

*"Our city is on the forefront of non-committal behavior. It's hugely diverse and multicultural, so people don't feel connected to ethnic origins like they do in other parts of the country." (Jewish– Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 5-3.5 depending on the area)*

*"People don't seem to have the time to devote to God. It almost seems like God and all of the ministry gets thrown on the back burner... There's worldly fleshly issues, Satan interfering with people and preventing them from coming to church. Busy-ness with sports and their kids." (UMC – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 3.5)*

*"Involvement in work is a top priority for many members of the community. They're busy with young children. They should be incorporating the children instead of separating them out. This is the most critical time." (Baha'i – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 2.5)*

On a similar note, some blamed people for not taking their faith more seriously.

*"The biggest obstacle is the narrow definition that you are living out your life as a Christian if you come to*

*church Sunday morning and attend worship, sing some hymns, say some prayers and put some money in the offering and listen to the sermon and go home... It is not in keeping with the teaching of Jesus who spoke about loving God and your neighbor as yourself.” (PCUSA – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 3.5)*

Leadership was also named as something that can hurt vitality. Respondents from many traditions (including Baha’i, ELCA, UCC, Jewish, Orthodox) talked about how the personal and relational characteristics of the professional leader and other professional staff can negatively impact vitality. Sometimes leaders are overworked and burned out. Other times they have dysfunctional relationships within staff and with the rest of the congregation. Often, it is the relationship between the professional leader(s) and the volunteer lay leadership that cause problems which lead to lowered vitality.

*“I am on the council and we’ve been dealing with a difficult situation the last few months which seems to be tied to an increasing lack of vitality.” To summarize, a new pastor came 5 years ago because he understood the congregation wanted to change, but found resistance among some key leaders who weren’t really interested in change. When the pastor made changes anyway, it created conflict. (ELCA – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 3)*

Others point to a lack of people to lead.

*“One of our challenges we had a couple years ago, we had one member step forward and create kind of a volunteer base of matching people with needs within the congregation or broader community. So somebody had a gift and there is a need, so this person was helping us to put two and two together and unfortunately due to family issues this person had to back away from that leadership role, and we have yet to fill it with someone else.” (PCUSA – Self vitality rating on scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high) = 3.5)*

## Why vitality changed

When congregations were asked how long they had been at the current level of vitality, some indicated that it had changed. For many, the change was decades in the making, while for some it had shifted only a few years ago.

The previous section describes reasons respondents named for negative changes. The most important factors for improving vitality were: an increased clarity in the congregation’s mission/purpose and an increased level of authentic engagement in that mission. Those objectives were generally achieved by leadership intentionally building up the relationships among members, while simultaneously teaching faith practices to members.

In some cases, barriers needed to be removed. Several respondents talked about helping members learn to accept change as part of what it means to be a vital congregation. Others described shifting focus and energy from matters inside the congregation to those outside the congregation. Still others talked about the need to remove personal relational barriers between people. For example, one respondent noted the positive impact that occurred when one of the more difficult members moved away. But, most respondents talked about building up relationships among congregants. The following quote from an Orthodox pastor illustrates how building more authentic relationships among members breaks down barriers.

*“The biggest help in transition from less vital to more is disarming the power structure... Isolated individualism tends to have everybody guarding their own camp. And then they try to secure a power position and it becomes combative. At the very best, the situation becomes distant. So, when those positions of power are removed and you have people taking up a humble position, accepting humility instead of prideful arrogance and power, then they can actually be joined to each other because they’ve removed the walls they artificially put up to try to hold themselves up on a pedestal of power. When those go away they can actually love each other... The free flow of authentic thought comes out without fear... (Having a drink together) is a means to sit and talk. It could be a cup of coffee or a donut. But to spend 2-3 hours in actual fellowship.... When you can look into the eyes of another person and can feel their touch, now you can be joined and love another person.” (Orthodox)*

This quote speaks to the importance of building community via authentic human connections. That was a common theme among respondents. Deeper interpersonal relationships were often described as an essential first component of transformation. Without this, deeper engagement in mission is not possible. But, transformation went beyond building individual relationships. It also included strengthening spirituality and deepening engagement in the world.

Essentially, congregations moved from low to high vitality by intentionally building paths for members to shift from the center grey ring to the outer colored rings represented in Figure 1. Congregations did not appear to expect every member to make the shift, but they did suggest that a critical mass of members (especially leaders) moving to the outer ring was necessary for the congregation to become vital.

Several respondents also described an increase in the physical size of the worshipping population overall. Losing members was often equated with a loss in vitality, while gaining members was associated with increased vitality. The gain or loss did not define vitality. Rather, it was experienced as a shift in energy. In some cases (especially LDS), the gain/loss was associated with demographic changes to the neighborhood or city rather than changes within the worshipping community itself. In other cases, the gain or loss in membership was assumed to be the result of changes in the level of spiritual vitality. It was these shifts that positively impacted their sustainability.

## Vitality & Sustainability

When asked to describe what sustainability is, responses pointed to a congregation’s ability to continue being vital (fulfilling its mission) into the future and across generations.

When asked about the relationship between vitality and sustainability, all traditions had some respondents who agreed that the two concepts are related. Many said they are synonymous. If vitality goes down, so does sustainability.

*“I think they’re Siamese twins.” (Nazarene)*

*“They go hand in hand.” (Baha’i)*

*“No way a congregation can be sustained without the love of our Father.” (Latter-Day Saints)*

*“Congregations that are spiritual, and are meeting the needs of their members and helping them find meaning in their lives, they’ll be sustainable. There will be no congregation of tomorrow if we don’t have God today.” (Jewish)*



Yet, with the exception of the Latter-Day Saints respondents, every tradition also had people who acknowledged that some congregations can be sustainable without being vital, especially if they have built up financial security. This kind of sustainability was not perceived as a good thing by any respondents.

*“You can sustain yourself for long periods of time after the vitality has left.” (Quaker)*

*“...the question is, is it that really a church anymore?” (Orthodox)*

Respondents from the ELCA, PCUSA, UCC and Quaker also noted that some congregations are vital but not sustainable.

*“Vital and not sustainable, yeah, in the short run.” (Quaker)*

*“...(they) have little resources but have a ton of energy.” (UCC)*

Short term sustainability was not always seen as a bad thing. Some respondents acknowledged that God can use short lived congregations too. Many respondents pointed to the need for continuous reform. Without it, things become routine and focus on the core mission is lost. The idea of continuous reform was an especially common theme among Jewish congregations.

*“If it’s not broken, break it! The difference between being in the groove and being in a rut is simply perception.” (Jewish)*

It may be surprising that no faith community defined sustainability as having a particular size of congregation, the presence of particular programming, a full-time leader, or owning a facility. While these things were sometimes mentioned as resources that could be used to improve vitality, they were not themselves signs of vitality or sustainability.

## Conclusions

One of the most interesting findings of this study was the degree of agreement, across faith traditions, about what it means to be spiritually vital and what things contribute to promote or damage that vitality. **Spiritually vital congregations are those that come together for a divine common purpose in ways that are transformative to the people within them and to their communities.**

When congregational leaders intentionally built supportive communities, and engaged their people in faith practices (within and outside the congregation), they strengthened vitality. When leaders or the congregation at large focused on anything else, vitality diminished.

Even though vitality was often discussed as something that began with the transformation of the individual, no one talked about the percentage of transformed individuals needed for a congregation to be considered vital. Rather, a congregation’s vitality was described in ways that assumed a critical mass of individual transformation lead to the transformation of the larger congregation.

It was also interesting to note that, even though respondents rated their congregations' vitality along a continuum from 1-5, they typically used language that described vitality in black or white terms; congregations were either vital or not. Respondents who gave scores below 4 tended to see themselves as lacking something essential to vitality, even if they thought they were moving toward it. That something appeared to be a lack of sufficient transformative engagement among participants.

When the 2015 FACT survey results are considered, the percentage of congregations reporting high spiritual vitality (rating of 5) was only 26.6%, down from 42.8% in 2005. As the model presented in Figure 1 predicts, the lower vitality was mirrored in the FACT survey by a decrease in congregational emphasis on prayer groups, spiritual retreats and scripture or theology studies. There were also fewer congregations working on social justice. At the same time, there was decreased willingness to change and less innovation in worship. These are signs that many congregations are pulling back toward the grey ring in Figure 1.

Yet in this study, spiritual vitality was often described as a journey. Many respondents talked about the ups and downs of their congregation's vitality over time. High or low vitality was not a trait to be graded so much as a description of the current relationship between the congregation and God, one another, and their neighbors. Reflections from leaders demonstrate that these relationships change. It seems that in this time of tremendous social change, many congregations are grappling to discern what it now means to hear God's call and live authentically in an increasingly secular society. It may be that congregations, like society at large, are entering a time of transition from one era to the next. This study suggests that diminished vitality is not the beginning of the end. Rather, there are a number of ways that leaders can help congregations move into the new world by helping their congregations focus on God's current call to more deeply engage with God, their neighbor, and one another so that they are transformed for the sake of today's world.

*"You are always in the process of becoming not in the state of being." (Orthodox)*

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<sup>1</sup> David Roozen, "American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving," in Faith Communities Today (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2015).

## The Faith Communities Today Surveys

The Faith Communities Today national surveys of American congregations are aggregations of several national sample surveys conducted by denominations and faith traditions that are members of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP—see below). These are supplemented by a random, national “church list” sample of non-participating member congregations and non-member congregations. The aggregated national sample includes all faith groups that have congregations in the United States. The decadal 2000 and 2010 surveys include surveys from all CCSP partners, plus the non-partners sample, in each case totaling over 10,000 responding congregations. The 2005, 2008 and 2015 surveys had fewer partner-contributed surveys, and therefore smaller numbers of responding congregations—884 responding congregations in 2005, 2,527 congregations in 2008 and 4,436 in 2015.

The surveys in any given year are combined in such a way that, through the use of statistical weights, each partner denomination and faith group, and each non-partner cluster of congregations are represented in the data set proportionate to their representation in the total population of congregations in the United States. The 2005 through 2015 survey data is further weighted to best estimates of national parameters for denominational family and census region, thereby improving the data’s representation as true national samples of American congregations.

CCSP partners develop a common questionnaire for each survey, ranging from 150 to 200 questions. The questionnaires contain about an equal mix of continuing trend questions and items unique to a particular survey. The surveys are typically conducted by mail and/or online, although in a few instances are supplemented by telephone interviews. Questionnaires are completed by a key informant reporting on his or her congregation. The key informant is typically a congregation’s senior clergy leader. Copies of all FACT questionnaires are available at: [faithcommunitiestoday.org](http://faithcommunitiestoday.org)

### FACT2015 included surveys from:

- Canonical Orthodox Bishops in North and Central America
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod
- Megachurches
- National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is of the U.S.
- Presbyterian Church, USA
- Random “Church Lists” Supplement provided by FaithStreet
- Seventh-day Adventist
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church

The aggregated dataset is double-weighted, as noted above. First, it is weighted proportionate to the national representation of contributing denominations/groups. It is then weighted to represent denominational family by census region parameters attained from a combination of the National Congregations surveys and the 2010 U.S. Religious Census.

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