



Background

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IN SEARCH OF VITALITY

Defining church vitality continues to be an elusive challenge, especially if we try to do so purely by the statistics. Obviously, a vital congregation will have common statistics reflect that over time, but these measures still have their limitations. On the other hand, the subjectivity of determining vitality without some quantitative grounding is very difficult. The Call to Action study by Towers Watson was an example of the former. A glimpse of the latter has been captured by the Faith Communities Today (FACT) study. This report will see how well they intersect.

FACT (<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/>) represents a massive series of congregational surveys carried out every few years by a host of denominations and independent organizations and is facilitated by Hartford Seminary. United Methodists have been participants in this for well over a decade, through the excellent work of the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA). An updated FACT study was done in 2010, which covers a vast spectrum of data of interest in the life of congregations. Of unique focus for this report was a simple question as part of a series of responses asking to what extent the respondent agreed or disagreed. In particular, “Our congregation is spiritually alive and vital.” One of five boxes could be checked, representing the range between “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.”

Before discussing the results, several qualifications should be noted. For one, there was a single respondent for each church, in most cases, the pastor. There may be some obvious bias in the response. Also, as is typical in surveys, not all churches responded. It is possible that those who felt more positive about their ministries were more willing to fill out a survey. Another observation is that

this survey was quite comprehensive and this was only one question. The intent of the survey was not to tease out this one item, so it did not have other related questions for the purpose of adding statistical validity. The results of this single line of the survey were eye-catching. Twenty-three percent of the respondents strongly agreed that they were vital. An astonishing 53% said they agreed that they were vital. Only 15% were unsure. A mere 7% disagreed, and a whopping 1% strongly disagreed. I think most United Methodists who pay attention to this subject and are familiar with the UM church landscape would instantly conclude that these figures might not represent reality.

Towers Watson took a very different approach. They used the denominational statistics and developed clever formulas to remove the factor of church size. They looked at the numbers across several dimensions, including growth in attendance, level of involvement of congregants, and engagement beyond themselves. They then developed formulas to reach an index number in each of these areas. All UM churches were thus ranked. In each of the categories, the top one-fourth was deemed to be highly vital in that area. Likewise, the bottom quarter was deemed to be of lowest vitality, and the remaining half was of medium vitality. Finally, those churches that received a “high” in two of the three categories, along with a “medium” in the third, were classified as highly vital. When GCFA ran this system against the 2010 UMC (US) church data, 4,961 (15%) of the 32,228 churches were in this highest category.

In comparing the two approaches, some contrasts are apparent. One is the difference in the often-casual stroke of a pen of one being interviewed,

as opposed to the statistical rigor of the data-based approach. The survey was a sample of the whole and was comprised of self-selected responders versus the entire population of UMC (US) churches making up the other study. The results are also quite different. Of the FACT survey respondents who strongly agreed that their churches were vital (23% of respondents), only 32% were in the Towers Watson highly vital group. Of the FACT respondents who agreed, though not strongly, that their churches were vital (53% of respondents), 17% were deemed highly vital by Towers Watson. Things get a bit weird in the next category of survey responders, who neither agreed nor disagreed that their churches were vital (15%). One would not expect any Towers Watson highly vital churches to be present, yet there were 14% of this group qualifying under the statistical determination. Of the paltry 7% of surveyed churches that disagreed that they were vital, eight of them (12% of this group) were deemed highly vital by Towers Watson. At least there were no surprises with the handful of survey respondents who strongly disagreed that they were vital, as there were none of them on the statistically highly vital list.

On the flip side of this comparison are those who strongly agreed on the survey that they were vital, but who got dismal-to-low statistical scores. Of this group, 2% received the lowest possible statistical score, rating low in all three Towers Watson categories. Nearly 10% had the lowest score in two categories. Nearly 40% of those strongly agreeing to vitality had at least one lowest score on the statistical rating. In all fairness, many of the churches not deemed highly vital by Towers Watson standards were nearly so. Whereas highly vital required two “high” ratings and a “medium,” 20% of those surveyed who strongly agreed they were vital received one “high” and two “mediums,” suggesting a statistical vitality rating above average.

These comparisons are just the beginning of what can be done in this sort of analysis. At the least, we can get a sense of some of the issues involved in assessing vitality. It is subjective on the one hand, and requires

some type of more-qualitative approach on the other. The subjective approach will of course require a great deal more reflection and definition than one survey question amidst pages of them. On the other hand, the statistics need context. There are stories behind numbers. For example, churches that were not vital but have been transforming will experience the new vitality before the numbers come along.

Another critical observation is captured in a qualifier in the survey question that asked degrees of agreement with the statement that the congregation was “spiritually” vital. A statistical definition of vitality can inadvertently leave the spiritual component out. Organizations with no spirit can still be managed effectively and have capable members who can generate good statistics. Spiritual vitality is by nature more nebulous than statistics can capture. At the least, a spiritually vital church should be fulfilling the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-30) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). The latter forms the basis for the mission of all United Methodist churches, i.e., to make disciples of Jesus Christ (for the transformation of the world). Whatever our perceived or measured vitality may be, there is always room to be more vital—something to strive for in all congregations.

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