



CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE: INTERSECTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR MINISTRY

A Research Report of the United Church of Christ
Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD)

God is still speaking,
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



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Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD)**

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**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



Dear Friends,

Ministerial leadership matters, and it profoundly impacts the vitality of congregations.

In every setting of our denominational life together, talk of ministerial excellence and congregational vitality abounds. In the United Church of Christ, the vision plan of the national setting includes the goals of having “a wealth of prepared, excellent leaders that reflect the diversity of God’s beloved community” and “welcoming, reachable congregations...that are accessible to all.”¹

But what kind of leadership matters? Too often, our training and our traditions have fooled us into believing that being an authorized minister automatically provides us with all of the qualities, skills, and abilities necessary for the work of leading congregations and denominations. And while seminaries and various theological education programs may have prepared us ministers to think theologically, interpret scripture, preach, provide pastoral care, and lead worship and ritual, systems of formal training are just now beginning to move outside of these realms into consciously preparing clergy with the skills necessary to lead any organization, including congregations.

Congregational vitality is another hot topic of conversation these days. Many congregations are searching for the elixir that will slow decline and breathe new life into their churches. For some, this means more people in the pews and more dollars in the offering plate. But vitality is more than that and, I would argue, actually has very little to do with nurturing and sustaining vital, healthy congregations.

The intersections between these two areas are dynamic, and learning more about the relationship between congregational vitality and ministerial excellence has the potential to transform the ways in which we lead the church and be the church. To that end, the UCC Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD) engaged in a preliminary research study to explore the nuances of this complex, yet rich relationship and to provide a foundation from which additional studies might be undertaken.

While more research is needed in order to further validate our findings, the conclusions within this report clearly emphasize the importance of pastoral training and continuing education in general leadership areas and the need for solid tools with which to assess a congregation’s vitality. Decades ago, pastors may have been able to effectively lead their congregations solely with the ministry-related education and training they received; that is no longer a viable option for birthing the kind of life-altering, missional, adaptive ministry we long for in the 21st century. How will we respond to these findings as congregations, pastors, middle judicatory leaders, denominational executives, and seminary leaders? Indeed, ministerial leadership matters a great deal; but the nature of what is required for nurturing and sustaining vital, vibrant congregations has shifted.

My hope is that this report will be a catalyst for renewed conversation, action, and additional research around ministerial excellence and its impact on congregations now and in the future. May this report be a blessing for all who read its contents.

Paz,



Rev. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, Ph.D.
Director, CARD

With the rapid changes that U.S. congregations are experiencing at this point in our religious history, sustained excellence in the pastorate is needed now more than ever.

¹“The Vision Plan of the National Setting of the UCC,” www.ucc.org/vision_plan.



CONTENTS

Introduction and Overview	7
Congregational Vitality: A Closer Look	9
Ministerial Excellence: A Closer Look	13
Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ	17
The Relationship between Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence	19
Methods	
Measures	21
Participants	21
Analysis	25
Results	
Descriptive Statistics	27
Relationships between Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence Measures	30
Validity of Survey Measures	33
Toward the Development of a Congregational Vitality Index	35
Congregational Vitality and Numerical Growth	36
Conclusions	37
Discussion and Implications of the Research	
Commentary A: Rev. Dr. William McKinney	39
Commentary B: Rev. Holly MillerShank	41
Commentary C: Rev. Cameron Trimble	42
Appendix: Congregational Vitality and Clergy Excellence (UCC) Survey	43



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The United Church of Christ is comprised of over 5,000 congregations and nearly one million members. For these congregations and members, there are roughly 5,800 leaders serving within the parish setting. These ministerial leaders are authorized as holding ordained, licensed, dual, or ordained ministerial partner standing. In addition, members in discernment (those in the authorization process) and individuals with no UCC standing who are laypersons or who may be ordained by other traditions also serve as leaders of UCC congregations. Regardless of authorization, their leadership abilities and actions have a profound impact on the vitality of congregations.

Researchers, scholars, and ministers alike have investigated the concepts of congregational vitality and ministerial excellence for the past several decades, seeking meaningful ways to define and measure the qualities and characteristics of both of these important ministry frameworks. This particular research project conducted by the United Church of Christ attempts to add to this on-going conversation, while at the same time contribute new research by exploring the relationship between a church's vitality and the skills and qualities of its lead pastor.

Let it be stated at the outset that this research is incomplete in nature; its purpose is to provide a *preliminary first response* to the main question: **What is the relationship between congregational vitality and ministerial excellence in UCC congregations?**

In the spring of 2014, the UCC Center for Analytics, Research and Data—through the project coordination efforts of CARD Research Intern Ashleigh Hope—created and distributed an online large-scale survey through the UCC's weekly e-newsletter. This survey was designed for church congregants and sought to assess their perceptions of vitality within their congregations, as well as the presence of ministerial traits and abilities among their lead pastors. Results were analyzed in order to obtain a baseline understanding of the relationship between certain vitality factors and ministerial competencies and traits *as perceived and experienced by local church congregants*.

In addition, data from the UCC Data Hub (the denominational database of congregational and ministerial information) was utilized to analyze attendance and membership information from the congregations whose members participated in the large-scale survey, in order to determine whether the congregations rated as most vital by congregants demonstrated concrete numerical patterns of growth.

The hope in conducting this research is to begin a renewed conversation on ministerial excellence as it relates to congregational vitality, knowing that further investigation is necessary in order to definitively confirm and shape best practices for ministerial formation and continuing education, as well as factors that measure congregational vitality. However, the results should not be ignored as they point to phenomena that impact our understandings of what it means to be a vital congregation and to create and encourage additional leadership training and skill building for authorized ministers.



CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY: A CLOSER LOOK

What exactly is congregational vitality? To answer this question, it is first important to investigate the origins of this term. Since the 1960's, mainline Protestant congregations in the United States have been experiencing steady numerical decline; and for as many years, researchers and denominational leaders focused their efforts on understanding the contextual factors contributing to this decline, in hopes of determining the factors needed to (re)create numerical growth within congregations.

While these numerical losses were of great concern to local pastors as well, ministers have long experienced the phenomenon of "growth" in ways other than counting the number of individuals in a pew on any given Sunday. In 1993, pastor and researcher Loren Mead published *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow*, and this work became a major contributing factor in focusing the attention of researchers and pastors on alternative ways of describing growth in congregational settings.²

Mead proposed that, in addition to numerical growth, churches also experienced the following:

- **Maturational growth:** Growth in the faith of each individual and in the ability to nurture and be nurtured; today, more commonly understood today as faith / spiritual formation or spiritual growth / vitality
- **Organic growth:** Growth of the congregation as a functioning community, able to maintain itself as a living organism / institution that can engage other institutions of society
- **Incarnational growth:** Growth in the ability to take the meanings and values of faith and actualize them in the wider community and world beyond the congregation

In essence, this broadened definition of growth became the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of pastors and their churches, and also opened the door to what is understood today as *congregational vitality*. In practical terms, congregations experiencing numerical stasis or decline could experience growth / vitality in other ways. Similarly, it would also stand to reason that not all congregations experiencing numerical growth were vital, which therefore fostered a disassociation between the vitality of a congregation and its numerical membership within the collective consciousness of church and denominational leaders.

In the 1990's, other researchers and leaders were also writing about vitality in similar ways to Mead, particularly emphasizing the concept of congregations (and all other organizations) as living organisms and systems, thereby linking vitality with church health. Peter Steinke argued that what matters to any living organism is the health of its body, with all parts functioning as a whole to maintain balance.³ Additionally, Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers articulated

²Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993).

³Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996).

that healthy organizations are those which mirror the processes and behaviors of living organisms in the natural world.⁴

To this day, the movements between growth, health, and vitality continue to be fluid since they clearly possess overlapping elements. Because of this complexity, there are many different definitions for congregational vitality, though they all share similar underpinnings. Diana Butler-Bass articulated vitality as simply “transcending numeric growth.”⁵ Presbyterian Church (USA) researchers Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce described vitality as “universals related to purpose and mission” of congregations.⁶ Most recently, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America researcher Linda Bobbitt defined congregational vitality as “connection to God, each other, and the world.”⁷ It appears that congregational vitality encompasses all of these definitions; but it is interesting to note that Bobbitt’s definition—gained through several years of research on ELCA congregations—possesses a promising similarity to Mead’s original growth typology. (See Table 1)

TABLE 1: GROWTH/VITALITY DEFINITIONS OVER TIME

MEAD (1993) – GROWTH TYPOLOGY	BOBBITT (2014) – CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY
MATURATIONAL GROWTH	CONNECTION TO GOD
ORGANIC GROWTH	CONNECTION TO EACH OTHER
INCARNATIONAL GROWTH	CONNECTION TO THE WORLD

Because of congregational vitality’s continuing relationship to numerical growth, however, numbers cannot be discounted completely. According to David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, all studies to date on this subject indicate that “membership growth is significantly related to other possible indicators of vitality.” In the same manner, this particular research study examines both factors for vitality and numerical membership changes over time; for when all is said and done, membership numbers provide a level of concreteness and validity that vitality factors alone cannot offer.

One helpful way to distinguish congregational vitality and numerical growth is to envision factors that affect a church’s vitality as *pertaining to the qualities within the congregation itself (congregational factors)*. In essence, the subject of congregational vitality is a largely internally focused enterprise that is not greatly concerned with external forces or factors or, at this point, affected by them in a conscious way. On the other hand, factors that affect the numerical growth of a congregation can be *both congregational and contextual*. That is, even if a congregation is rated highly on vitality factors, it may still experience numerical decline due to external factors beyond the control of the church such as neighborhood population changes and larger societal shifts in belief or practice. Because of this, numerical growth must be concerned with examining both congregational and contextual factors. (See Figure 1)

In examining factors associated with congregational vitality, there are some patterns that have begun to form within the current body of research. (See Table 2 for a comprehensive review of the research.) As summarized by Linda Bobbitt, common characteristics of vital congregations include:

- Spirituality and an ability to help people grow in faith
- Clear sense of mission and excitement about the future

⁴Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996).

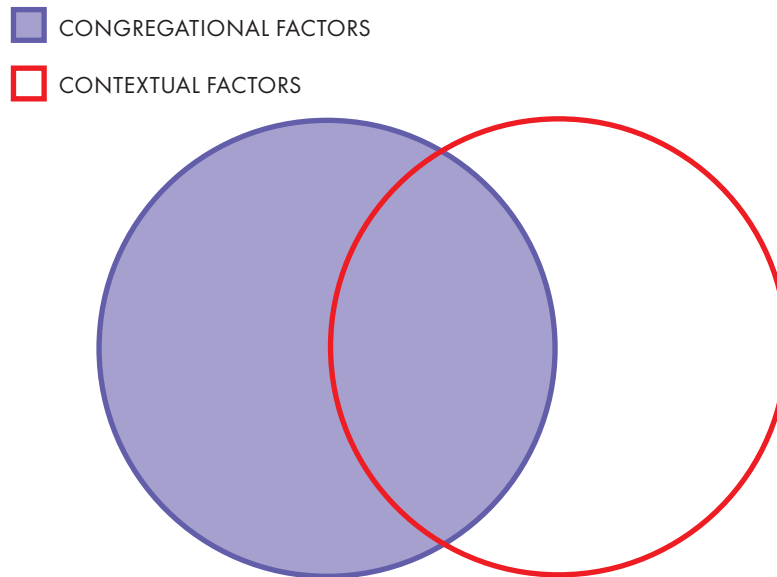
⁵Diana Butler-Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Press, 2006).

⁶Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁷Linda Bobbitt, “Measuring Congregational Vitality: Phase 2 Development of an Outcome Measurement Tool,” *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 3 (September 2014): 467-84.

- Inspirational worship
- Practice of hospitality
- Sense of community and belonging among members
- Ability to share faith in word and deed beyond the congregation

FIGURE 1: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND NUMERICAL GROWTH FACTORS



Some individuals and organizations that have promoted factors associated with congregational vitality offered these items as *prerequisites* to membership growth—namely, that if these factors were present within a congregation or if a congregation worked to possess all of these factors, then it would experience numerical growth. Indeed, research has shown that a more vital church is likely to be a growing church, so there is a sizable degree of correlation between these areas despite efforts to distinguish numerical growth factors from vitality factors. What is unknown, however, is whether certain factors have a *causal* effect on numerical growth since we can only note that there is a relationship between the presence / absence of vitality factors and increased / decreased membership numbers. In other words, it is not certain whether the presence of vitality factors actually causes numerical growth, or whether numerical growth actually creates certain vitality factors within churches.

Regardless of these challenges, it is important to conduct research in the area of congregational vitality, particularly in the United Church of Christ, because this work assists us in gaining insights into the current state of UCC congregations. This research project will determine answers to questions like: Which particular vitality factors are most present within our congregations? What is the relationship between these vitality factors and changes in membership over time? And ultimately, what role does ministerial excellence play in congregational vitality?

TABLE 2: FACTORS/CHARACTERISTICS OF CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

Mead (1993)	Connection to God: Faith formation and spiritual growth Sense of mission	Connection to each other: Healthy Christian community	Connection to the world: Social outreach and evangelism Welcoming and accepting newcomers	Incarnational growth
Woolver and Bruce (2004)—U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS)	Growing spiritually Meaningful worship Looking to the future	Participating in the congregation Having a sense of belonging Caring for children and youth Empowering leadership	Focusing on the community Sharing faith Welcoming new people	
National Church Life Survey (NCLS)	Alive and growing faith Vital and nurturing worship Clear and owned vision	Strong and growing sense of belonging Inspiring and empowering leadership Imaginative and flexibly innovation	Practical and diverse service Willing and effective faith sharing Intentional and welcoming inclusion	
Hadaway (2010)—Faith Communities Today (FACT) Survey	Spiritually and vitally alive Innovative, reverent worship	Active focus on families Absence of serious conflict	Working for social justice/Moral beacon in the community Engaging in evangelism or recruitment	
Schnase (2007)—Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations	Intentional faith development Passionate worship	Extravagant generosity	Risk-taking mission and service Radical hospitality	
Steinke (2006)—Seven Health Promoters	Sense of purpose/Clarity	Mature interaction Healing capacities/ Mood and tone Appraise and manage conflict	Focus on resources	
Schwarz (1998)—Natural Church Development (NCD)	Passionate spirituality Inspiring worship services	Gift-based ministry Holistic small groups Empowering leadership Loving relationships	Need-oriented evangelism	
Butler-Bass (2006)—Ten Signposts of Renewal	Discernment/Reflection/ Contemplation Worship/Beauty	Healing Diversity	Justice Testimony Hospitality	



MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE: A CLOSER LOOK

The subject of ministerial excellence is a highly relevant topic not only to congregations seeking new leadership, but also to settled church pastors and leaders, denominational leaders, seminaries and theological schools, and other ministerial leadership and training programs. Throughout the history of the United Church of Christ, as well as its predecessor traditions, commitment to a well-trained, learned clergy has been of great importance. Today, this hallmark is emphasized through the denomination's Vision Plan with the specific goal that the UCC strive to retain "a wealth of prepared, excellent leaders that reflect the diversity of God's beloved community."

That being said, the state of ministry—and therefore, of ministerial education and training—is experiencing a number of significant shifts. Beginning in the 1950's and 1960's with the rediscovery and renewed emphasis on Reformation doctrine regarding "the priesthood of all believers," a greater sense of mutuality between trained clergy and laypersons has occurred; but this has also blurred distinctions between these two groups and questioned the unique role and function of the pastor. This major shift—combined with other shifts such as the increase in the ordination of women, the shortage of ordained, seminary-trained clergy (real and perceived), the increase in second- and third-career individuals' entrance into ministry, and society's overall changes in the perception of ministers and religious institutions—makes the need for research around what excellence in ministry is and should be in the future a critical topic for exploration.



What exactly is ministerial excellence? Similar to the subject of congregational vitality, definitions and factors vary widely, though there are some commonalities in the research. Jackson Carroll views ministerial excellence through two different, yet overlapping perspectives:⁸

- **Normative perspective:** A way of describing excellence by which all ministry practice is guided and judged; gained through a review of the best that has been thought or known throughout time
- **Contextual perspective:** Pastoral excellence in relationship to the congregation and the social world as they interact with the normative perspective

The normative perspective of excellence includes the general attributes, knowledge, skills, and abilities that a minister should possess in order to be effective in one's position. This perspective seeks to provide a standard set of marks by which a minister's abilities and practice of ministry can be measured.

The contextual perspective of excellence, on the other hand, takes into consideration the current size, location, and life

⁸Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

cycle stage of a pastor's particular setting, the characteristics and skills of the pastor in relationship to the congregation, and the relevant social characteristics of the broader community and world in which the church is situated. This view seeks to determine what it means for a particular pastor to be faithful in *this* congregation and in *this* time and place.

Of course, these perspectives are not exclusive of one another and work hand-in-hand to create a holistic view of ministerial excellence. Most other definitions and descriptors related to excellence fall into one or both of these general categories.

More specifically, Carroll outlined three distinctive, yet interrelated, ministry models that fit into both the normative and contextual perspectives in order to more clearly define the role of the pastor:

- **Pastoral leadership as an office:** A formal position gained by ordination through a congregation or denomination to perform specified duties such as traditional rites (baptisms, communion, marriages, etc.), preaching and teaching, and overseeing the life of the congregation
- **Ordained ministry as a profession:** An educated or learned clergy, competent largely by virtue of their professional education; has gained the proper knowledge and training in order to carry out the office of pastor
- **Ministry as a calling:** The presence of spiritual depth and character arising from the inner experience of one's invitation by God to take up the work of ministry

While there are some differences between what is necessary for ministerial excellence and what is important for general leadership excellence (particularly in attributes associated with ministry as calling), there are great similarities and insights that can be gained from the research on organizational leadership. For example, Gopal Kanji and Patricia Moura e Sá performed an extensive review of the literature on leadership and determined that there were three main approaches to leadership excellence:⁹

- **Traits approach:** There are innate characteristics that make an individual a leader and that distinguish one from non-leaders; can include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (and also spirituality and moral character in the case of pastors)
- **Behavioral approach:** Effective leadership is related to how one behaves and is based on tasks of leadership composed primarily of position- and relationship-related processes; encompasses what leaders do and how they act
- **Situational/contingency approach:** Different situations demand different kinds of leadership, requiring adaptability to context through leader/member relations, task structure and management of leader's positional power dynamics

While a number of specific types of leadership models have developed over time and since the publication of this research, most models are comprised of some version of the three approaches above, which in many ways are quite similar to Carroll's ministry models. (See Table 3) In essence, leadership excellence—and ministerial excellence—call for a balance between all three main approaches.

With these perspectives as a foundation, it is important to now give attention to the specific attributes, knowledge, and tasks highlighted in leading research and by the United Church of Christ. In the late 1970's, an extensive study of ministry was undertaken in the United States funded by the Lilly Endowment and the Association of Theological Schools.¹⁰

⁹Gopal K. Kanji and Patricia Moura e Sá, "Measuring Leadership Excellence," *Total Quality Management* 12, no. 6 (2001): 701-718.

¹⁰David S. Schuller, Merton P. Strommen, and Milo L. Brekke, eds., *Ministry in America: A Report and Analysis, Based on an In-Depth Survey of 47 Denominations in the United States and Canada, with Interpretation by 18 Experts* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

With the additional help of the Search Institute, thousands of laypersons, clergy, church leaders, seminary professors, and students in 47 denominations were surveyed in order understand what qualities churches expected of a minister in the beginning stages of ministry. The results of the study pointed to the significance of 11 factors in five ministry areas for excellent ministry. (See Table 4)

TABLE 3: MINISTRY VS. GENERAL LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE

CARROLL (2006) – MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE	KANJI & MOURA E SÁ (2001) – LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE
PASTORAL LEADERSHIP AS OFFICE	BEHAVIORAL APPROACH
ORDAINED MINISTRY AS PROFESSION	SITUATIONAL / CONTINGENCY APPROACH
MINISTRY AS CALLING	TRAITS APPROACH

TABLE 4: MINISTRY IN AMERICA STUDY RESULTS (1980)

MINISTRY AREA	DESIRED CHARACTERISTIC
FUNCTIONAL CONTENT OF MINISTRY	MINISTRY TO COMMUNITY AND WORLD MINISTRY FROM PERSONAL COMMITMENT OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT OF FELLOWSHIP AND WORSHIP CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP CARING FOR PERSONS UNDER STRESS
MINISTRY STYLE	OPEN, AFFIRMING STYLE THEOLOGIAN IN LIFE AND THOUGHT NON-PRIVATISTIC, NON-LEGALISTIC STYLE
DENOMINATIONAL ISSUES	DENOMINATIONAL AWARENESS AND COLLEGIALLY PRIESTLY-SACRAMENTAL MINISTRY
QUALIFYING PERSONAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS	MORALITY

While this study was completed many years ago and focused on ministers at the very beginning of their ministries, the findings are still relevant today and are applicable to pastors at all stages of ministry. In addition, each of the desired characteristics from the research possessed several sub-themes and attributes.

Jackson Carroll’s research also presents some characteristics of ministerial excellence, most of which can be incorporated within the study above:

- Resiliency and Spiritual Disciplines (similar to Ministry from Personal Commitment to Faith)
- Agility and Reflective Leadership (under the general characteristic of Congregational Leadership)
- Trust and Personal Authority (under the general characteristics of Morality, Open, Affirming Style, and Priestly-Sacramental Ministry, among others)
- Willingness to Stay Connected (similar to Denominational Awareness and Collegiality)
- Self-Directed, Career-Long Learning (similar to Theologian in Life and Thought)

In this discussion of ministerial excellence, it is important to note that most literature on this subject emphasizes excellence as a set of functionalities to be mastered rather than a developmental process. This is simply due to the limits of what research in this area can produce. The United Church of Christ, however, views ministerial excellence as both functional and developmental, particularly visible through the ministerial reflection and assessment tools provided by the national setting for use by ministers, potential ministers, and committees on ministry.



MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND EFFECTIVE AUTHORIZED MINISTERS IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The United Church of Christ has developed its own tool for discernment and assessment regarding authorized ministry, resulting from conversations surrounding the Ministry Issues Pronouncement of General Synod 25.¹¹ This document, entitled “The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ” (or “the MARKs”), is used by members in discernment (those discerning a path to authorized ministry), committees on ministry (bodies which authorize persons for ministry in the UCC), and authorized ministers themselves.¹²

Similar to the ways in which researchers have created different categories for qualifying ministerial excellence, the MARKs are divided into the following themes:

- Spiritual Foundations for Ministry
- UCC Identity for Ministry
- Personal and Professional Formation for Ministry
- Knowledge and Skills for Ministry
 - General Knowledge and Skills
 - Knowledge and Skills Specific to Authorized Ministry

In general, it is clear that the major themes of this document are congruent with the understanding of ministerial excellence as a combination of traits or attributes, knowledge, skills and abilities, and context for ministry. Items from the MARKs were used as survey items for this research project and are discussed in greater detail below.

¹¹The Ministry Issues Pronouncement of General Synod 25 “sought to expand UCC definitions of learnedness and leadership in authorized ministry and to emphasize excellence in ministerial formation” according to the UCC website (www.ucc.org/ministers_marks).

¹²The term “authorized minister” refers to all persons who are authorized for ministry in the United Church of Christ. This includes ordained clergy, but also includes other categories of authorization such as licensure and commissioning. For a detailed description of the various paths to authorized ministry, visit www.ucc.org/ministers_authorized.



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE

The subjects of congregational vitality and ministerial excellence are extensive and well researched in their separate rights; however, this research sought to explore the relationship between these two phenomena. In the world of sociological research, it is quite difficult—nay, nearly impossible—to ever fully prove a *causal* relationship between two occurrences (for example, we can never really know whether a high rating in one specific behavior or trait is the full and direct cause of any particular vitality characteristic). We can also say that certain features of ministerial excellence are likely to *predict* an increase in particular congregational vitality factors without declaring a full causal relationship.

Because of the difficulties in fully identifying these cause-and-effect relationships, there is little research in this area to date. Much has been written about the *experiential* nature of the relationship between ministers and church vitality. For example, books written by ministers and church consultants on best practices for growing congregations are numerous. Many of these books provide excellent testimony to the effects that ministers can have on congregations, so it is widely known that ministerial excellence has the potential to impact greatly the life of a congregation. But there is little sociological research in this area.

However, Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce have provided some helpful foundational research on this subject in their most recent publication analyzing results of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS).¹³ Using ten strengths of congregations that they identified in previous research, they summarized that:

The ten church strengths individually call for diverse pastoral talents and leadership styles. Therefore, no single pastor profile exists that best fits congregations with each of the ten strengths. Rather, some pastor characteristics are important for predicting one or more congregational strengths. Other pastor profiles predict different strengths.¹⁴

What we can prove, and what this research demonstrates, is that there are clear relationships between certain MARKs and particular aspects of congregational vitality from the perspective of congregants.

¹³Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church: What Kind of Pastor for What Kind of Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 90.

While our research confirms these overall findings, the results are somewhat different because we explored relationships between the prevalence of certain vitality factors and the frequency with which congregants perceived that pastors displayed particular characteristics, behaviors, knowledge, and skills. Woolever and Bruce analyzed how pastors spent their time in certain areas as related to congregants' perspectives of vitality.¹⁵ For example, pastors who spent less time on administrative tasks were predicted to have congregations with strengths in providing meaningful worship and in sharing faith with others. The nuance is subtle but important, as one is a self-assessment of time use on the part of the pastor; and the other is a perception of exhibited factors of ministerial excellence by congregants.

It makes sense that spending more or less time on ministry-specific tasks leads to more meaningful ministry within and beyond the congregation; but the *quality* of those specific tasks was not explored within the scope of their research. The MARKs, in and of themselves, are value statements indicative of ministerial excellence; so in using this tool in our own study, we can report more qualitatively on the relationship between ministerial excellence and congregational vitality.

¹⁵Other demographic predictors such as marital status, career stage, church location, and gender were also analyzed in their research; however, this was not included here since it was not the focus of our research.



METHODS

MEASURES

A 60-question online survey was developed for this research project. In order to measure perceptions of congregational vitality, we identified variables representative of the congregational strength characteristics adapted from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) by Woolever and Bruce. These strengths also captured each of the three facets of vitality as indicated by Linda Bobbitt of connecting to God, each other, and the world. Therefore, specific questions were constructed from a vitality measurement tool developed by Bobbitt for ELCA congregations; and the questions asked congregants to rate their perceptions of particular vitality items on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* and *Poor* to *Excellent*. (See Table 5)

It is important to note that not all items fit into one specific category, so measures were spread as evenly as possible for purposes of generalization upon analysis.¹⁶ The same can be said for ministerial excellence measures.

Ministerial excellence survey items were chosen using the United Church of Christ's ministerial discernment and assessment tool "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ." Items from this document were selected for the survey on the basis of their correlation with the main approaches identified by leading researchers as applicable to ministerial excellence. The items asked participants to evaluate how frequently their lead pastor displayed the listed skill or characteristic on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Never* to *All of the Time*. Three of the four areas in "The MARKs" were included in the survey.¹⁷ (See Table 6)

Other survey items included questions regarding demographic information about the congregant, lead pastor, and the congregation. (See Appendix for complete survey)

PARTICIPANTS

The web-based survey was distributed through announcements in the weekly denominational e-newsletter in the spring of 2014. At the time, there were 65,700 email addresses subscribed to the newsletter; but only church attendees and members were invited to participate in the survey (excluding local church pastors). For this, we relied on the integrity of respondents to self-select their eligibility for participation in the study.



The survey's introductory paragraph ensured the confidentiality of responses and explained the purpose of the survey. The introduction also detailed explicitly that none of the responses would be used to evaluate the participant's congregation or the pastor of the congregation and that all responses would simply provide results on larger social trends apart

¹⁶For example, the congregational vitality item "This place has lots of meaningful activities" is included under the theme of connecting to God; however, it can also be grouped into the themes of connecting to each other and participating in the congregation. See Table 5 for complete item categorizations.

¹⁷The area of the MARKs that was not used in this study was "UCC Identity for Ministry" since much of the previous research on the subject did not emphasize this area as essential for ministerial excellence.

TABLE 5: CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY MEASURES

VITALITY MEASURES (BOBBITT)	CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTHS (WOOLEVER AND BRUCE)	SURVEY ITEMS
Connecting to God (7 items)	Growing spiritually	This place helps people deeped their relationship with God.
		This congregation is focused on doing God's work.
		Helping adults grow in their faith
		Helping members live out their faith in their daily lives
	Meaningful worship	Praying (during and outside worship service)
		This place is spiritually vital.
		This place has lots of meaningful activities.
	Participating in the congregation	Building strong, healthy relationships among members
		Managing disagreements in a healthy, respectful manner
Connecting to each other (10 items)	Having a sense of belonging	This congregation is a close-knit family.
	Empowering leadership	Seeking out and using the gifts of members of all ages
		In general, there is a good match between this congregation and its pastor(s).
	Looking to the future	There is excitement about the future here.
		There is a clear sense of mission here.
		This congregation is always ready to try something new.
	Caring for children and youth	Helping children and youth grow in their faith
		Involving youth or young adults in decision making
Connecting to the world (10 items)	Focusing on the community	Interacting with the local community
		This congregation works for social justice/advocacy
		This congregation is a positive force in the community.
		Addressing social concerns
	<i>Connecting with the wider church*</i>	Partnering with other congregations in the area
		Helping people feel a sense of connection with your association or conference
		Sharing information about the wider UCC
	Sharing faith	Equipping members to share their faith with others
	Welcoming new worshippers	Accepting newcomers
		Incorporating newcomers into the congregation's life

***This particular strength was not one of the ten strengths identified by Woolever and Bruce.**

TABLE 6: MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE MEASURES

SECTIONS WITHIN THE MARKS	SURVEY ITEMS/MARKS
Spiritual Foundations for Ministry (1 item)	A living faith showing love of God, trust in Jesus, and openness to the Holy Spirit
Personal and Professional Formation for Ministry (11 items)	A sense of theological identity and authority, while being responsive to the opinions and values of others
	Ability to maintain personal and professional boundaries in interpersonal, congregational, and community settings
	Ability to demonstrate moral maturity, including integrity in personal and public life
	Ability to frame and test a vision in community
	Ability to take initiative in leadership
	Ability to communicate appropriately
	Ability to listen empathically and keep appropriate confidences
	Ability to function as part of a team and give/receive supervision
	Ability to mutually equip and motivate a community of faith
	Ability to be resourceful and adaptable, and know where to locate additional resources and seek consultation when needed
	Ability to accept and promote diversity and to inspire others to do so
Knowledge and Skills for Ministry (9 items)	A thorough knowledge and personal engagement with the Bible
	Skill with methods of biblical interpretation, including the historic interpretive traditions of the church and contemporary methods
	Ability to communicate biblical knowledge in an understandable way
	Ability to provide effective and appropriate pastoral care, and to equip and motivate others to share in these ministries
	Ability to provide effective and appropriate Christian education/faith formation, and to equip and motivate others to share in these ministries
	Ability to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship and social transformation
	Ability to preach the good news, lead worship, and participate in the sacraments...
	Ability to organize and implement programs, and to administer the operations of a complex organization
	The ability to read the contexts of a community's ministry and creatively lead that community through change or conflict

from specific congregations, though names and locations of congregations were requested for the purpose of incorporating annual Yearbook membership data in overall analyses.

Individuals were also asked to complete the survey based on the qualities and skills of their senior or lead pastor for those congregants who attended multiple-staff congregations, in order to avoid conflating multiple pastors within individual survey responses.

Demographic information for the survey participants is summarized in Table 7 and includes age, race, gender, how often the participant attended worship or other activities in their congregation, and how long the participant attended their current congregation. The majority of participants were over the age of 55, white, female, attended their congregations for six or more years, and attended events at their congregation at least once a week. Because the majority of participants had been attending their congregation for six or more years, their perceptions were grounded in experiences within their congregation rather than assumptions about the congregation. All of these participant characteristics were used as control variables in advanced statistical analyses.¹⁸

TABLE 7: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Characteristic	Number	Valid Percent
Age		
18-24	12	1.4
25-34	34	4.0
35-44	70	8.2
45-54	147	17.1
55-64	256	29.8
65-74	238	27.7
75+	101	11.8
Race		
White/Caucasian	801	93.2
Black/African American	23	2.7
African/African-Caribbean	1	0.1
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	0.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	0.9
Latino/Hispanic	4	0.5
Arab/Middle Eastern	1	0.1
Multiracial	9	1.0
Other	11	1.3
Gender		
Male	296	34.7
Female	557	65.2
Transgender/Gender Variant	1	0.1

¹⁸Control variables are variables that may influence the way a participant will respond, or the perceptions they experience. In this case, a person's race, gender, age, church tenure, and how often they attend church were likely to influence their perceptions of their congregation and their congregation's pastor.

How often do you attend worship or participate in other activities in your congregation?		
Rarely	21	2.4
Once a Month	34	3.9
Two or Three Times a Month	104	12.1
Once Every Week	324	37.6
More Than Once a Week	379	44.0
How long have you been going to worship services or activities at this congregation?		
Less than 1 year	40	4.6
1 to 2 years	91	10.6
3 to 5 years	139	16.1
6 to 10 years	159	18.4
11 to 20 years	148	17.2
More than 20 years	285	33.1

ANALYSIS

The primary form of data analysis for this report included a quantitative (numbers-based) approach. By performing the analysis in this way, we were able to understand overarching trends and further assess how reliable those trends were in the data collected from the survey. Advanced statistical analyses were performed which revealed the strength of relationships between congregational vitality measures and variables of ministerial excellence. Descriptive statistics, or analyses explaining the main features of a collection of data, were also gathered from survey data and from the UCC Data Hub, the denominational database that maintains all contact, demographic, and annually collected Yearbook information for congregations and authorized ministers.¹⁹

¹⁹For detailed information on advanced statistical tests that were performed with the data, contact CARD directly.



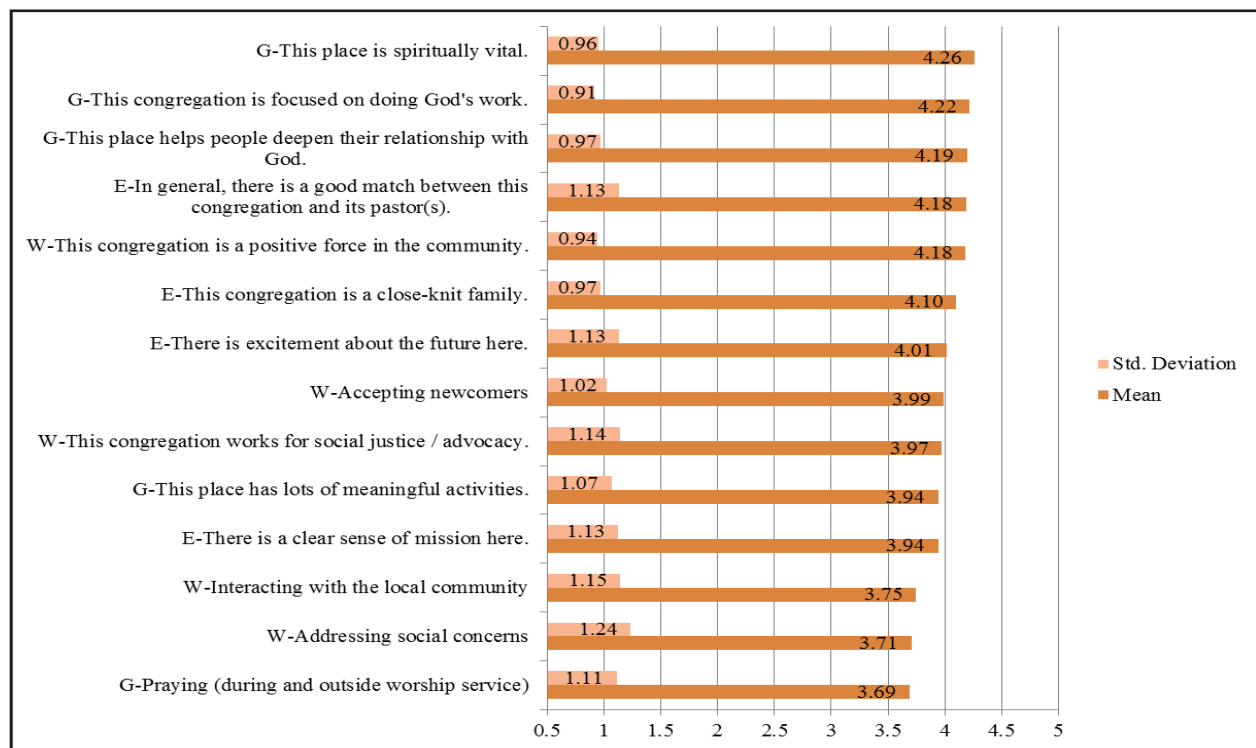
RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

A total of 865 valid responses were collected from the survey.²⁰ Congregational vitality and ministerial excellence items were sorted by means (average ratings) and then ranked highest to lowest. (See Figures 2–5)

In Figure 2, the higher-rated congregational vitality characteristics contained a combination of items connecting with God (G), each other (E), and the world (W), though it is interesting to note that the three most highly-rated vitality items represented connection to God.²¹

FIGURE 2: HIGHER-RATED CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY MEASURES



²⁰A response is valid when a majority of the questions on a survey are completed by an individual. By identifying this number and isolating data to valid responses only, reliable data analyses were performed.

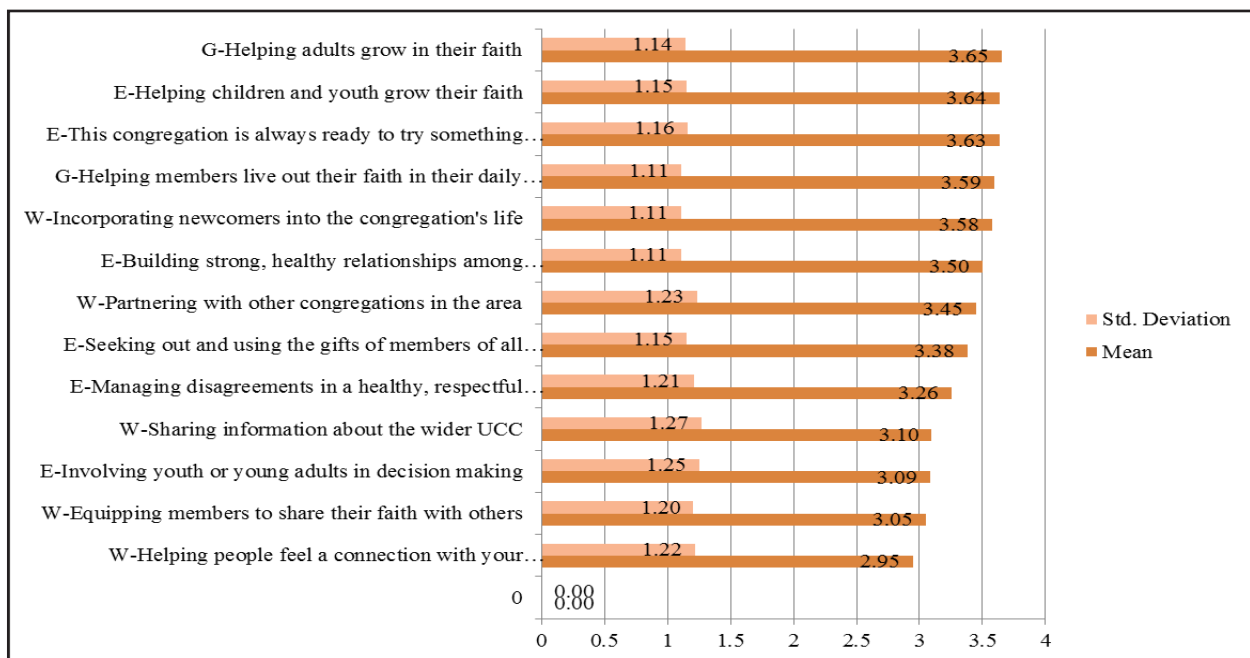
²¹It is important to note that some of the congregational vitality items fit into other overall vitality themes as well and may not be categorized solely in one theme.

The highest-rated vitality factor that congregants identified in the survey was **spiritual vitality** (4.26). This item alone is vague; therefore, using other markers of vitality in the survey provided greater detail as to what things were particularly live-giving for congregants and their congregations. In reality, most people perceive their congregation to be spiritually vital even though other indications of vitality listed in each figure varied in terms of how they were rated. Spiritual vitality is a general perception and captures the idea that most congregants believe their congregation is a good place to be overall (otherwise they might not be attending that specific congregation).

In Figure 3, the lowest-rated vitality measures included all items within the theme of **connecting with the wider church (whether with other congregations or the wider UCC)**. Vitality indicators dealing with evangelism, congregational conflict, relationships, and experimentation were also rated lower by respondents. "Involving youth or young adults in decision making" might have been rated lower because of decreased participation of youth and young adults in the overall life of a congregation, and may not be indicative of their involvement levels in decision making.

In general, the standard deviations between responses for each item increased as ratings decreased. This simply signifies that there was more variance in the way that congregants rated these items.

FIGURE 3: LOWER-RATED CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY MEASURES



In Figure 4, the three categories from The MARKs were all represented in the higher-rated measures: Spiritual Foundations for Ministry (SFM), Personal and Professional Formation for Ministry (PPF), and Knowledge and Skills for Ministry (KSM). As a whole, congregants rated their pastors very highly on all items. However, the most highly-rated items by congregants pertained to knowledge and skills that were directly related to ministry such as preaching, leading worship, biblical knowledge and interpretation. Other highly-rated factors of excellence included demonstrating moral maturity, integrity, living faith, and promoting diversity.

In Figure 5, other ministry-related tasks such as providing pastoral care and Christian education/faith formation and leading ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship and social transformation received lower ratings overall, though most items were still rated at a 4 or above (on a 5-point scale). **However, what was most noticeable about the lower-rated items was that several were related to skills and abilities that**

are necessary for leading any organization, not solely for leading churches. These items included communicating appropriately, functioning as part of a team and giving/receiving supervision, organizing and implementing programs and administering the operations of a complex organization, mutually equipping and motivating a community, reading the contexts of a community and creatively leading them through change or conflict, and framing and testing a vision in community.

FIGURE 4: HIGHER-RATED MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE MEASURES

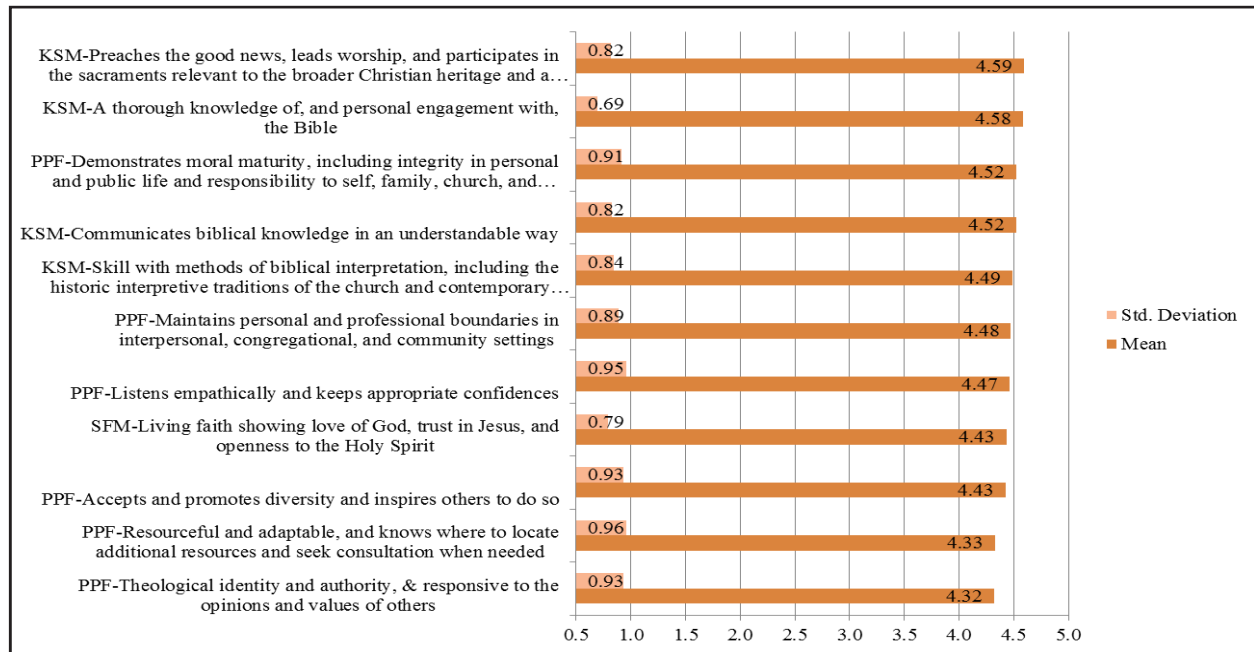
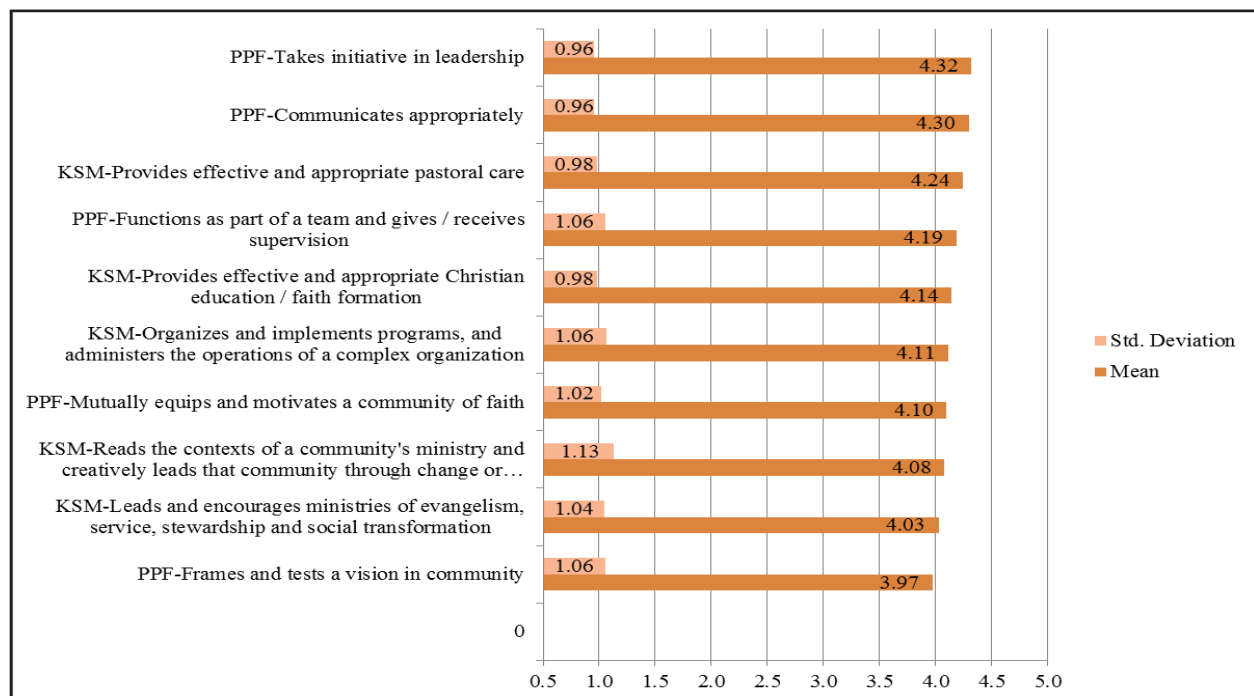


FIGURE 5: LOWER-RATED MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE MEASURES



On the whole, congregants considered their congregations to be vital places of ministry (with nearly all average ratings above 3). They also considered their pastors to model ministerial excellence, as congregants rated their pastors exceptionally highly (most ratings above 4). This indicates that clergy are demonstrating qualities, knowledge and skills of effective and faithful ministry in the UCC.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE MEASURES

Next, we investigated the relationships between measures of congregational vitality and ministerial excellence using inferential statistics.²² The following congregational vitality items were analyzed with all ministerial excellence items in the survey:

- This place helps people deepen their relationship with God.
- This place encourages prayer inside and outside of worship.
- This place helps build strong, healthy relationships.
- This congregation is a close-knit family.
- This place helps children and youth grow in their faith.
- This place interacts with the local community.
- This place equips people to share their faith.
- This place accepts newcomers well.
- This place uses the gifts of members of all ages.
- There is excitement about the future here.
- This place is spiritually vital.

For this analysis, not all vitality items were measured against ministerial excellence factors. We selected the above vitality items as most important for this particular analysis and as conducive to overall congregational vitality because they statistically created the best model that fit the overall data.²³ However, in future analyses, other vitality items could be utilized for further exploration into relationships between these two areas.

In exploring these relationships statistically, four marks of ministerial excellence related significantly to the greatest number of congregational vitality factors:

- The ability to mutually equip and motivate a community of faith (related to 8 vitality factors)
- The ability to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship and social transformation (related to 6 vitality factors)
- The ability to read the contexts of a community's ministry and creatively lead that community through change or conflict (related to 5 vitality factors)
- The ability to frame and test a vision in community (related to 5 vitality factors) (See Table 8)

Interestingly, these four marks were the lowest-rated items by congregants. *This is significant.* Three of these four ministerial excellence marks were also related with general leadership skills necessary to lead any organization. The ministry-related mark of leading and encouraging evangelism, service, stewardship and social

²²Inferential statistics are quantitative analyses that aid in the process of determining relationships and patterns in data and ensuring that these patterns are not due to random chance but demonstrate a systematic relationship that can be observed again.

²³The regression model for each of these vitality items demonstrated that the percentage of the response variable variation was fairly high (between Adjusted $R^2 = .30$ and Adjusted $R^2 = .40$ on average).

transformation ministries was also significant and suggests that a mission-focused congregation, and a pastor who possesses abilities to lead others in outreach and mission, is a vital congregation.

As shown in Table 8, several congregational vitality factors were related with more than one mark of ministerial excellence. For example, the vitality factor “There is excitement about the future here” related significantly to three ministerial excellence marks. A congregation’s ability to interact with the local community was also related with three marks of ministerial excellence.

TABLE 8: KEY MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE FACTORS RELATED TO CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

The ability to mutually equip and motivate a community of faith (8 items)	β	p
E-There is excitement about the future here.	.309	.000
G-This place is spiritually vital.	.230	.001
G-This place helps people deepen their relationship with God.	.211	.001
W-This place equips people to share their faith.	.275	.001
E-This place uses the gifts of members of all ages.	.189	.023
E-This place helps children and youth grow in their faith.	.183	.035
E-This place helps to build strong, healthy relationships.	.188	.012
G-This place encourages prayer inside and outside of worship.	.197	.012
The ability to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship and social transformation (6 items)	β	p
W-This place interacts with the local community.	.222	.003
W-This place equips people to share their faith.	.334	.000
E-This place uses the gifts of members of all ages.	.304	.000
W-This place accepts newcomers well.	.129	.057
E-This place helps children and youth grow in their faith.	.203	.009
G-This place encourages prayer inside and outside of worship.	.260	.000
The ability to read the contexts of a community's ministry and creatively lead that community through change or conflict (5 items)	β	p
E-There is excitement about the future here.	.171	.017
E-This congregation is a close-knit family.	.186	.010
W-This place interacts with the local community.	.148	.053
W-This place equips people to share their faith.	.227	.004
E-This place uses the gifts of members of all ages.	.165	.031
E-This place helps to build strong, healthy relationships.	.172	.013
The ability to frame and test a vision in community (5 items)	β	p
E-There is excitement about the future here.	.229	.001
G-This place is spiritually vital.	.157	.010
This place interacts with the local community	.339	.000
This place accepts newcomers well.	.134	.057
This place helps to build strong healthy relationships.	.187	.007

An item is statistically significant if the p value is at or below .100.

Most ministerial excellence items that did not possess significant relationships with a great number of vitality items were at least related with one vitality item. These marks tended to be knowledge, skills and qualities necessary for the specific task of ministry required within the local church. As an example, “The ability to provide effective and appropriate Christian education / faith formation, and to equip and motivate others to share in these ministries” was related to the following vitality items significantly:

- This place helps adults grow in their faith.
- This place helps children and youth grow in their faith.
- There is excitement about the future here.

Conversely, six ministerial excellence marks did not relate significantly with any vitality factors:

- KSM-A thorough knowledge, and personal engagement with, the Bible
- KSM-The ability to organize and implement programs, and to administer the operation of a complex organization
- PPF-A sense of theological identity and authority, while being responsive to the opinions and values of others
- PPF-The ability to take initiative in leadership
- PPF-The ability to communicate appropriately
- PPF-The ability to be resourceful and adaptable, and know where to locate additional resources and seek consultation when needed

Most of the average ratings for these marks were found in the middle to lower areas when compared to all marks. However, “A thorough knowledge, and personal engagement with, the Bible” was the second highest-rated mark by congregants. It is interesting to note that several of these marks possess an underlying theme of authority; and within a congregationally-based polity structure like the UCC, this could be a reason that none of these factors were related with congregational vitality significantly. In addition, the marks in this group relating to theology and Bible knowledge might not be significant because there is general uniformity in how pastors display these items (all excellently). Furthermore, they might be so present in congregational life that they are not distinguishable through particular elements of congregational vitality. This may be true for all factors that were not statistically related to vitality.

One excellence mark was significantly negatively related with a number of congregational vitality items, meaning that as the presence of this mark increased, certain congregational vitality items were less prevalent. “The ability to function as part of a team and give / receive supervision” was negatively related with the following vitality factors:

- There is excitement about the future here.
- This place is spiritually vital.
- This place helps people deepen their relationship with God.
- This place equips people to share their faith with others.
- This place encourages prayer inside and outside of worship.

It is difficult to explain why this particular mark was negatively correlated, and further study will be needed to determine the underlying phenomena in this case. Perhaps this relates to the theme of authority and the strong sense of lay leadership within the UCC congregations, but that is uncertain.

To summarize, these specific results provided a direct answer to our original research question: **What is the relationship between congregational vitality and ministerial excellence in UCC congregations?** The rela-

relationship is a complex one, but we can say that there is indeed a solid, strong relationship. Overall, the four lowest-rated ministerial marks related significantly with the greatest number of congregational vitality factors, and these marks tended to mirror general leadership qualities and skills critical to any organization. Some marks related significantly with a few vitality factors, and these marks were most related with qualities and skills specific to local church ministry. Finally, the marks that did not directly relate to vitality items also included items necessary for leadership in any organization, but also included items specific to biblical knowledge and theological authority.

Again, these findings do not provide a definitive answer to this question, as more methods of inquiry are necessary in order to fully validate these results. However, this survey does provide us with a beginning for a broader conversation on these matters.

VALIDATION OF SURVEY MEASURES

Beyond providing a preliminary response to the original research question, additional exploratory analyses were conducted on congregational vitality and ministerial excellence survey items in order to test whether these items were measuring what they were intended to measure, how well the items were measuring the phenomena, and whether a key index could be created for use among a broader sample of congregations.

For this analysis, conducted by ELCA researcher Linda Bobbitt, the validity of the UCC survey items was tested in order to compare this with her original validation of the survey completed by ELCA congregants.²⁴ When congregational vitality factors were tested as one scale, all of the items grouped together as a single concept, meaning that the items were essentially testing one underlying theme.²⁵ It is difficult to determine the specific concept being measured in the survey; but, most likely, the factors are measuring the overall perception of how vital a person believes that her congregation is, or how positively or negatively a person feels about her congregation in general.

When testing ministerial excellence marks as one scale, the same phenomena occurred. All of the items grouped together as a single concept with one underlying theme.²⁶ It may be that the marks in the survey are measuring the overall perception of how well a congregant believes her minister is doing as lead pastor, or how much a congregant likes or dislikes her pastor in general.



Even though both sets of survey items each measured one underlying concept, there was substantial variance in congregants' ratings. As evidenced by the standard deviations in Figures 2 through 5, congregants varied in their responses by roughly one whole number. Furthermore, when Linda Bobbitt created average scale scores (the average of all responses) for each congregant, the averages were distributed evenly across the scale (meaning that there was a great deal of variety in congregants' overall responses). This was true for both congregational vitality scale scores and ministerial excellence scale scores. (See Figures 6 and 7)

When both the congregational vitality and ministerial excellence average scores were correlated to determine the overall relationship between these two concepts, they were significantly correlated at .744.²⁷ This means that as the congregational vitality rating increased or decreased, the ministerial excellence rating correspondingly increased or decreased as

²⁴Internal consistency was first tested, followed by a factor analysis to test subscales. For more details on the analyses conducted, contact CARD directly.

²⁵Cronbach's Alpha = .967.

²⁶Cronbach's Alpha = .978.

²⁷The correlation coefficient is a number between -1 and +1 that represents the linear dependence of two different sets of scores. A .744 signifies that two items are highly positively related with one another.

FIGURE 6: DISTRIBUTION OF CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY RESPONSES (AVERAGE SCORES)

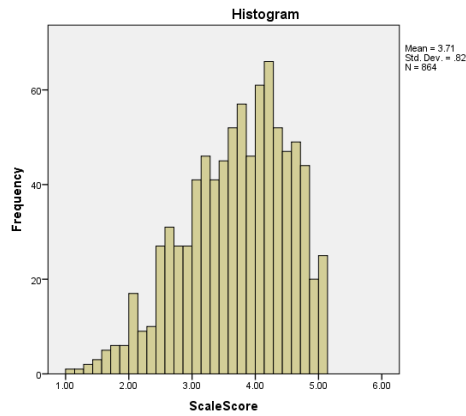
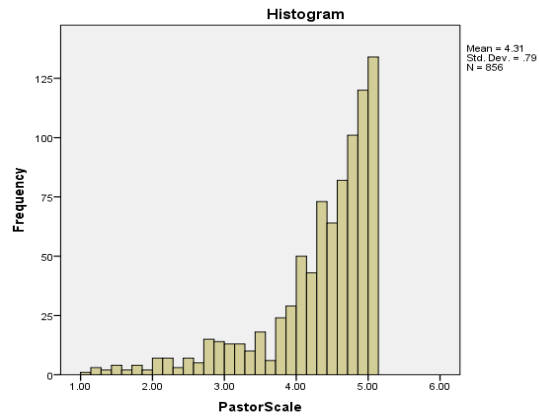


FIGURE 7: DISTRIBUTION OF MINISTERIAL EXCELLENCE RESPONSES (AVERAGE SCORES)



well. So in general, if congregants rated their pastors highly, they also rated their congregations' vitality highly (and vice versa). This is to be expected, though there were exceptions since both themes were not fully correlated.

In the end, we may have only measured a congregant's perception of overall general congregational vitality and ministerial excellence, or merely general satisfaction with one's minister and church. While this is a major limitation to the study, and additional research is necessary to further explore these concepts, we have determined (at the very least) that the overarching relationship between vitality and ministerial excellence is a strong, solid one.

TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY INDEX

With that being said, it was possible to determine whether some congregational vitality items were more meaningful than others in creating a key index of factors to measure overall vitality. In conducting statistical analyses, we developed a ten-item index of congregational vitality factors to assist in assessing the overall vitality of a congregation.²⁸ (See Table 10)

TABLE 9: CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY INDEX

1. There is excitement about the future here.
2. There is a clear sense of mission here.
3. This place has lots of meaningful activities.
4. This congregation is always ready to try something new.
5. This place incorporates newcomers into the congregation's life.
6. This place seeks out and uses the gifts of members of all ages.
7. This place helps to build strong, healthy relationships among members.
8. This place manages disagreements in a healthy respectful manner.
9. This congregation equips members to share their faith with others.
10. This place interacts with the local community.

In original analyses, most of these items were categorized as connecting to each other (E) and connecting to the world (W). Only the third item in the index was categorized as connecting to God (G), though this item could also be categorized with the theme of connecting to everyone (E).

This raises several issues. First, perhaps it is only really possible to measure congregational vitality using outwardly-focused factors. Because it is incredibly difficult to measure spiritual growth and formation (which is internal to the individual), it may mean that more mission-oriented factors of relating to others and the world are simply clearer when determining a congregation's vitality. Spiritual formation should be a central to any congregation's vitality and perhaps is the most important factor that undergirds all of the more "visible" factors.

For this reason, additional research is needed to fully test this index; but, we would argue that this is a valid instrument that can be used in congregations as it exists now. **In essence, how individuals within a congregation (the congregants and the pastor) respond to the ten vitality factors is a statistically-driven, sound way of determining how vital a congregation is, which can be a very useful tool for congregational planning and decision-making.**

This vitality index was also positively related to ministerial excellence scale scores. For every increase in a minister's overall rating, the congregation's vitality index score increased as well. This was simply another method of demonstrating that the relationship between vitality and ministerial excellence is a strong one.

²⁸This index was created using an aggregate dataset of responses by congregation and was developed through scale reliability analyses. Cronbach's Alpha = .901.

CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND NUMERICAL GROWTH

Finally, membership and attendance numbers from congregations whose congregants completed the survey were comparatively analyzed with the congregational vitality index in order to begin to explore the relationship between vitality and numerical growth and decline. Congregational data were obtained from the UCC Data Hub, the denominational database through which annual Yearbook information is reported by churches.

Results of these preliminary analyses showed that membership *did not* possess a statistically significant relationship with the vitality index. Even more surprisingly, worship attendance possessed a significant relationship with the vitality index, albeit a *negative* relationship. So as worship attendance increases, it becomes more difficult to maintain vitality (as we have measured it, at least). Theoretically, this phenomenon is valid—with an increase in worship attendance, it is possible that certain factors such as incorporating newcomers, managing conflict, building relationships, etc. may become more difficult. In this case, it stands to reason that numerical growth may hinder vitality and raises the question of whether an “ideal size” exists for a congregation to be considered vital. Further exploration is needed in this area to validate findings; however, this preliminary result is intriguing in many ways.





CONCLUSIONS

Through this study, several important findings emerged regarding congregational vitality and ministerial excellence.

Congregants love their pastors. On the whole, individuals who participated in the survey rated their pastors highly with regard to their qualities, skills and abilities.

UCC congregations, as a whole, are places of vitality. Congregants considered their churches to be spiritually vital places that help people connect to God, one another, and the world. The most highly-rated vitality indicators were specifically related to connecting with God (spiritual formation), and lower-rated items focused on evangelism, connecting with the wider UCC, and involving youth or young adults in decision making.

Pastors excel in ministry-specific areas. Congregants tended to rate their pastors highest in ministry-specific areas such as preaching, biblical knowledge and interpretation, moral maturity and faith, and pastoral care.

Pastors excel less in general leadership areas. Congregants tended to rate their pastors less highly on survey items such as communicating appropriately, taking initiative in leadership, framing and testing a vision in community, and equipping and motivating others, which are all skills necessary for leadership in any organization. Overall, however, it is important to note that individuals rated pastors highly on all items (most average ratings were above 4 on a 5-point scale) except for the skill of framing and testing a vision in community (which was below 4).

There is a strong relationship between vitality and pastoral leadership. A majority of ministerial excellence marks related significantly with at least one congregational vitality measure. In addition, when ministerial excellence items were placed on one scale and congregational vitality items were placed on a separate scale, one scale's scores increased or decreased in relationship to the other scale's scores, suggesting that these two concepts are highly related.

Most vitality measures are associated with general leadership marks of ministerial excellence. Characteristics that were not isolated to ministry were more commonly associated with congregational vitality items. Interestingly, the four lowest-rated ministerial marks related significantly with the greatest number of congregational vitality factors; and these marks tended to mirror general leadership qualities and skills critical to any organization. For example, the ability to mutually equip and motivate a community of faith was related with eight congregational vitality

While more studies are needed in order to further validate our findings, these conclusions provide a critical first step in examining the relationship between, and nuances within, the factors associated with congregational vitality and ministerial excellence.

measures at a statistically significant level.

Ministry-specific marks are associated with some aspects of vitality. In general, ministry-specific leadership areas were associated with fewer vitality items, and some qualities such as biblical knowledge and interpretation were not associated with any vitality measures. However, the ability to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship, and social transformation was related with several vitality measures.

Ten congregational vitality factors can statistically predict a congregation's overall sense of vitality. How individuals within a congregation (the congregants as well as the pastor) rate ten essential vitality factors is a statistically-driven, sound way of determining how vital a congregation is, which can be a very useful tool for congregational planning and decision-making.

All survey items may only be measuring a congregant's perception of overall general congregational vitality and ministerial excellence, or merely general satisfaction with one's minister and church. Further research is needed in order to test different items with other sampling methods, and this was a major limitation of the study. Still, the results provide a great deal of information and insight into the perspectives of church congregants.

Results from this study determined that membership and congregational vitality are not related in a statistically significant way, and that worship attendance is negatively related with vitality. As worship attendance increases, it becomes more difficult to maintain vitality (as we have measured it, at least). This is merely a preliminary finding, and additional research is necessary.

While more studies are needed in order to further validate our findings, these conclusions provide a critical first step in examining the relationship between, and nuances within, the factors associated with congregational vitality and ministerial excellence. As stated at the beginning of this report, the findings clearly emphasize the importance of ministerial training and continuing education in specific areas, as well as solid tools with which to assess a congregation's vitality.

Now, the question before us is this: What shall we do with what we have learned?



DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

COMMENTARY

REV. DR. WILLIAM MCKINNEY

Former President and Professor of American Religion, Pacific School of Religion



For many years I divided my research agenda into two distinct parts. Mornings I would spend thinking and writing about religious leadership. How do we identify, recruit, prepare, support, evaluate and celebrate the persons we count upon shape the life and future of faith communities? In the afternoon I would turn my attention to religious institutions, particularly congregations and denominations. How do we build, change, transform, reinvent and sustain faith communities that make a meaningful difference in the lives of their members and the communities they serve?

As time went on and I took on various administrative responsibilities first at Hartford Seminary and later at Pacific School of Religion, I slowly came to the conclusion that at least in theological education the sharp division between leadership and religious renewal was no longer helpful. In speeches I began to suggest that individual renewal, religious community renewal and public renewal need to be seen as complimentary processes.²⁹ You rarely find healthy religious leaders in dysfunctional faith communities and you don't find healthy religious communities in dysfunctional cities, towns and nations. The challenge for the church today is to equip persons with tools for self, church and public renewal, all at the same time.

This is, of course, a daunting challenge but it is exactly the one posed by this research. The church needs to find ways for a serious engagement of what we mean by ministerial excellence, religious vitality and mission and we can no longer afford to pretend that these are separate questions. This is not a task that can be assigned to a special commission or task force. It needs the attention of the whole church in all of its settings. It calls for a spirit of experimentation more than new programs that assume someone has the right answers that need to be passed along by trained experts to passive learners.

One of the fascinating findings in this study is the relatively low rating of pastors on general leadership attributes. Members hold pastors in high regard but are less impressed by their skills in areas that would be expected of leaders in general. In other words, pastors are seen as effective in ministry-specific matters but seem less strong as leaders of institutions more generally. I find this a bit troubling and wonder if it is a reflection on those who are called to ministry or the relative isolation of seminaries and clergy continuing education from other areas of professional leadership development.

I have a couple of comments / suggestions as the research agenda continues. Sampling readers of *Keeping You Posted* is appropriate for an exploratory study of this kind and study participants seem broadly representative of UCC members;

²⁹See, for example, "Religious Leadership, Religious Research and Religious Renewal (The 1997 H. Paul Douglass Lecture)" Review of Religious Research, September 1998.

but this population probably skews toward denominational activists and congregational leaders whose perceptions of their congregations and ministers may be quite different from other members. Also, it would be nice to have indicators of ministerial excellence and congregational vitality that are based on more than member perceptions. I would be fascinated to see the relationships between the proposed congregational vitality index and, for example, per capita member giving,

worship attendance as a proportion of reported membership, mission giving, and additions by confirmation, confession of faith and transfer, etc.

It is encouraging to see the national setting of the church taking social research seriously. This is the kind of study that can inform policy formation and program development across the various settings of the United Church of Christ.

COMMENTARY

REV. HOLLY MILLERSHANK

Team Leader, UCC Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) Team



Authorized ministers in the United Church of Christ are often described as spiritual leaders in their congregations; however, this research shows that ministers need to be visionary, systemic leaders as well in order to create and sustain vital congregations.

The introduction of the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers put the United Church of Christ at the forefront of the move from input-based models of theological formation to outcome or competency-based models. This research affirms the essence of the MARKs as realistic indicators of the types of skills necessary for ministerial leadership. This study shows that the broad-ranging emphases of the MARKs, ranging from Spiritual Foundations for Ministry, Personal and Professional Formation

for Ministry, and Knowledge and Skills for Ministry represent a holistic approach to ministerial formation which takes into account not only the accumulation of theologically specific knowledge but also the general leadership skills necessary to empower congregations to put their faith into action in ways that directly impact church members and the wider community.

Gauging from the fact that the four ministerial excellence traits that most closely align with markers of congregational vitality were the four lowest traits identified with ministerial excellence, I believe we have an opportunity before us to help congregations re-vision the leadership possibilities of authorized ministers. Congregations celebrate strong preaching and pastoral care, but congregations should come to expect that their ministers are also community leaders, conflict managers and systemic innovators. This revelation will be important to communicate to local churches as they discern the types of leadership skills they are seeking in their pastors, and as they encourage and nurture the calls of their own members into ministry.

Institutions of theological education, including seminaries and regional theological programs, should embrace this research and think critically about the types of course work and experiences they can provide students to prepare them for leading complex organizations. Partnerships with secular leadership programs focusing on the development of traits related to equipping, motivating, visioning and transforming will have a lasting impact on our ministers and our churches. Likewise, continuing education offerings focused on transformational community leadership will make a noticeable difference in the vitality of local congregations.

Ministry matters and matters deeply. This report demonstrates the importance of well-rounded, Biblically-engaged, community-oriented, outcomes-based ministerial formation as well as the need for on-going demonstration of both spiritual and visionary leadership skills in ministry in order to produce and sustain vital congregations.

I am grateful to CARD for this report and echo the closing thought: "What shall we do with what we have learned?" MESA looks forward to partnering as we together explore the possible answers to this important question.

COMMENTARY

REV. CAMERON TRIMBLE

Executive Director & CEO, The Center for Progressive Renewal



The complimentary connection between excellent ministerial leadership and congregational vitality has never been more important. We live in an age of unprecedented change with both our leaders and our congregants experiencing 10 to 100 times the life experiences of their ancestors even two or three generations prior. We now find ourselves in an age without leadership formulas or text books or self-help coaches or Congregational experts to show us how to grow our churches in the communities where they are planted. We are awake to the new reality that the programs, leadership approaches, congregational structures and demographic assumptions that got us here won't take us forward, but we struggle to clearly see where the mainline church in North America may go to maintain its vitality of years past.

This study highlights the great opportunities before the mainline church in North America to reinvest and reinvent itself for the sake of the Gospel.

Borrowing from Linda Bobbitt's paradigm of effective leadership and congregational vitality connecting people to God, each other and the world, this study invites us to consider the question the study was not designed to address directly but must surely consider as a next step: What is the relationship of a vital church, its leadership and its context? I have come to believe that if the UCC is to have a brilliant future, its congregations must take the world of community transformation seriously. In other words, the measures of vitality must be broadened to include not just the average participation numbers or Sunday offerings, but also the community crime rates, literacy rates and health indicators of the surrounding community (just to name a few). In the future, a congregation's vitality will be directly tied to the difference it is making in its community.

If this comes to pass, the MARKS for ministerial excellence must take seriously the important finding of this study: We must improve our capacity as leaders to shape compelling vision, motivate people to action, and build sustainable ministries. The role of the minister in the congregation is changing from the resident theological expert to, in many settings, the local community organizer or community facilitator. Leaders will need new skills—business acumen, real estate knowledge, entrepreneurial instincts, big-picture vision and a genuine commitment to live the life of faith. This study underscores that we are the pioneers of new ways of being church in the new world. These could not be more exciting days to be the Church.



APPENDIX

CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY AND CLERGY EXCELLENCE (UCC) SURVEY

Greetings! Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. The United Church of Christ is interested in understanding your perceptions about the church you attend, as well as your thoughts about your congregation's pastor. (NOTE: If your congregation has multiple pastors, please only respond to the questions as they apply to your senior / lead pastor.)

The purpose of this research is--on a large scale--to look at the relationship between congregational vitality and characteristics of pastoral excellence. The UCC wants to offer helpful information to the wider church about what types of pastoral skills and qualities congregants find valuable for growing, sustaining, and declining churches.

For this reason, at the end of the survey you will be asked to provide the name and location of the congregation you attend. This information **will not** be used to make any individual identifications about your pastor or your congregation and will only be used to connect *non-identifiable* demographics about your church's membership, worship attendance, etc. and *non-identifiable* demographics about your current pastor such as age range, race, and gender. This is not a survey that is intended to be an evaluation or assessment that your pastor or anyone else will see and will only be used to measure overarching trends.

As such, all responses are **completely confidential**. Only the researchers for this project will have access to the survey data. This research project is being conducted through the UCC's Center for Analytics, Research, and Data (CARD) as part of their on-going mission to gather, provide, and interpret information and trends for the purpose of illuminating the past, realizing the present, and envisioning the future of the United Church of Christ in the larger social context.

The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. The deadline for taking the survey is Friday, April 11.

If you have any questions, please contact Rev. Dr. Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, CARD Director, at hajbik@ucc.org or Ashleigh Hope, CARD Research Intern, at Ashleigh.Hope@unco.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important research project!

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements regarding your congregation.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	UNABLE TO RATE
This place is spiritually vital.						
There is excitement about the future here.						
There is a clear sense of mission here.						
This place helps people deepen their relationship with God.						
This congregation works for social justice / advocacy.						
This congregation is a close-knit family.						
This congregation is a positive force in the community.						
This congregation is focused on doing God's work.						
This place has lots of meaningful activities.						
This congregation is always ready to try something new.						
In general, there is a good match between this congregation and its pastor(s).						

Please rate how well your congregation engages in the following items:

	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	VERY GOOD	EXCELLENT	UNABLE TO RATE
Accepting newcomers						
Incorporating newcomers into the congregation's life						
Seeking out and using the gifts of members of all ages						
Building strong, healthy relationships among members						
Managing disagreements in a healthy, respectful manner						
Involving youth or young adults in decision making						
Helping children and youth grow their faith						
Helping adults grow in their faith						
Praying (during and outside worship service)						

Addressing social concerns						
Equipping members to share their faith with others						
Interacting with the local community						
Partnering with other congregations in the area						
Helping members live out their faith in their daily lives						
Helping people feel a connection with your association or conference						
Sharing information about the wider UCC						

Please indicate how often the pastor in your congregation demonstrates the characteristics or skills described below. (NOTE: If your congregation has multiple pastors, please only respond to the questions as they apply to your senior / lead pastor.)

	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALL OF THE TIME	UNABLE TO RATE
A living faith showing love of God, trust in Jesus, and openness to the Holy Spirit						
A sense of theological identity and authority, while being responsive to the opinions and values of others						
The ability to take initiative in leadership						
The ability to frame and test a vision in community						
The ability to listen empathically and keep appropriate confidences						
The ability to communicate appropriately						
The ability to function as part of a team and give / receive supervision						
The ability to mutually equip and motivate a community of faith						
The ability to accept and promote diversity and to inspire others to do so						
The ability to maintain personal and professional boundaries in interpersonal, congregational, and community settings						
The ability to be resourceful and adaptable, and know where to locate additional resources and seek consultation when needed						
The ability to demonstrate moral maturity, including integrity in personal and public life and responsibility to self, family, church, and community						

Please indicate how often the pastor in your congregation displays the following skills. (NOTE: If your congregation has multiple pastors, please only respond to the questions as they apply to your senior / lead pastor.)

	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALL OF THE TIME	UNABLE TO RATE
A thorough knowledge of, and personal engagement with, the Bible						
Skill with methods of biblical interpretation, including the historic interpretive traditions of the church and contemporary methods						
The ability to communicate biblical knowledge in an understandable way						
The ability to provide effective and appropriate pastoral care, and to equip and motivate others to share in these ministries						
The ability to provide effective and appropriate Christian education / faith formation, and to equip and motivate others to share in these ministries						
The ability to lead and encourage ministries of evangelism, service, stewardship and social transformation						
The ability to preach the good news, lead worship, and participate in the sacraments in a manner faithful to the broader Christian heritage and the characteristics of a specific culture and setting						
The ability to organize and implement programs, and to administer the operations of a complex organization						
The ability to read the contexts of a community's ministry and creatively lead that community through change or conflict						

Please indicate the current employment status of your pastor.

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Don't know

Please indicate which of the following statements is true about your pastor (NOTE: If your congregation has multiple pastors, please only respond to the questions as they apply to your senior / lead pastor):

- My pastor is currently in a committed relationship.
- My pastor is not currently in a committed relationship.
- I do not know the current relationship status of my pastor.

Please indicate which of the following statements is true about your pastor (NOTE: If your congregation has multiple pastors, please only respond to the questions as they apply to your senior / lead pastor):

- My pastor has children currently living in the home.
- My pastor has children, but they are not currently living in the home.
- My pastor has some children currently living in the home, and some children not currently living in the home.
- My pastor does not have children.
- Don't know

How long have you been going to worship services or activities at this congregation?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 to 2 years
- 3 to 5 years
- 6 to 10 years
- 11 to 20 years
- More than 20 years

How often do you attend worship or participate in other activities in your congregation?

- I rarely attend worship or participate in activities.
- I attend worship or participate in activities about once a month.
- I attend worship or participate in activities two or three times a month.
- I usually attend worship or participate in activities every week.
- I attend worship or participate in activities more than once a week.

Over the last two years, has there been any conflict in your congregation?

- No conflict that I'm aware of
- Some minor conflict
- Major conflict
- Major conflict with leaders or people leaving
- Don't know

What is the full name of your congregation?

In what city is your congregation located?

In which state is your congregation located?

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender / Gender Variant

What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 or older

How would you describe your race?

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African American
- African National/African-Caribbean
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Latino/Hispanic
- Arab/Middle Eastern
- Multiracial
- Other



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