



FACTs on Spiritually Vital Congregations

FACT 2020 National Survey of
Congregations

Faith
Communities
Today

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About the FACT 2020 Survey

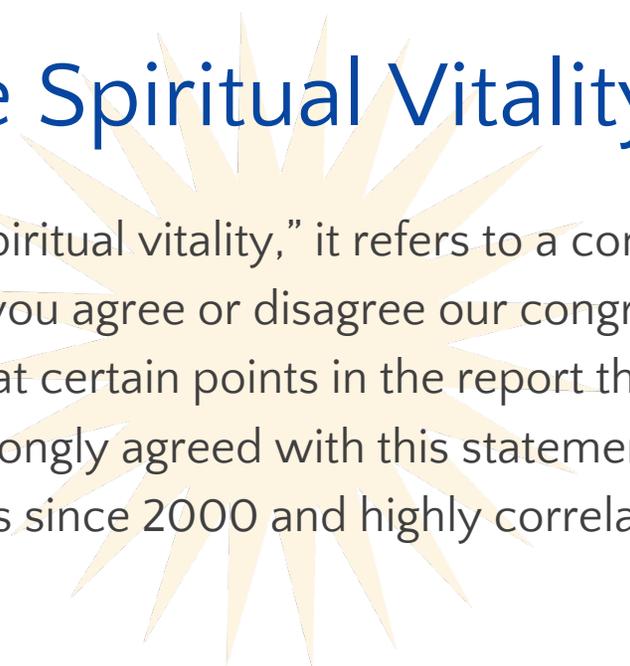
With more than 15,000 respondents, the 2020 Faith Communities Today survey of congregations offers a sweeping portrait of the religious life of the United States.

This report summarizes findings related to the spiritual vitality of the congregations responding to the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey. The 2020 survey was the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the US, covering 15,278 congregations from 80 different denominations and faith traditions. Faith Communities Today has been tracking trends in congregational life since 2000.

Note on How the Covid-19 Pandemic Affected the Survey

The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) national survey of congregations took place as the pandemic arrived in the United States. As such, some congregations responded to the survey before restrictions on public worship and other pandemic-related measures were put into effect; others responded in full lockdown mode. As such, the data here reflects both responses collected immediately before the pandemic and those that emerged during the initial year of it. Those completing the survey after the lockdown were asked to have their answers reflect a pre-pandemic situation.

How We Define Spiritual Vitality



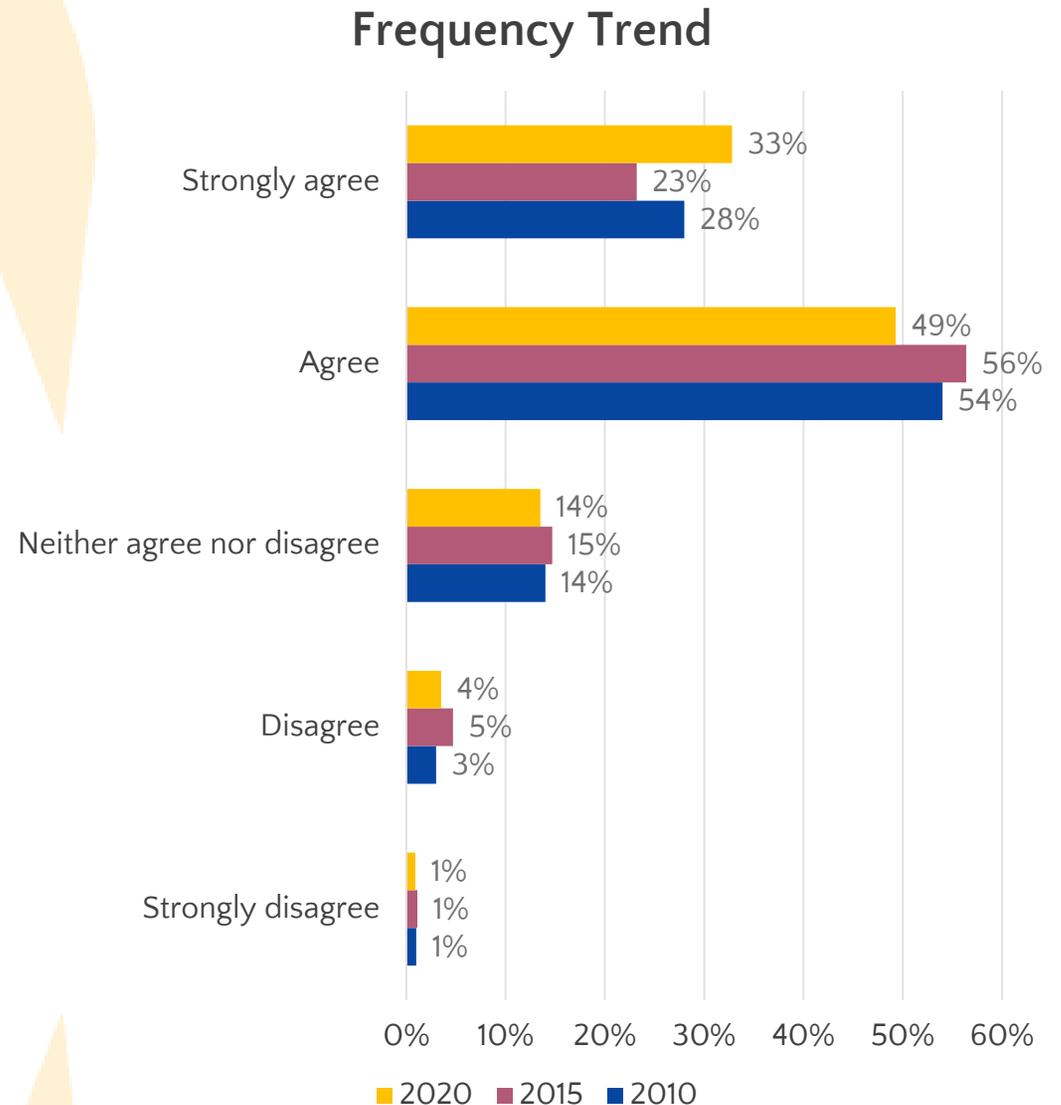
When this report addresses “spiritual vitality,” it refers to a congregational leader’s response to the question: “Do you agree or disagree our congregation is spiritually vital and alive?” Where noted, at certain points in the report the analysis focuses only on those congregations that strongly agreed with this statement. This question has been asked in the FACT surveys since 2000 and highly correlates with other measures of vitality and flourishing.

Disclaimer

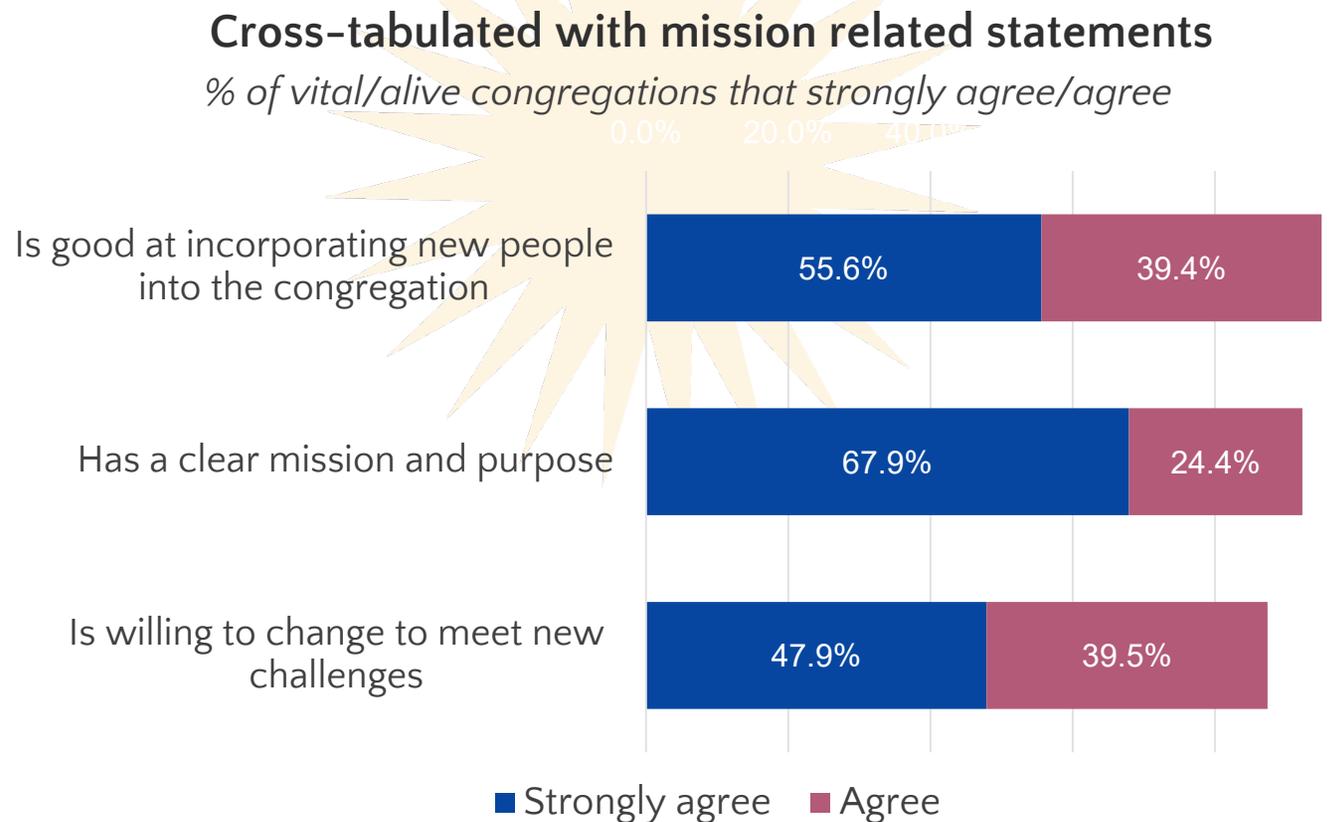
The opinions and analysis expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs or views of the Faith Communities Today initiative or its members.

Our Congregation Is Spiritually Vital and Alive

In the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey, respondents were asked if they agreed (or disagreed) with the statement “My congregation is spiritually vital and alive.” The chart shows trends among the congregations in the national random samples in 2010 (N=11,077), 2015 (N=3,847), and 2020 (15,041). There is a higher percentage of congregations in 2020 that strongly agreed they were spiritually vital and alive.



Spiritual Vitality and Church Mission

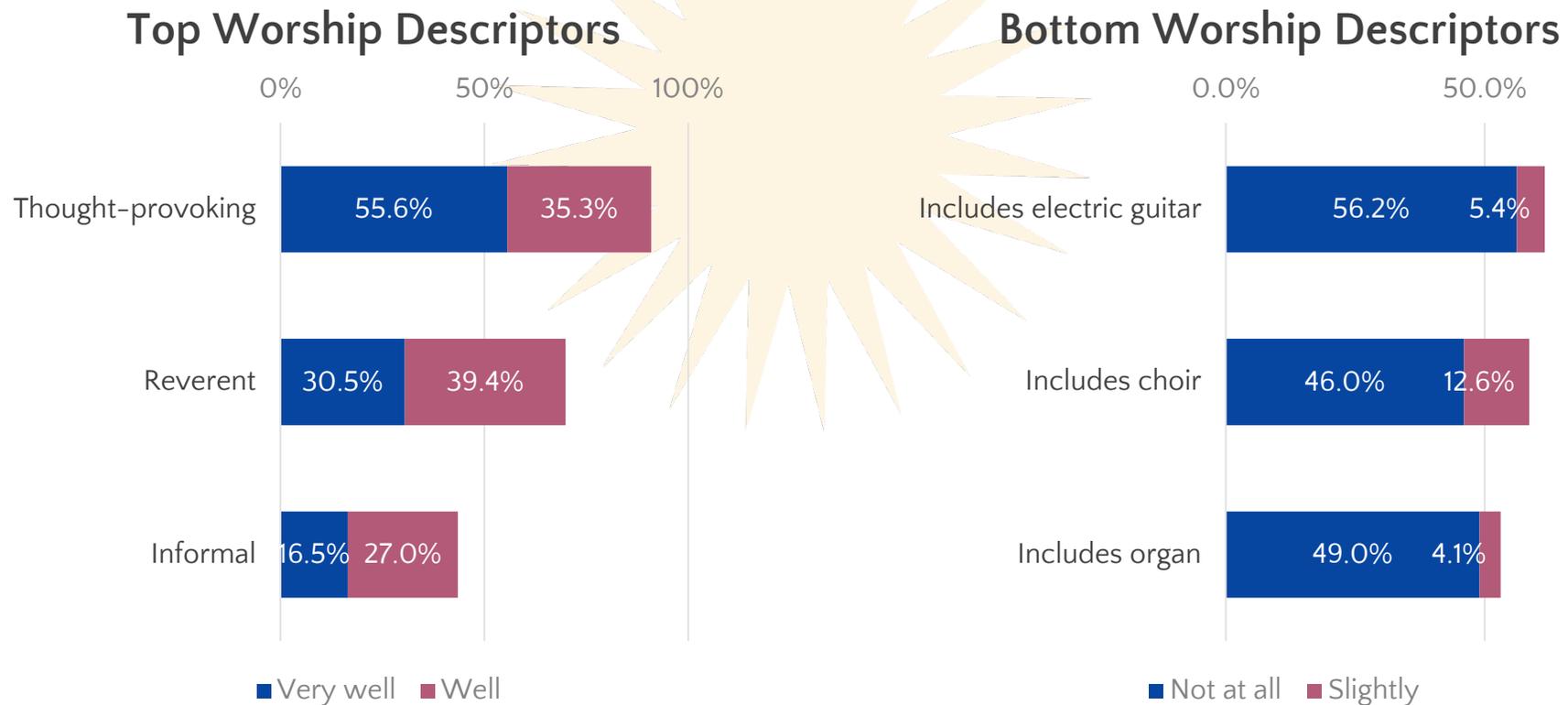


The rest of this report focuses primarily on this 33% of congregations that strongly agreed they were “spiritually vital and alive” 95% of these spiritually vital and alive congregations report they are “good at incorporating new people.” Friendliness and inclusiveness towards new people go hand in hand with spiritual vitality.

92.3% of spiritually vital and alive congregations have a clear sense of mission and purpose. Why it exists is important to a radiant congregation.

87.4% of spiritually vital and alive congregations are “willing to change to meet new challenges.” Recent years have clearly demonstrated how important it is to be responsive and proactive to societal change.

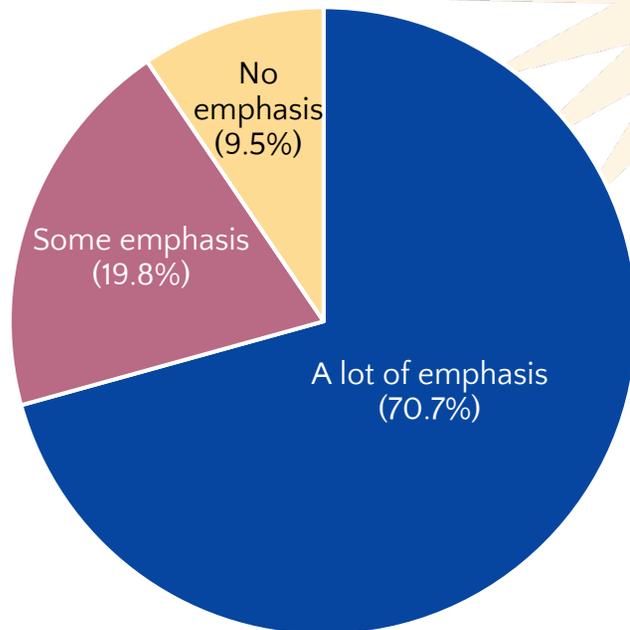
Spiritual Vitality and the Worship Service



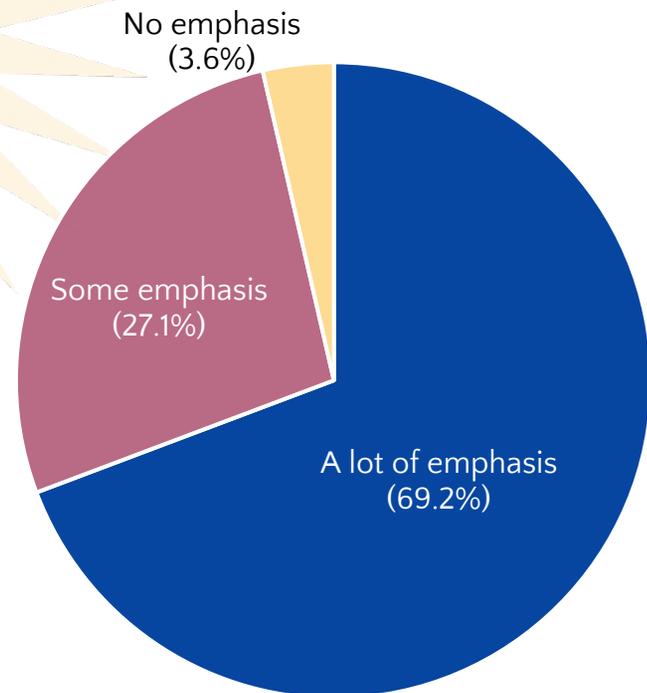
While there was a significant correlation with worship services described as “thought-provoking,” “contemporary,” and “innovative,” the top descriptors of worship in spiritually vital and alive congregations were “thought-provoking” (90.9%), “reverent” (69.9%), and “informal” (43.5%). Just one in three vital congregations claims to have “formal ritual or liturgy” in worship, and less than two in five have a “contemporary” (38.6%) or “innovative” (37.8%) worship. Of the 11 listed worship descriptors in the survey, those least often selected for vital congregations (Not at all and Slightly) were “electric guitar” (61.6%), “choir” (58.6%), and “organ” (53.1%). While three out of four vital congregations place some emphasis (40.5%) or a lot of emphasis (36.9%) on music, less than one in three include electric guitar (29.4%) or choir (31.3%), and slightly over two in five use an organ (41.3%).

Spiritual Vitality and Religious Education

Religious education for children
(e.g. Sunday school)



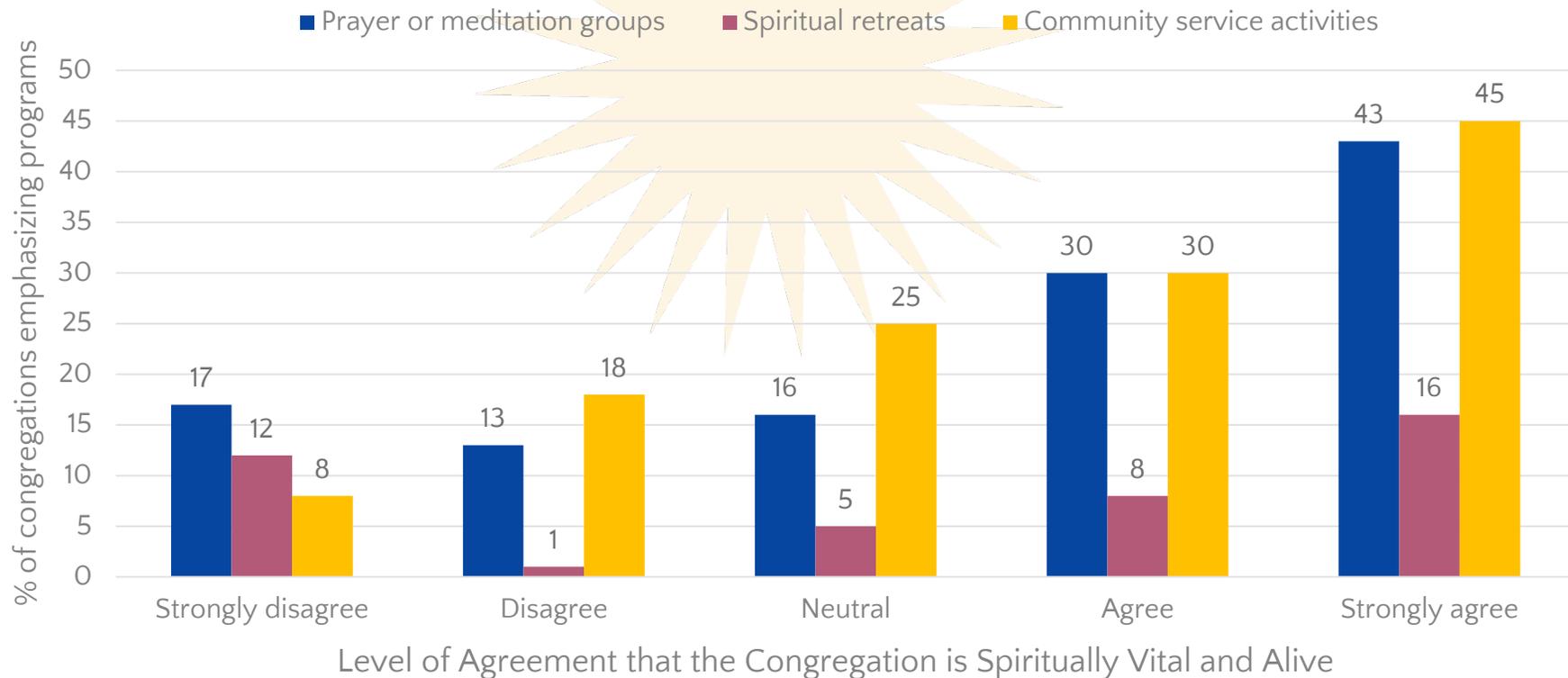
Religious education for adults
(e.g. Scripture studies)



The most frequent program emphasis among spiritually vital congregations is religious education for children and for adults. More than two out of three congregations place a lot of emphasis on Sunday school and similar activities for children (70.7%) and on adult Scripture study (69.2%). Almost one in two of these congregations emphasize informal religious education (parents talking about faith with children and/or with those who are not part of their congregation). Among these most vital congregations, 36.7% place a lot of emphasis on youth (teen) activities but only 15.1% on young adult activities. The data also reveal that relatively few of these congregations place emphasis on the general education of children with efforts such as operating a preschool (12.3%), elementary school (11.4%) or high school (8.1%).

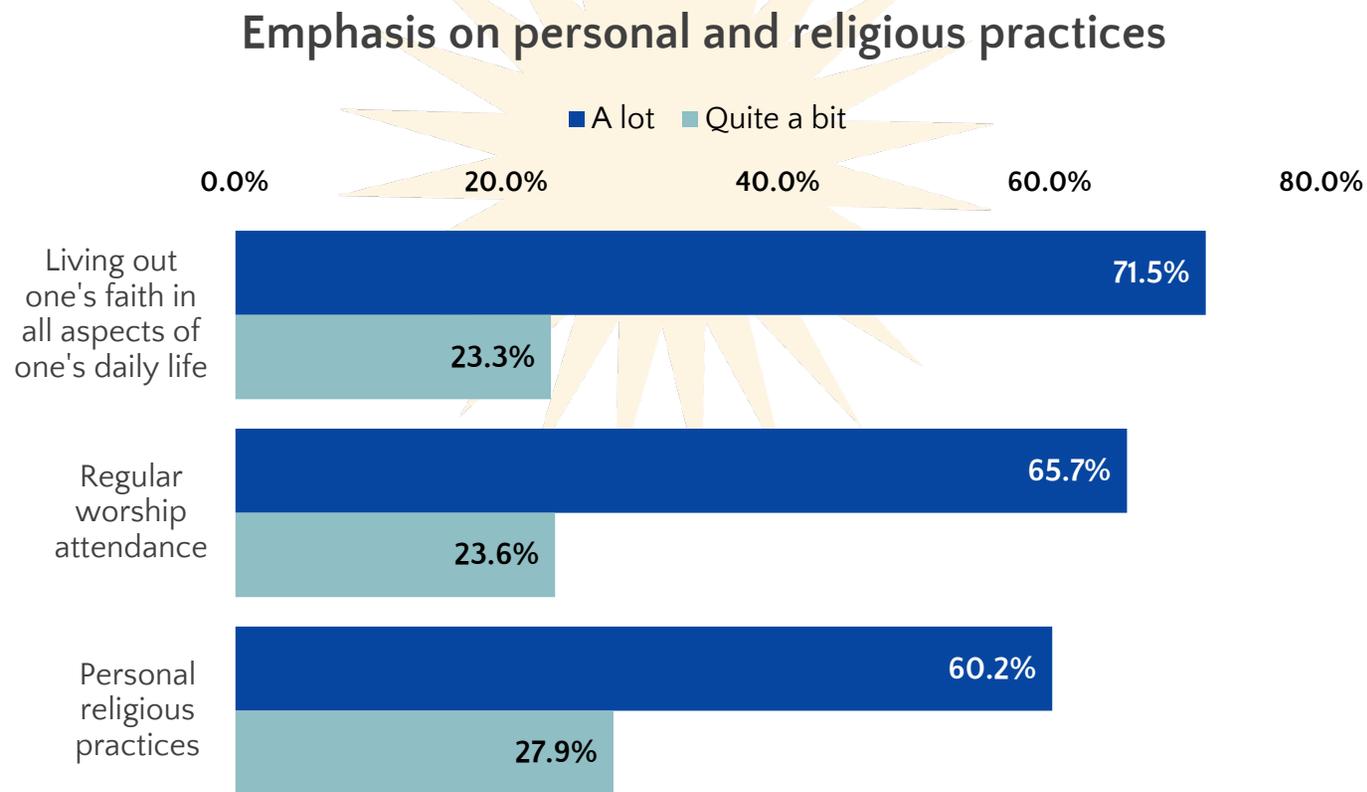
Spiritual Vitality and Related Programs

As Vitality Rises, So Does Emphasis on Certain Programs



With greater spiritual vitality, there is a larger percentage of congregations with more emphasis on certain programs. A greater sense of spiritual vitality generally equals more emphasis on programs supporting spirituality. Surprisingly, there is an overall low percentage of congregations in general with spiritual retreats, even among those at the highest level of spiritual vitality (15.5%). Another surprising fact is that the program most correlated with spiritual vitality is an emphasis on community service activities (44.9%). Yet only one in ten of these highly spiritually vital churches (9.7%) strongly agree they place a lot of emphasis on social justice and/or advocacy groups. Interestingly, in the spiritually vital congregation, almost every other adult person (47.4%) regularly serves as a volunteer.

Spiritual Vitality and Religious Practices



An emphasis on "living out one's faith in all aspects of one's daily life" is strongly related correlation to the level of spiritual vitality reported in congregations; there is a substantial relationship between the two. Interestingly, the most spiritually vital congregations place a greater emphasis on living out one's faith than they do on emphasizing regular worship attendance, as the chart above shows. Three in five vital congregations (60.2%) place a lot of emphasis on personal religious practices such as prayer, meditation, scripture study and/or devotions. Only 12.4% of vital congregations place a lot of emphasis on fasting and 23.3% on observing special practices or restrictions on one's holy days.

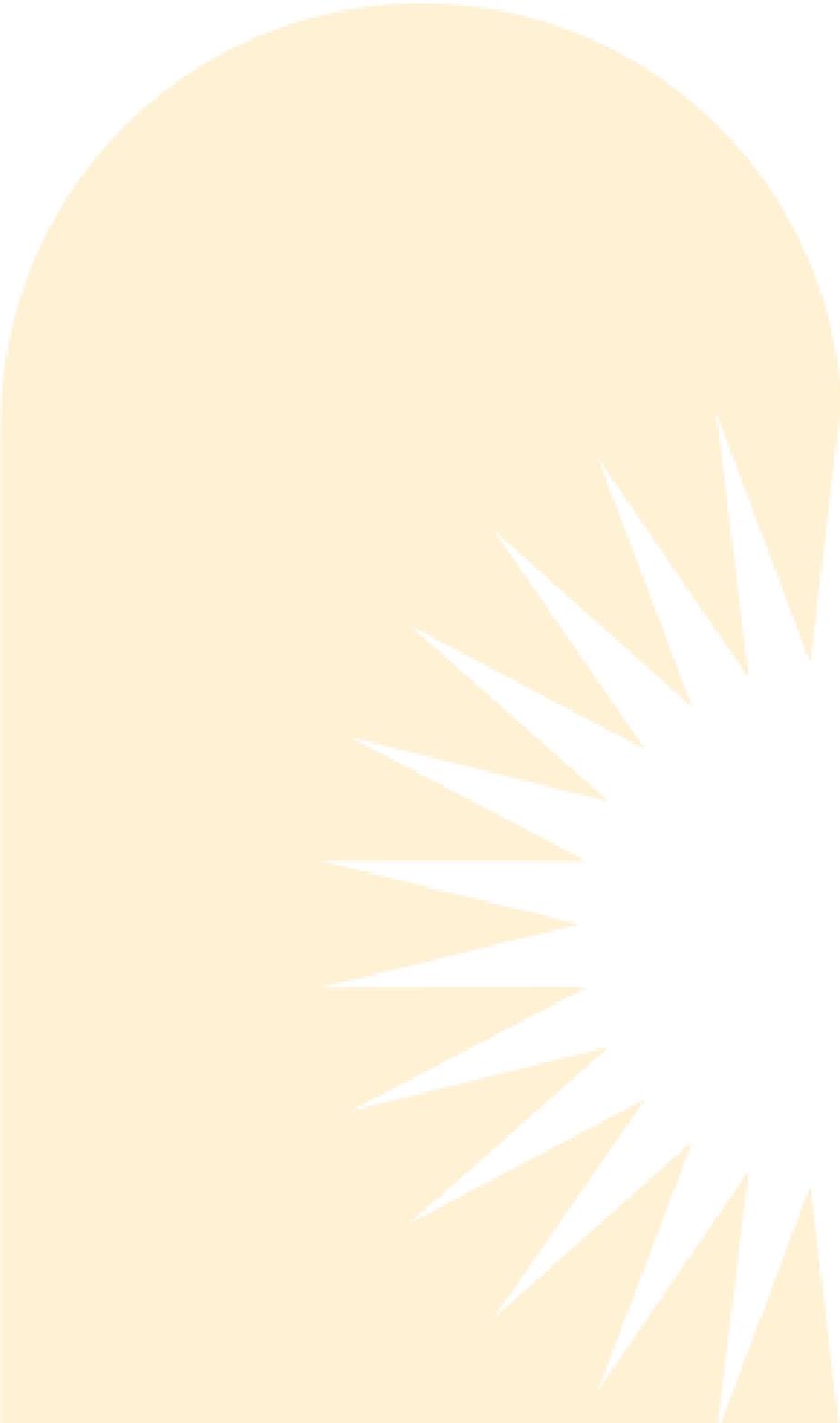
Spiritual Vitality and Age Groups



Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive					
	<u>Stongly disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Neither agree or disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly agree</u>
Children (ages 0-12)	14.4%	10.3%	12.4%	13.4%	15.5%
Youth (ages 13-17)	9.5%	7.3%	7.5%	9.2%	9.1%
Young adults (ages 18-34)	16.2%	7.5%	11.6%	13.7%	16.4%
Middle adults (ages 35-64)	24.7%	25.8%	31.0%	33.2%	34.0%
Senior adults (ages 65 and older)	37.0%	50.5%	40.1%	33.2%	27.6%

The above table shows the average percentage of age-group distribution in congregations cross-tabulated by the level of agreement with spiritual vitality. The lowest percentage of presence (an average of 8.87%) is youth (ages 13-17). It needs to be noted that the range of years for this demographic is the smallest of all groups (only 5 years).

All age groups except senior adults have an above-average percentage in spiritually vital congregations. In other words, less vital congregations have a higher percentage of senior adults. In general, senior adults make up the largest group in all congregations that are reported to be less spiritually vital and alive.



Conclusion

In 2020, about a third of faith communities reported they strongly agreed that “spiritually vital and alive” described their congregation. This is over 40% more than did so in 2015.

Most spiritually vital congregations had a set of distinctive characteristics that included:

- being open to incorporating new people
- willing to change to meet new challenges
- having thought-provoking worship services
- emphasizing religious education for both children and adults
- considering it important to live out one's faith in all aspects of daily life, not just during sacred time
- having more younger people participating

Despite minor variances by faith tradition and denomination, it is remarkable to see the level of general agreement on common denominators of spiritually vital and alive congregations. We hope this report offers a helpful glimpse into the rates and traits of spiritual vitality among congregations in the U.S. and look forward to exploring this further with our FACT 2023 survey.