

Spiritual and Social Trends and Patterns in the Christian Reformed Church in North America

SECOND EDITION

*A report on the 2012 Christian Reformed Church Survey,
sixth in a quinquennial series beginning in 1987*

Rodger Rice
Neil Carlson
Thomas Sherwood
Traci Montgomery
Melissa Lubbers
Daniel Molling
Michael Kelly

Foreword by Rev. Joel Boot

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Calvin College Center for Social Research (CSR)

Neil Carlson, Ph.D., Director
Thomas Sherwood, Research Associate, 2011-2013
Traci Montgomery, Research Specialist, 2012-2014
Melissa Lubbers, Research Assistant, 2012-2014
Daniel Molling, Research Assistant, 2011-2013
Michael Kelly, Research Assistant, 2012-2014
Kathy Bardolph, Administrative Assistant

Barnabas Foundation

Rodger Rice, Ph.D., Consultant; also Director Emeritus of CSR

Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA)

Rev. Joel Boot, Executive Director

2012 CRC Survey Advisory Group:

Gary Bekker, Director, World Missions, team leader
Bruce Adema, [then] Director, Canadian Ministries
Henry Hess, Director, Communications

With assistance from:

Moses Chung, Director, Home Missions
Viviana Cornejo, Ministry Developer, Home Missions
Lis Van Harten, Program Director,
Sustaining Congregational Excellence and Sustaining Pastoral Excellence
Steve Kabetu, Canada Director, World Missions

Survey translators

Spanish: Mrs. Nancy Ayala, Back to God Ministries
Korean: Mrs. Eunae Chung
Chinese: Ms. Xiaohong Zhou

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Calvin College Center for Social Research

Mailing: 3201 Burton St. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
Street: 2041 Raybrook St. SE, Suite 103
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
Phone: #616-526-7799
Email: csr@calvin.edu
Web: <http://www.calvin.edu/csr>

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Executive Summary

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA or just CRC) is a bi-national body of believers with almost 1,100 congregations and almost 300,000 participating believers in the United States and Canada.¹ The church's headquarters are found in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the denomination has an unusually influential array of agencies and institutions. More information is available at www.crcna.org.

The 2012 CRCNA Congregant Survey (publicly labeled the "2012 CRC Survey," given the timing) sought data from individuals at 233 randomly-selected Christian Reformed churches² during the period from August 2012 to January 2013. The survey's stated purpose was "To help leaders at all levels of the CRC to understand trends and patterns in the composition of the church and the beliefs and practices of the people."

The 2012 survey continued a series of surveys conducted by the Calvin College Center for Social Research every five years since 1987. Several new features first introduced in 2007 were repeated or expanded in 2012:

- a **focus on local congregational health** and much less about denominational agencies *per se*;
- **church-based sampling and data-collection method** that allowed churches to recruit anonymous responses that were aggregated and returned to churches custom reports (in 2012, we doubled the number of randomly-sampled churches, re-inviting 113 of the 120 who participated in 2007, and inviting 120 new cases);
- economical, **all-online response collection** that tripled responses over prior surveys;
- available **Spanish, Korean and Chinese translations** (Chinese is new in 2012).

After extended, personal data collection efforts, the survey concluded with 2,609 responses from 102 unique churches; 67 churches provided at least 10 responses, and 40 provided the 30 responses minimum necessary to receive a special report. 22 churches participated both in 2007 and in 2012. The response rate is difficult to calculate due to the list creation method, but based on Yearbook membership numbers, about **7.3% of the 102 participating churches' members** participated (see **Table 2** on page 8).

An important caveat for this entire report is that there was very little response to substantial efforts to recruit responses from multiethnic, nonwhite and non-English-speaking congregations in our random sample. This report underrepresents these important demographics, which were supplied in 2007 by recruiting responses from a few congregations willing to participate despite not forming part of the sample. We are discussing plans to remedy this absence through efforts to replicate the 2012 survey in 2013 or later with at least 50 of these underrepresented churches, with plans to report especially on the comparative results.

CRC TRENDS, 1987-2012

Our first set of results builds on the previous four surveys to provide a twenty-five-year portrait of social and spiritual trends in the denomination. We report the following key trends:

- **Aging population:** Median age³ continued to increase, from 44 years old in 1987 and 52 in 2007 to 54 years old in 2012. After falling from 53 in 2002 to 51.3 in 2007, mean age resumed climbing in 2012 to 53. See **Figure 1** on page 10.

¹ For an excellent, brief overview of CRC history, beliefs, and membership statistics, please visit <http://www.crcna.org/welcome>.

² We began with 120 newly sampled cases and the original 120 from our 2007 sample, but 7 of the 2007 participating churches are no longer reachable, leaving 233. We have not (yet) conducted a study of Yearbook data, but we saw a loss of 5.8% over 5 years (with sizeable sampling error), a compound annual closure rate of 1.2% per year. Yet the total number of CRCNA congregations grew from 1,057 to 1,099 over the same period (see <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/membership-statistics>), a 0.8% compound annual growth rate, suggesting that church planting efforts might exceed 2% per year.

³ The median age is the age of the person exactly halfway between the ends of a line of all respondents sorted by age; the median is much less sensitive to a few large or small values than the mean, which adds up all ages and divides by the number of people.

- **Low but stabilizing proportions of children and children in Christian schools:** as a concomitant effect of aging, households with children fell from 47% in 1987 to 35% in 2007 and 2012, while the proportion of households with children in Christian school fell from 41% in 1978 to 19% in 2007, increasing slightly to 20% in 2012. See **Figure 3** on page 12.
- **Rising socioeconomic status:** relative to national averages, CRC respondents had been becoming steadily more educated and higher-income on average, but both trends stabilized between 2007 and 2012 (though US median income fell and Canadian median income increased); see **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** beginning on page 13.
- **A recent increase in loyalty both to denomination and to the local church:** after a major uptick from 1992 to 1997 (possibly due to the departure of significant numbers of discontented congregants in the mid-90s over the issue of women in ministry), the denomination had seen a decline in the proportion of respondents who were “very loyal” to the denomination, falling from 63% in 1997 to 53% in 2007; but in 2012, the number increased slightly to 55%. Strong loyalty to the local congregation had fallen from 70% to 65% over ten years from 1997 to 2007, but also increased to 68% in 2012. See **Figure 6** on page 15.
- **Weekly morning attendance drops a little as evening worship attendance continues to plummet:** weekly morning attendance fell a bit to 86% in 2012, the lowest figure in the survey series but comparable to 1987’s 87%, the proportion of respondents attending evening worship services every week fell from 51% in 1987 to 17% in 2012. See **Figure 9** on page 18.
- **Declining frequency of devotional activities:** **Figure 10** on page 19 shows that four daily devotional practices (private prayer, Bible reading, family devotions and personal devotions) have all fallen steadily since 1987, reaching record-low levels of daily practice in 2012.

STEWARDSHIP: FACTORS RELATED TO GENEROUS GIVING

The survey, benefitting from author Rice’s work with the Barnabas Foundation, asked for the first time in 2007 about total household income, total gifts to the congregation, and a battery of stewardship-related questions. In 2012, we found the following:

- **The median percentage of household income given to church is 6.1%, steady since 2007;** however, just 19% of respondents report giving 10% or more of their income to the local church, down 3% from 2007. See **Figure 11** on page 21.
- **Older respondents give greater percentages; wealthier respondents give smaller percentages.** See **Figure 12** on page 22 and **Figure 13** on page 23.
- **Spiritual nourishment is strongly associated with generosity:** “malnourished” respondents (those who pray, read the Bible and have personal devotions less than weekly or never) give a median 4.1% of income to the local church. “Daily nourished” Christians give a median of 7.7% (up 0.7% since 2007). See **Figure 17** on page 27.

Generosity is thus strongly associated with personal spiritual health.

CHURCH LIFE CYCLES AND CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

In this section, we introduce author George Bullard’s concept of “life stages,” comparing churches to individuals by analogy to infancy, early childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mature adulthood, retirement, and old age. The analogy is only that; in fact, the purpose is to emphasize the capacity of churches to monitor themselves for signs of aging and to undertake rejuvenation efforts when signs of aging appear.

- **Most CRC congregations are mature, retiring or in old age:** 62%,⁴ according to **Figure 22** on page 33 and using Bullard’s grouping. However, if mature adulthood is regarded as a healthy life stage, then 68% of CRC churches are young or mature, but not retiring or aging.

⁴ Corrected; our first version said “67%.” Our apologies for the error.

- **“Younger” churches are healthier, enjoy more volunteer hours and enthusiasm, and sense more belonging.** These findings suggest that the life-stage indicator is a potential one-question workshop-worthy proxy for the much bigger Healthy Church scales.
- **Millennials’ interest in long-term relationships with churches has jumped, but “younger” churches have fewer people seeking such relationships.** This is a major finding, though serendipitous: surveyed Millennials (under 30 in 2012) express more interest than any other generation in pursuing a long-term church relationship, rather than seeking primarily to meet their own needs or to use their gifts. Yet they are more likely to find others looking for such relationships in “older” life cycle churches. See **Figure 28** on page 39 and **Figure 29** on page 40.
- **Vision fades in aging churches;** but recovering a shared vision can rejuvenate a church. See **Figure 30** on page 41.

MEASURING AND EXPLAINING PERCEPTIONS OF CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

The 2012 survey continues to build on integration with the Healthy Church survey instrument, which is now in regular use by the Healthy Church coaching network supporting individual congregations on each congregation’s convenient schedule. We asked respondents 40 to 50 questions each from the 163 items in the 11 Healthy Church scales; this section analyzes these responses briefly.

- **Perceptions of overall church health improved slightly from 2007 to 2012,** including among repeat-participant congregations. See **Figure 33** on page 44.
- **Centrality of the Bible continues to be the healthiest area** in congregants’ perceptions of the CRC, but Biblical knowledge and reading habits still need work within the Biblical scale, while items from outreach- and discipleship-related scales (Kingdom Extension and Disciple Making) are the least likely to be affirmed true. See **Figure 34** on page 45 and **Figure 35** on page 46.
- **Respondents give higher ratings to the church than to themselves;** the gap between self and church is widest in Centrality of the Bible and in Kingdom Extension. See **Figure 36** on page 47.
- **Churches vary widely and can learn from each other.** We compare four churches and discuss how even the healthiest churches could learn from their peers that excel in certain areas. See **Figure 37** on page 48.
- **Contemporary learning modes stand out as potential practical levers to increase church health.** As we found in 2007, we again find that healthier churches engage more often in storytelling, drama, audiovisual content, discussion, and other forms of engagement. Experimentation with these practices could deliver great improvements in church health. See the discussion of multivariate models beginning on page 48 as well as **Figure 38** on page 50.

THEMES FROM RESPONDENTS’ COMMENTS

Survey respondents had two opportunities to express themselves at length, about the role of CRCNA agencies and ministries in the health of their congregations and about the survey and “our life together as the body of Christ.” We received and coded over 750 comments from over 400 respondents. See **Figure 39** on page 51 and **Figure 40** on page 52 for a breakdown of the themes we coded.

- **As in 2007, the most prevalent theme was praise and gratitude for the CRCNA.** About 18% of comments included this theme.
- **We noted substantial anxiety about change and perceived loss of traditional beliefs and practices.** However, we note that this anxiety is unfocused; while some individual writers are confident of their prophetic voice, there is little sense of a consensus of the proper diagnosis for what ails the CRC. See page 54 for sample quotes.
- **There was a measurable rise in mentions of denominational governance issues.** About 14% of responses about ministries and agencies mentioned this theme. Many respondents expressed concern about the quality of relationship between agencies and congregations, citing a loss of sense of ownership and belonging. Others, however, expressed admiration for the Banner as a communications vehicle and faulted themselves for failing to take advantage of CRC services. See page 56.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the trends we are monitoring have not improved, though some have stabilized. If we predict the results of present patterns in the life cycle of our congregations, yes, the CRC is in crisis.

However, the data are also full of evidence of God's gifts, and he is calling us to action. A chief ministry priority approved in 2005 remains in operation: creating and sustaining healthy congregations. We reiterate "five keys to healthier congregations" from 2007 and add three new keys. The old five are:

- Spiritual development,
- Stewardship education,
- Disciple-making,
- Leadership training, and
- Keeping in touch (communication with congregants).

The three new keys are:

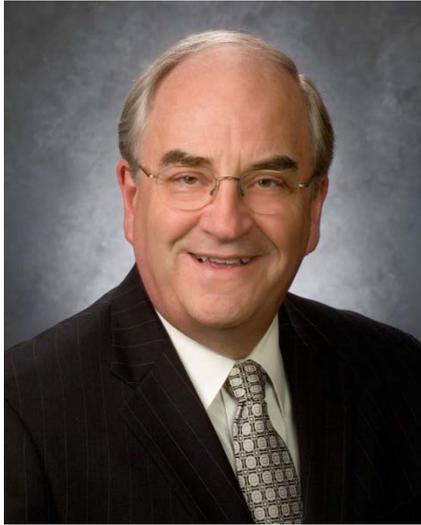
- **Church renewal**, including Healthy Church coaching. For example, see **Figure 37** on page 48 and the surrounding discussion about how churches might learn from each other and be revitalized through the Healthy Church coaching network.
- **Contemporary learning modes**. See **Figure 38** on page 50 and the narrative about how churches might benefit by employing more simple tools like drama, storytelling, children's participation, and group discussion. Digital audiovisual tools are still new in the sanctuary, but their proper role is still just to tell parables that grip the imagination with a longing for holiness and compassion.
- **One body, with unity in diversity**: we perceive that the CRC would benefit from a concerted "1 Corinthians 12" effort by pastors. Too many congregants perceive decay in other parts of the body near and far, but these perceptions are incoherent, circumstantial, or based on hearsay. Our survey data shows that we are largely healthy by a broad range of standards carefully designed to reflect Reformed faith and practice. We need to learn to show grace to the parts of the body we do not understand and to learn to value their functions. This recommendation encompasses diversity in: Biblical interpretation; sexual ethics; management and governance; the proper relationship between piety and politics; geographic and social divides; and ethnic, linguistic, cultural and racial backgrounds.

Finally, as suggested by the last phrase, all of these recommendations and indeed the entire report must be read through a lens of concern about our ability to operate as one body with all races, ethnicities, languages and cultures. We plan to invite fresh participation by ethnic and racial minorities in CRC surveys in the near future.

RESOURCES AND FEEDBACK

The final section of the report documents forthcoming resources and future plans; readers may visit <http://www.calvin.edu/go/crcsurvey> for much more information about the survey data.

The authors and the CRCNA leadership welcome your comments, critiques and suggestions. For the authors, write to csr@calvin.edu; for the CRCNA leadership, contact executive-director@crcna.org. Or include both addresses in a general message.



Foreword

Starting in 1987, Calvin College's Center for Social Research has surveyed Christian Reformed congregants at five year intervals (1987, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007-8, and 2012-13). The purpose has been to help leaders at all levels of the Christian Reformed Church understand trends and patterns in the composition of the church and in the beliefs and practices of Christian Reformed people. Such understanding has value as it informs our prayers and work together toward more faithful service to Christ.

A survey offers something like a photograph of many people. A photo does not present the people themselves. And, a photo shows parts of those people from a particular angle at a given point in time. To a stranger, the photograph may be worth very little. But, to the people photographed, the resulting picture may show all sorts of things, some delightful, some challenging. The findings of this survey hardly tell the whole story of the Christian Reformed Church. But they do tell us much about ourselves. Some of what the findings tell ought to increase our thanks to God for how he has shaped and deployed us for and in his service. Some of what they tell ought to drive us to prayer for wisdom in finding ways of serving our Lord more faithfully than we have. In any case, the real value of the survey will lie in how we respond to what it shows, not completely and hardly perfectly, but clearly enough about ourselves.

On behalf of the Christian Reformed Church, I want to thank Dr. Rodger Rice and the Calvin College Center for Social Research team for their excellent service in conducting the survey and for their ongoing work in helping us understand what it shows us about ourselves. May our Lord be honored as we use the picture of ourselves shown in this sixth survey to guide our life together in service to our Lord.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel R. Boot". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

Joel R. Boot
Executive Director of the CRCNA

I. An introduction to the survey

SURVEY PURPOSE: TRENDS, VOICE AND HEALTH

At the request of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and with kind cooperation of CRCNA leadership and the pastors, staff, and laypeople at dozens of local congregations, the Calvin College Center for Social Research (CSR) fielded the 2012 CRCNA Congregant Survey (publicly named the “2012 CRC Survey”) from September 2012 to January 2013. As agreed by a task force of CRCNA leaders, the survey’s stated purpose was “To help leaders at all levels of the CRC to understand trends and patterns in the composition of the church and the beliefs and practices of the people.”

As we first wrote five years ago, let us be clear: God is the only true judge of whether a congregation is healthy or not. Survey data is a helpful source of information of what God’s people believe, or are willing to say they believe, about their churches. The reader’s prayerful wisdom and judgment is indispensable. Churches should not shape their missions solely to improve their scores on these variables, like students studying only for the exam and not seeking to learn. But churches may certainly find that these distilled opinions offer insight into our real strengths and weaknesses as a denomination.

QUESTIONNAIRE: A CONTINUED FOCUS ON LOCAL CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

Surveys of CRC members have been conducted by CSR under the direction of one of us (Rice) every five years since 1987, so the 2012 survey marks the sixth such benchmark. As for any longitudinal study, a top priority for this survey design was to repeat questions from previous years so as to monitor trends. However, the denominational task force in 2007 was also particularly concerned with a competing priority, to establish the new survey as one of many means to emphasize and serve the denomination’s growing focus on healthy local congregations. The 2007 questionnaire, reflected in 2012, retained a limited set of trend items from previous years, focused primarily on the demographics and spiritual practices of congregants. The 2007 questionnaire dropped a large number of agency-oriented questions from previous surveys to make room for the new focus on congregational health.

In 2006, a team of denominational leaders began developing a CRC-specific survey on healthy congregations, adapted with permission from an instrument developed by the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). Today, the Healthy Church initiative is in full swing, with dozens of trained coaches and dozens of churches having participated, on their own timing, in the Healthy Church Survey (HCS). The HCS is built around 11 categories or “rubrics” for measuring congregational health and offers a battery of questions about each. Our 2007 design selected four indicators in each of these 11 areas, two referring to the health of the congregation and two referring to the health of the individual. In 2012, we followed a similar plan, selecting 22 indicators to ask of all survey respondents. But we also expanded this significantly, exposing each respondent to a randomly selected subset of the remaining 141 questions from the Health Church Survey. The result is that the entire survey dataset includes enough data on each question to present a sort of “2012 Healthy Church snapshot” of the entire denomination.

The survey team also made minor modifications to the rest of the survey, dropping some questions that did not deliver much value in 2007 and adding a few new demographic items of interest, particularly relating to economic activities.

The questionnaire required 20 to 45 minutes to complete, with the following sections:

1. Welcome and congregation selection
2. Healthy Church items (11 rubrics)
3. Congregational life cycle
4. Components of worship and worship styles
5. Personal spiritual health and participation in congregation and devotions
6. Stewardship and financial contributions
7. Belonging, loyalty, membership, baptism, profession of faith, CRC ties and Christian schooling
8. Contribution of CRCNA ministries and agencies to congregational health
9. Personal demographics
10. Closing comment

As English-language data collection began, Spanish- and Korean-language translations of the survey were updated and a Chinese language version was created for the first time. The survey team is much indebted to Ms. Nancy Ayala, Mrs. Eunae Chung and Ms. Xiaohong Zhou for their work on the translations. These translations were deployed in September of 2012 shortly after the English language launch and received a few responses in each language.

The survey instrument is reproduced on our website, along with a preview link to the online survey and other resources. Visit <http://www.calvin.edu/go/crcsurvey>.

SAMPLING METHOD: CONGREGATION-BASED RECRUITMENT OF ONLINE RESPONSES

The 1987-2002 membership surveys have been invaluable, but in 2007, we wanted to attempt to improve the survey's inclusiveness, usefulness and cost-effectiveness. The 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2002 surveys were mailed to samples drawn from a master list of households supplied by central denominational records. Such records are unavoidably biased toward people with relatively stronger connections to the denomination; in 2007, we wanted to make a concerted effort to hear from members and non-members who may not have been known to the central offices. Second, the earlier surveys did not record which church the respondent attended, making it impossible to serve particular churches with information about their congregants; in keeping with our focus on congregational health, we wanted to be able to provide individual congregations with data about their respondents. Finally, the earlier surveys incurred significant expenses for printing, mailing and re-mailing questionnaires to over 1,200 people, while returning just 500 responses. In 2007, we experimented successfully with Internet-only responses, to reduce costs and to increase the availability of the survey to church members and attenders.⁵

The 2012 survey applied the following methods: 120 churches sampled in 2007 were included in the survey for a second time; 7 had closed, leaving 113. 120 additional cases were randomly sampled from the remaining list of congregations active in June 2012. A well-designed electronic mail invitation was prepared with a note from CRCNA Executive Director Rev. Joel Boot and advice from Henry Hess, Director of Communications. A team of Calvin College student research assistants contacted these 233 churches repeatedly by email and telephone, asking them to participate by appointing an in-house "survey coordinator." In the end, 102 churches participated out of 233 invited, a 44% participation rate.

Survey coordinators were provided with handouts, announcement scripts and other materials to facilitate promotion of the survey within their congregations over the course of several weeks; coordinators also received regular telephone calls and email messages to report on how many responses had been received at CSR to date. In many cases, participation was delayed as Council approval to participate was sought.

The 2007 and 2012 sampling method is thus a combination of random selection of churches with "convenience samples" of willing participants in congregations. The results are not, therefore, a strictly statistically random sample of the CRCNA population and may suffer from a variety of biases, given the disposition of the church to participate, the extent of the church's response-recruitment efforts, and the relative availability of survey participants. However, we believe the results are highly defensible and useful on a number of grounds. First and most important, we find that the actual demographic and attitudinal distributions among respondents are consistent with distributions and trends established in previous surveys. We received responses across demographic categories in patterns that closely reflect the denomination's self-portrait from other sources, including the Yearbook. Second, given that we lack a central denominational database of all congregational members and attenders, the church-based recruitment method is arguably more inclusive and representative than past surveys. Third, any form of sampling suffers from the problem of self-selection; by definition, we never receive responses from those unwilling to complete surveys, so similar "convenience samples" necessarily exist even within statistically random samples. Finally, despite large variation in the participating churches (of the 102 surveyed congregations, just 22 were repeats from 2007), 2012 response frequencies for many opinion-based survey items (such as worship preferences and congregational health assessments) are distributed

⁵ Some offsetting exclusivity results from the online-only design, since Internet access is lacking in certain areas and among lower-income populations. However, response recruitment was done both on paper and in person, and survey materials encouraged respondents to get help from friends, church personnel, libraries and so forth. Many respondents did so.

identically to those from 2007, suggesting that the sampling approach produces representative samples in spite of significant shifts in which churches participate in a particular year. Given a choice between the old method and the 2007 strategy, we chose it again in 2012 and would do so again for the next survey.⁶

RESPONSES AND RESPONSE RATES

At the conclusion of the data collection period in January 2013, at least one response had been received from 102 churches. At least 10 responses were received from 67 churches; at least 30 responses (the minimum for a church to receive a customized report from CSR) were received from 40 churches, up to a maximum of 122 responses from a single church. Overall, 2,609 responses were received; 78.5 percent of these (2,048 cases) came from the top 40 responding churches. This result compares to previous surveys as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1 Survey history with response counts by year

Survey Year	Method	Sample Units	Total Respondents	Response Rate
1987	Mail	Members	555	N/A
1992	Mail	Members	617	N/A
1997	Mail	Members	488	44.4%
2002	Mail	Members	553	34.5%
2007-8	Internet	Churches	1,434	6.1% (est., Table 2 below)
2012	Internet	Churches	2,609	7.3% (est., Table 2 below)

Lacking a master list of potential respondents, we cannot calculate response rates in the traditional fashion. However, if we take the total CRC Yearbook membership counts,⁷ we can estimate response rates as percentages of congregational populations. These rate approximations range from 3.7 to 13.0 percent, as shown in **Table 2**. The best estimate is probably 7.3%, for the congregations that agreed to participate only; but this rate assumes that all members were in fact effectively invited to participate; some churches may not have distributed invitations so thoroughly.

Table 2 Response rate estimates

Group	Responses	2012 Yearbook Members	Rate
All 233 invited congregations	2,609	69,830	3.7%
All 101 participating congregations	2,609	35,748	7.3%
All 67 congregations with at least 10 respondents	2,512	26,373	9.5%
All 40 congregations with at least 30 respondents	2,048	19,382	13.0%

An important caveat for this entire report is that there was very little response to substantial efforts to recruit responses from multiethnic, nonwhite and non-English-speaking congregations in our random

⁶ We considered asking each congregation for a copy of its membership directories, but this would have been expensive to manage and could have been perceived as invasive. The present method is low-cost both for the denomination and for congregations, while remaining fully anonymous for individual respondents. However, it would still be greatly preferable to both past and present methods for the denomination to develop a robust denomination-wide master list of all churches' members and attenders, with suitable protections for individual and congregational control of privacy and communication channels.

⁷ Yearbook numbers were provided as a data file by the denominational offices in late 2012.

sample. Because the population of these congregations has grown, our random sample included over 25 such congregations. We expected to achieve sufficient representation of minority groups in 2012 simply by diligently did so recruiting responses from sampled congregations. We tried, but we failed, so this report underrepresents these important demographics, which were proportionately represented in the 2007 by recruiting responses from a few congregations willing to participate despite not forming part of the sample.

We are currently discussing with CRC leadership tentative plans to remedy this absence through efforts to replicate the 2012 survey in 2013 or later with at least 50 of these underrepresented churches, with plans to report especially on the comparative results.

WEIGHTS

For the analyses in this report, the survey data have been weighted to approximate a representative sample of the CRCNA by region and church size. That is, responses from smaller churches and from under-represented regions count more in calculating averages than those from less-represented regions and larger churches. As shown in **Table 3**, the least-represented churches (and therefore the most heavily weighted to compensate) are small churches in Eastern Canada (weight = 1.82 in 2007, 1.91 in 2012), while enthusiastic participation around Toronto in 2007 (weight = 0.50) and among small churches in West Canada in 2012 (weight = 0.52) led to small weights that reduce these respondents' leverage on overall averages.

Table 3 Weight matrix by region and church size

Summary statistics for CRC Surveys, 2007 and 2012

Country	Region (group)	Church Size	Survey Year				Grand Total	
			2007 Survey Wave		2012 Survey Wave		N	Weight
			N	Weight	N	Weight	N	Weight
Canada	East Canada	300 or fewer	30	1.82	63	1.91	93	1.88
		301 or more	396	0.50	276	1.26	672	0.81
	West Canada	300 or fewer	40	1.03	185	0.52	225	0.61
		301 or more	99	0.98	273	0.60	372	0.70
United States	US East, South, West	300 or fewer	175	0.83	196	1.51	371	1.19
		301 or more	108	1.40	196	1.27	304	1.31
	US Midwest	300 or fewer	128	1.43	408	0.95	536	1.07
		301 or more	458	1.23	1,012	0.94	1,470	1.03
Grand Total			1,434	1.00	2,609	1.00	4,043	1.00

In 2012, a small church representative in Eastern Canada counts as much as $1.91/0.52 = 3.67$ small church representatives in the Western Canada region. Despite the apparent disparity of weights, the effect of their application is usually insubstantial. For example, weighting may shift the estimated percentage strongly affirming a particular congregational health measure by a few percentage points, but it does not alter the overall relative pattern of affirmation or disaffirmation.

Meanwhile, the larger numbers of respondents from regions with low weights still have tremendous value by increasing the precision of the survey's estimates.

II. CRC trends over 25 years, 1987-2012

In this section, we shall report on a number of trends experienced by the CRC over approximately the past 25 years. A trend is a general movement over the course of time of some measurable change. The available measurement points in this report are the six surveys of the CRC taken every five years since 1987. The trends reviewed here are divided into three parts:

1. demographics;
2. church-related characteristics;
3. other trend items of interest available for 2007 and 2012 only.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Continued aging of the constituency

As shown in **Figure 1**, the mean age of survey respondents resumed climbing after declining briefly between 2002 and 2007, matching its 2002 high of 53 years and up from 51.3 years in 2007. These averages are not of the entire CRC population but only of those 18 or older, since respondents were limited to adults. When measured as a median—that is, the age at which half of all respondents are older and half younger—average age again shows an increase over the last survey, from 52 in 2007 to 54 in 2012.

Figure 1 Aging population

Median and mean age continue increasing

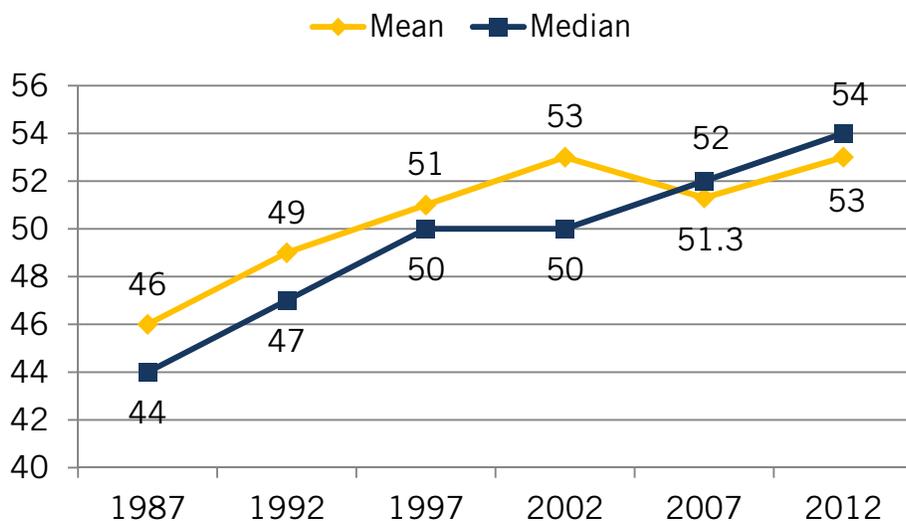
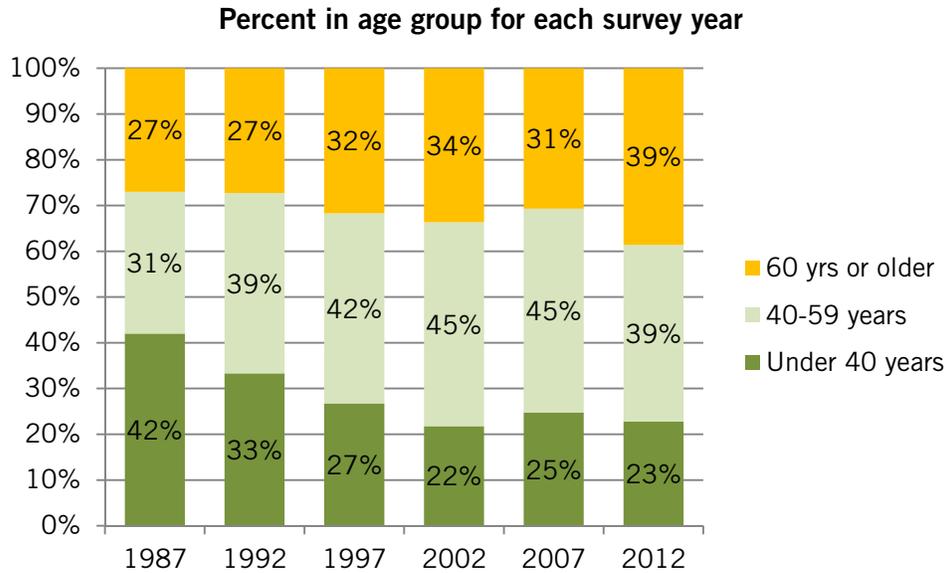


Figure 2 shows, for each survey year, a breakdown of respondents into three broad age categories: under 40, 40-59, and 60 or older. In 1987, Baby Boomers, the extraordinarily large cohort of babies born approximately between 1946 and 1965, would have been between the ages of 22 and 40. Boomers constituted a big part of the 42% of respondents under 40 in 1987. As Baby Boomers have aged, they have contributed to the expansion of the age group 40-59. By 2012, this relatively large “bulge” in the population had reached the ages between 47 and 65. A contributor to the aging of the CRC, then, has been this progressively advancing age cohort called Baby Boomers. They are the primary reason for the median increase of the last 20 years.

Figure 2 Age categories by survey year



We also note that the percent under 40 has resumed declining, reinforcing the probability that the slight uptick in younger respondents in 2007 was an artifact of the Internet-only response mode, not a small baby boom or surge in evangelism, given that neither of these is visible in other church membership reports.

Declining households with children and with children in Christian schools

Figure 3 shows a clear decline of households with children under 18, from 47% of all households in 1987 to 35% in 2012, though the figure stabilized from 2007 to 2012. The mean average number of children within all households has dropped from 1.1 in 1992 to 0.8 in 2012, again stable since 2007.

It isn't that the average number of children in households that have children has dropped, since that average has stayed relatively the same, around two children per household (not shown in the figure). The real change is simply that the percentage of households with dependent children is decreasing, so that today close to one of every three CRC households has the presence of school age children.

Figure 3 Average children; households with children; and households with children in Christian School

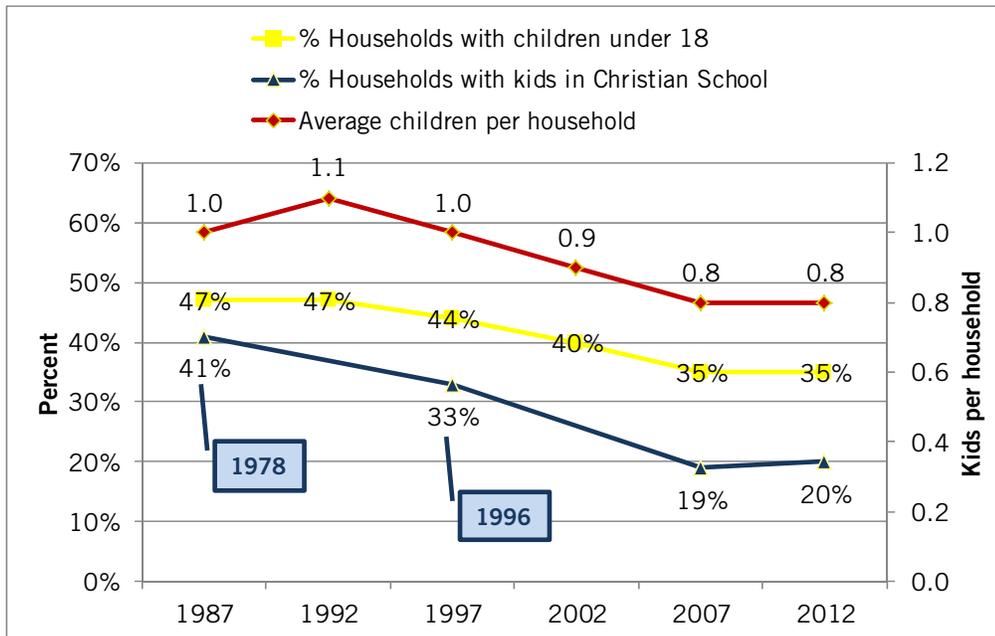
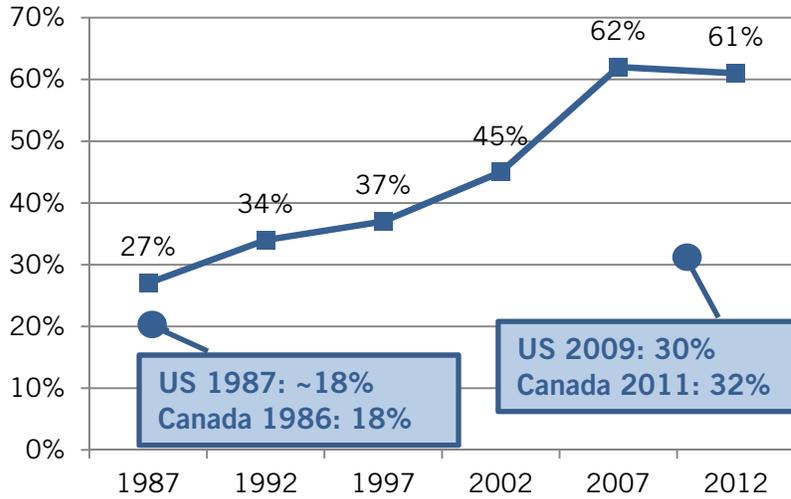


Figure 3 also shows a trend line for percentage of households with children under 18 attending Christian school. The question whether children in the household attended Christian school was not asked in previous surveys of this series. To estimate the trend, we borrow measurement points from two other denomination-wide surveys: a 1978 survey sponsored by the CRWRC and a 1996 survey sponsored by Barnabas Foundation. Using these three measurement points, we observe that the percentage of CRC households with children in Christian school fell from 41% in 1978 to 19% in 2007, but stabilized and even ticked up a bit to 20% in 2012. Only one in every five CRCNA households has children under 18 who are attending Christian school, where once that figure was two in every five.

Increasing proportion of CRC constituency with college education

Figure 4 shows stabilization in the proportion of CRC adults who are at least college graduates, after a sharp increase in from 2002 to 2007, which again may have been partly due to the Internet-only response format. Twenty-five years ago in 1987, 27% of the survey respondents said they were college graduates; by 2007, this number had increased to 62%, falling very slightly to 61% in 2012. The callout bubbles in this figure report official government estimates of national averages for the U.S. and Canada. The increase in college education over the last 25 years has been markedly steeper for the CRC relative to national averages.

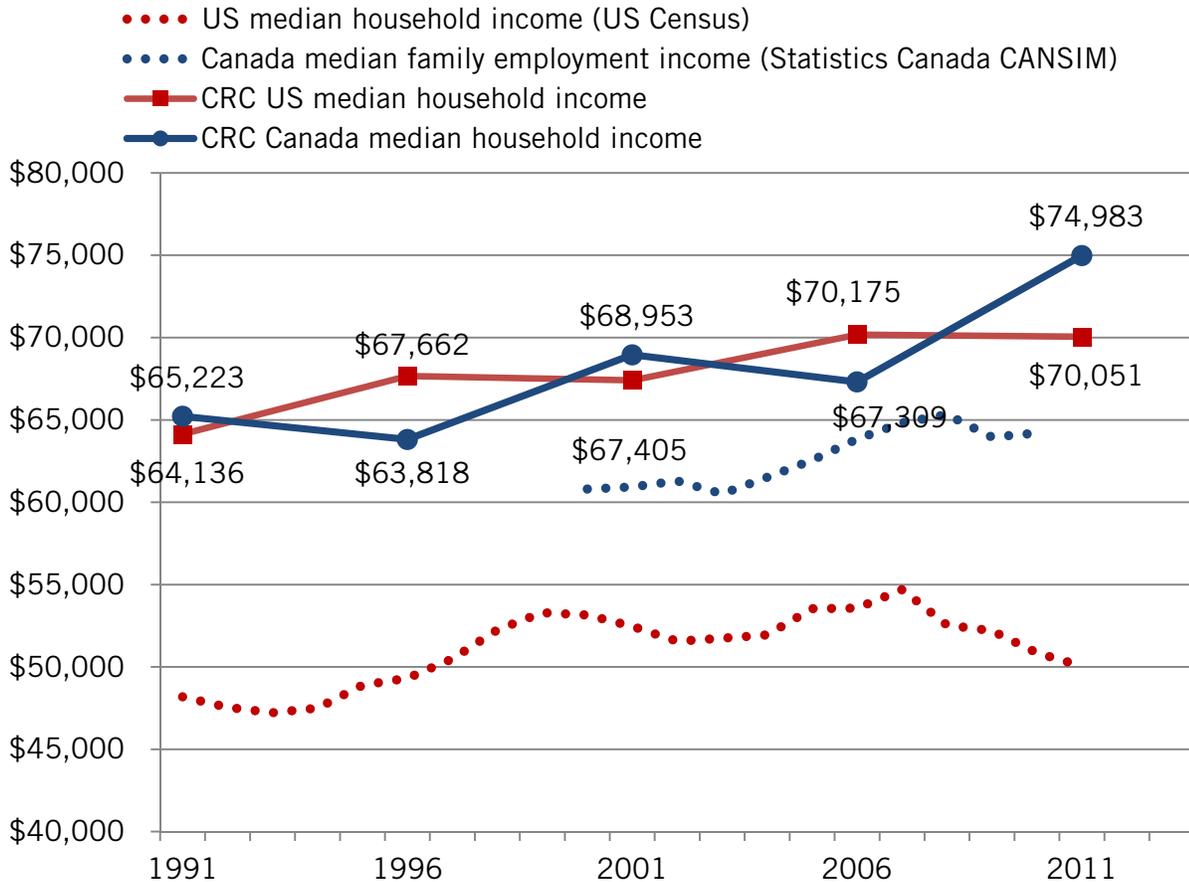
Figure 4 College-educated proportion is rising



Household income trend continues to be mixed

In **Figure 5**, annual household income (pre-taxes) medians have been adjusted to reflect inflation. For CRC households in both the United States and Canada, from 1991 through 2011, average incomes significantly exceed the national averages. But average income shows a mixed pattern for CRC US and CRC Canada, with adjusted median income at times increasing and other times decreasing. From 2007 to 2012, US and Canadian rates of change again traded places, with congregants in the US losing ground and congregants in Canada gaining significantly. Nevertheless, in the case of both, for the 20-year period 1991-2011, median annual household income adjusted for inflation has slightly increased. For CRC US, the 20-year increase was 7.0%, and for CRC Canada, 13.2%. These figures are reversed from 2007, in which the US had gained 9.4% and Canada just 3.2%.

Figure 5 Real (inflation-adjusted) household income trend is mixed but increasing over the long term⁸



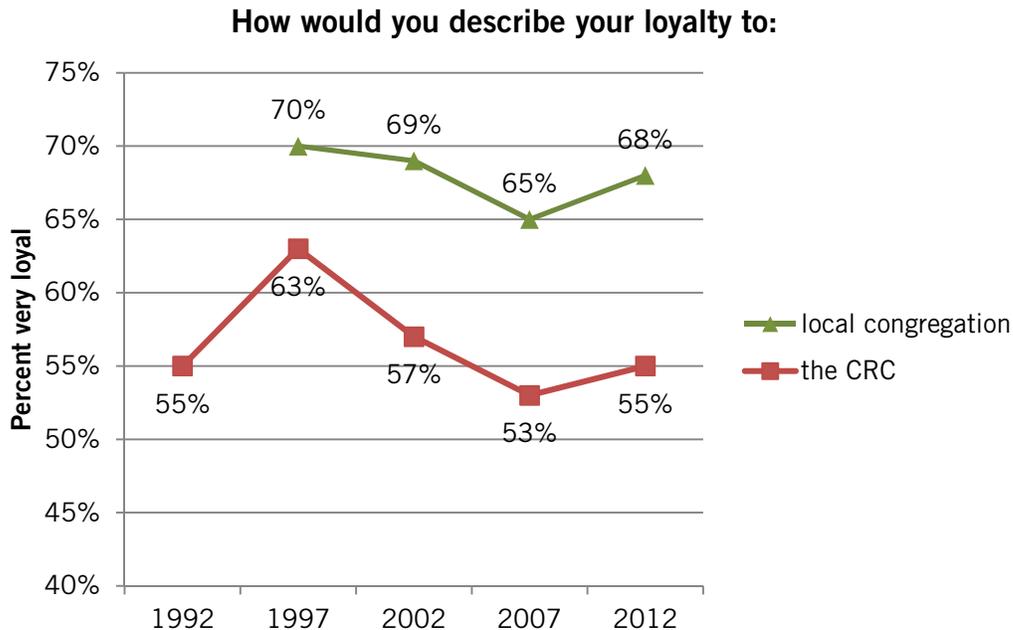
⁸ US median income figures were obtained from the US Census at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/household/> (Excel file at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/household/2011/H06AR_2011.xls; Canadian figures are from Statistics Canada's CANSIM table generator at <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/>, using "Median family employment income."

CHURCH-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS

Declining loyalty to CRC and local church

Since the 1997 survey, we have asked respondents to describe their level of loyalty to their local church. Four levels of loyalty are provided: very, somewhat, not very and none. As shown in **Figure 6**, those saying they are “very loyal” to their local church recovered slightly from 65% to 68% between 2007 and 2012.

Figure 6 Loyalty falling since 1997

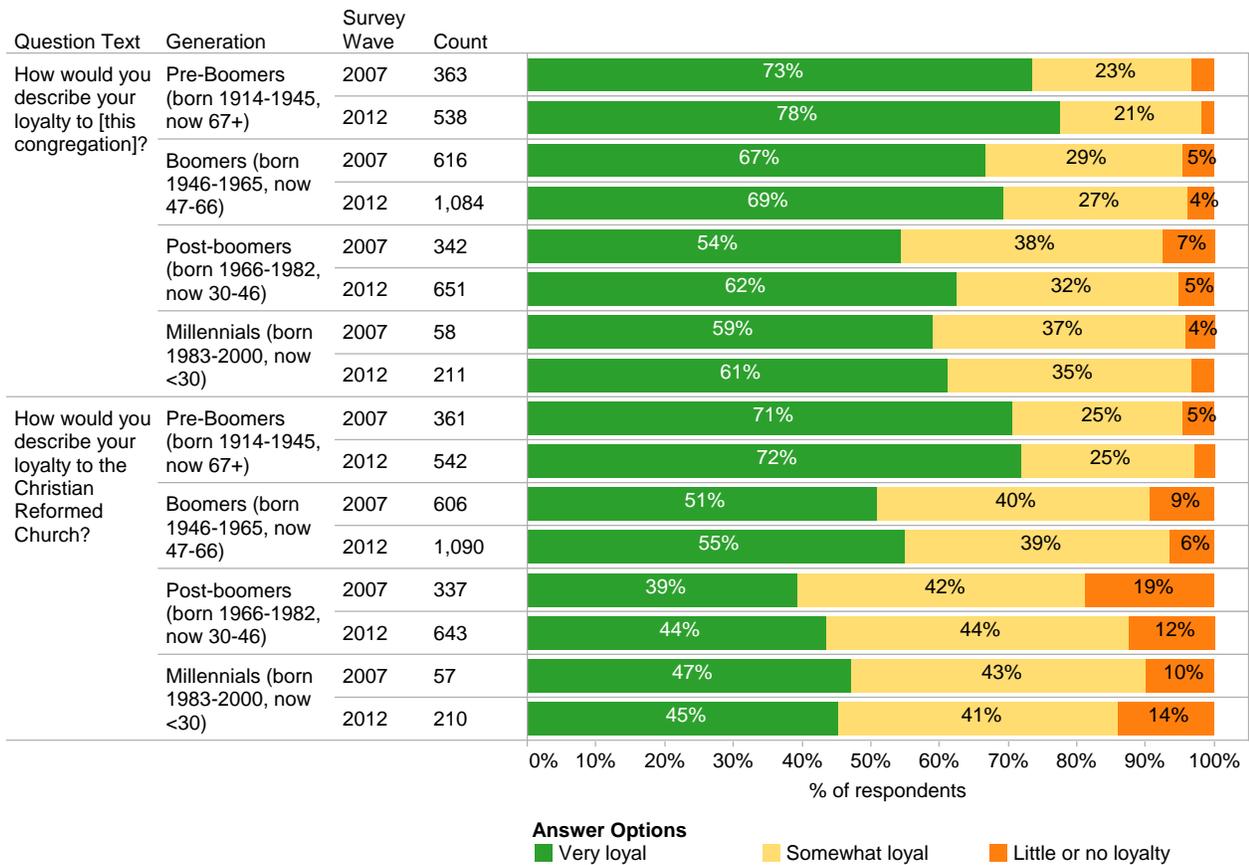


We began asking the loyalty-to-the-CRC question in 1992. Expressed level of loyalty to the denomination as a whole appears a bit weaker than to one’s local church. And, since 1997, the percentage saying very loyal to the CRC declined from 63% in 1997 to 53% in 2007, then recovered slightly to 55% in 2012. We may be witnessing a slight uptick in loyalty.

But loyalty’s meaning varies from generation to generation. In **Figure 7**, loyalty to the CRC in the 2007 and 2012 surveys is shown across four different generations: Pre-boomers, sometimes referred to as Traditionalists (ages 67 and older in 2012); Boomers or Baby Boomers (ages 47-66 in 2012); Post-boomers, often referred to as Generation X (ages 30-46); and Millennials, often called Generation Y (30 and younger).

Generation researchers say suspicion of institutions, such as governments, corporations and even churches, is characteristic of the younger generations, beginning with the Baby Boomers. Institutional suspicion weakens institutional loyalty (Lancaster and Stillman 2002). The top half of **Figure 7** shows, loyalty to local congregations decreases as generations get younger, but every generation’s loyalty to the local congregation increased in the last five years. Very few members of any generation acknowledge that they are “not very loyal” or “feel no loyalty” to their local congregation.

Figure 7 Loyalty varies by generation

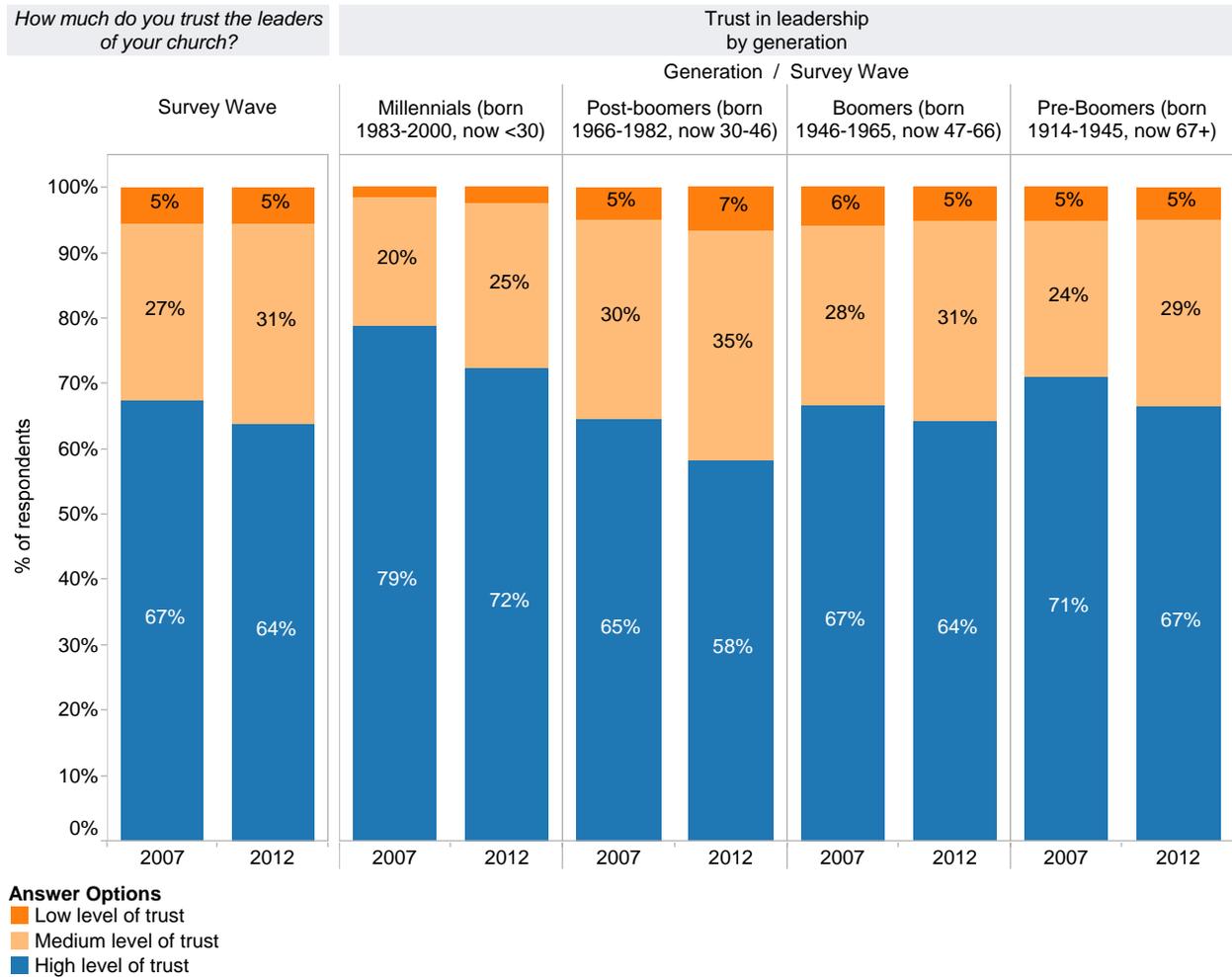


As the bottom half of **Figure 7** shows, among the oldest generation in the CRC, 72% said they are very loyal to the denomination in 2012, but 55% of the Baby Boomers, 44% of the Post-boomers (“Generation Xers”) and 45% of the Millennials (Generation Y) said they are very loyal. As these younger generations have become a larger proportion of the denomination, a natural consequence of their aging, overall loyalty to the CRC has weakened. The first three generations’ figures are up since 2007, however, by 1%, 4% and 5%, respectively. Millennials’ were the only generation with decreased “very loyal” responses, falling slightly by 2%. The proportion of Millennials admitting that they feel little or no loyalty to the CRC increased by 4% to 14%, rivaling the Post-boomers in their rates of weak attachment to the denomination.

Trust in leadership by generation

Respondents were asked in 2007 and 2012, “How much do you trust the leaders of your church?” **Figure 8** below shows the responses for all respondents, and then broken down by generation. The proportion of respondents who expressed a “high level of trust” fell from 69% in 2007 to 64% in 2012; the lowest reported trust level is among Post-boomers in 2012, falling 7% to 59% in 2012.

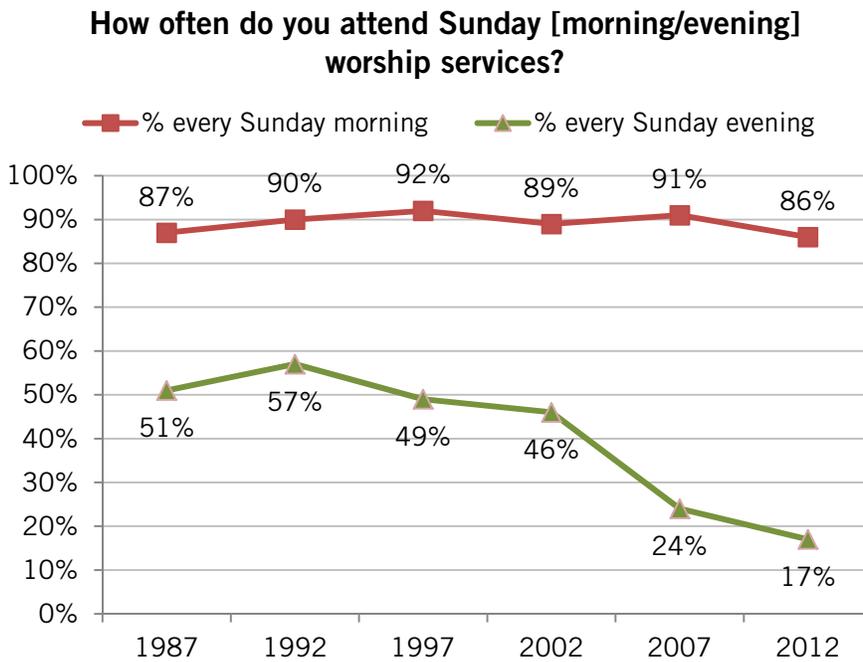
Figure 8 Trust in leadership by generation, 2007 and 2012



Declining evening worship attendance

In **Figure 9**, we see that the percentage of respondents who say they attend morning worship services every Sunday has remained fairly steady over the past 25 years; though we see a 5% dip since 2007, the figure is similar to 1987's 87% figure. Not so with evening worship service attendance. Since 1992, those attending every Sunday have fallen from 56% to 17% in 2012. The ratio of morning to evening attendees in 1992 was 2 to 5, compared to only 1 to 5 in 2012. Evening service attendance has clearly become optional.

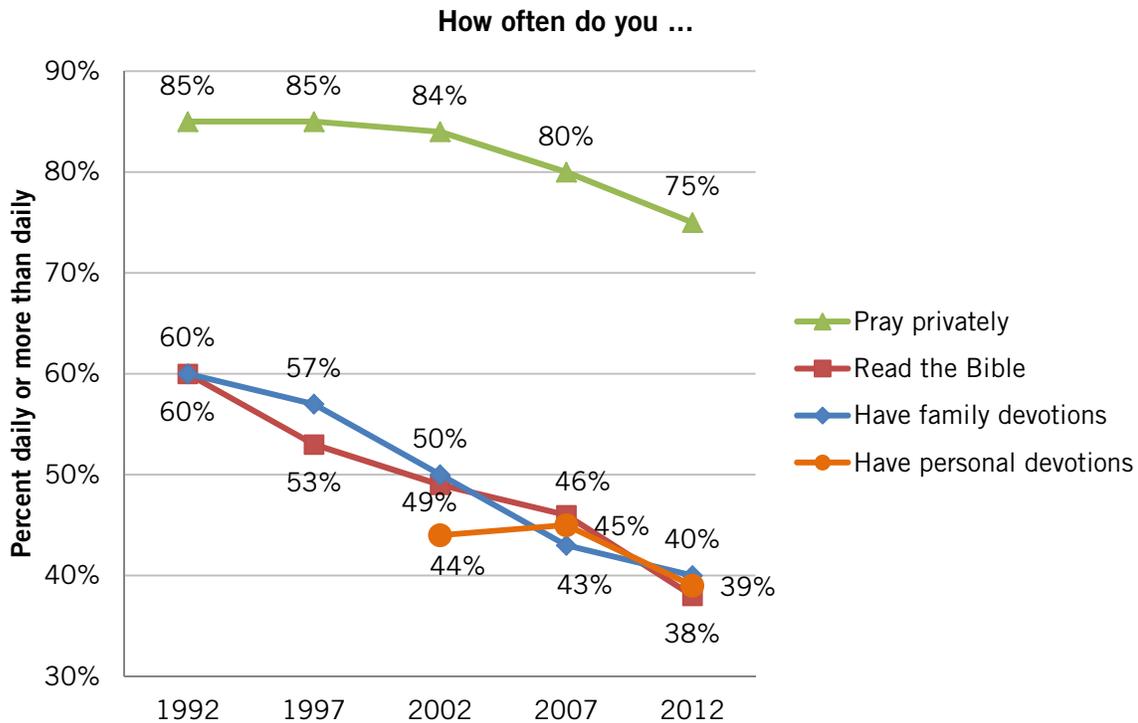
Figure 9 Attendance declined slightly in the morning; evening still declining steeply



Declining frequency of devotional activities

Figure 10 displays how often CRC people say they engage in certain devotional practices. There are four: praying privately, reading the Bible, having personal devotions, and having family devotions. We are showing only the percentage of those who engage in these practices daily or more often. In three of the practices, evidence points to a declining trend. From 1992 through 2007, the percentage praying privately on a daily basis slipped from 85% to 80%, the percentage reading the Bible dropped from 60% to 46%, and the percentage having family devotions declined from 60% to 43%. In 2012, the percentage reading the Bible dropped to 38%, the percentage having family devotions declined to 40%, and the percentage having personal devotions declined to 39%.

Figure 10 Devotional practices continue to decline



In the case of personal devotions, the 2012 data clarify that the trend is downward in sync with the other three practices, suggesting that the small uptick in the previous five-year period was a blip, possibly due to a small change in question wording. We conclude from the results shown in this figure that there has been a serious erosion of the frequency of devotional practices or, as often labeled, the practice of spiritual disciplines among the CRC constituency.

TRENDS SUMMARY

Our review of selected CRC demographic trends shows a denomination with an aging constituency (driven primarily by aging Baby Boomers), fewer households with dependent children and with children attending Christian school, increasing numbers of college graduates, and gradually increasing household incomes.

Trends of church-related characteristics include declining loyalty by generation (but with a slight multi-generational improvement in loyalty since 2007), possibly declining trust in local church leadership, continuously declining evening worship attendance, and declining frequency of certain devotional practices (spiritual disciplines).

III. Stewardship: Factors related to generous giving

Generous stewardship is one of the 11 rubrics used to measure congregational health treated in another section of this report. In this section, we delve more deeply into the subject by using selected results from both the 2007 and 2012 surveys. Although stewardship should be broadly understood as involving how we manage all of the gifts God has given to us—time, talent, treasure, the earth—for now, we focus on financial giving to the local church. The survey results demonstrate that financial giving to one's local church is positively associated with many other forms of generosity and giving. Generosity is an attitude spilling out into many areas of one's life.

PERCENT OF INCOME GIVEN TO CHURCH

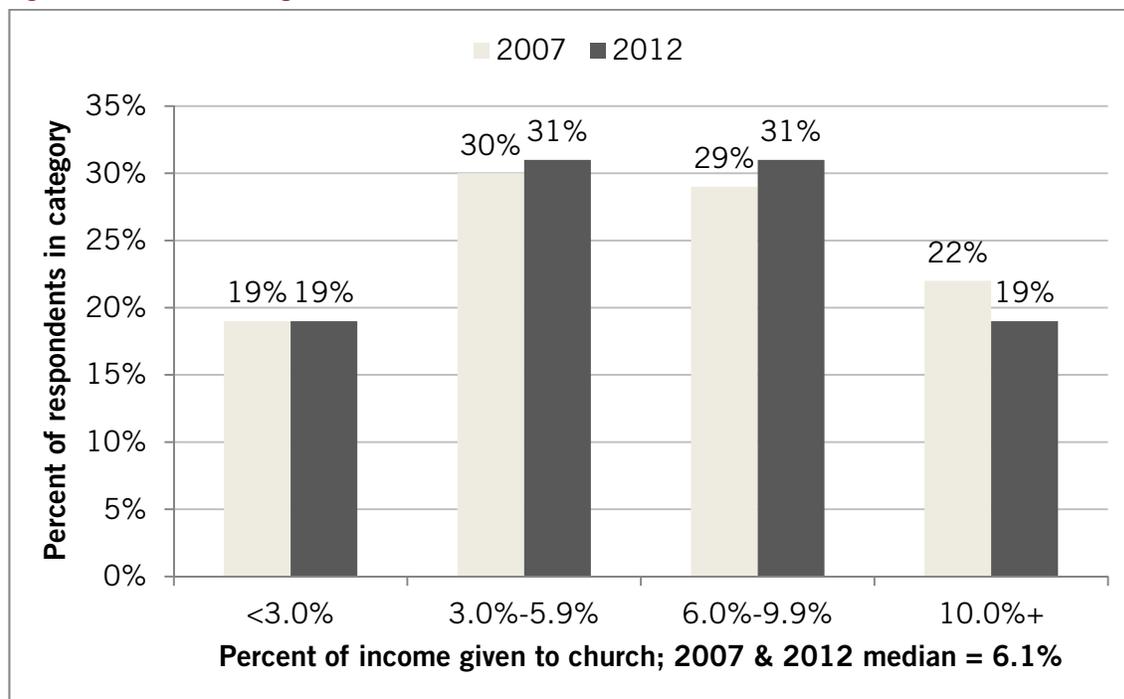
In both 2007 and 2012, we asked how much households contributed to their church in the previous year (excluding Christian education tuition, but including regular giving, special fundraisers, and material goods). We also asked for household income in the year previous to the survey.⁹ It is thus possible to estimate—for everyone who reported their church contribution and household income—a percentage of household income given to the local church. Proportional or percentage giving, as opposed to dollar amount given, takes into account income level and therefore is a fairer measure of generous (or not so generous) giving.¹⁰

⁹ Keep in mind, then, that giving and income results in this section date to 2006 and 2011, respectively (the years previous to the survey years). Also, dollar amounts are estimated from the midpoints of ranges (for example, giving between \$1,000 and \$1,500 is valued at \$1,250, while giving between \$1,501 and \$2,000 is valued at \$1,750; respondents who differ by as little as \$1 and as much as \$1,000 thus are estimated to differ by \$500. The giving categories end at “\$15,000 or more,” with a maximum estimate of \$17,500. Income is similarly estimated, but from wider categories with larger steps (for example, \$40,000 to \$49,999 is valued at \$45,000; the next bracket is valued at \$55,000). Thus the numbers here are not precise, but also are not responsive to idiosyncratic gifts by a few very large donors.

¹⁰ Respondents were also asked how much their households contributed to all other charitable causes, but that figure is not the focus of analysis here. In both years, mean dollars (weighted) given to other charities were 57% to 58% of dollars given to the local congregation (\$2,745 over \$4,795 in 2007, \$3,008 over \$5,166 in 2012).

Figure 11 shows how the estimated values of percent of income given to one's church vary among respondents to the 2007 and 2012 surveys. The distribution obtained from both surveys is very similar. In fact, the 2007 and 2012 medians for this variable are the same: 6.1% given to the church.¹¹ Observed increases in total dollars given are thus mainly a simple function of rising incomes.

Figure 11 Percent of income given to church



In both surveys, percent of giving to the local church ranged between 3% and 10% for about 60% of households. Just under one fifth (19%) gave less than 3% of their incomes, and about one fifth gave a tithe (10%) or more, although the percentage of those in the most generous category declined slightly between 2007 and 2012, from 22% to 19%. The economic recession of 2007-09 might have shifted some households from tithing to giving a lower percentage.¹²

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH GENEROSITY

In this section, we shall explore who are the generous givers and the not-so-generous givers to the local church. We can do this by examining what factors or characteristics are associated with our generosity measure, percent of income give to the local church.

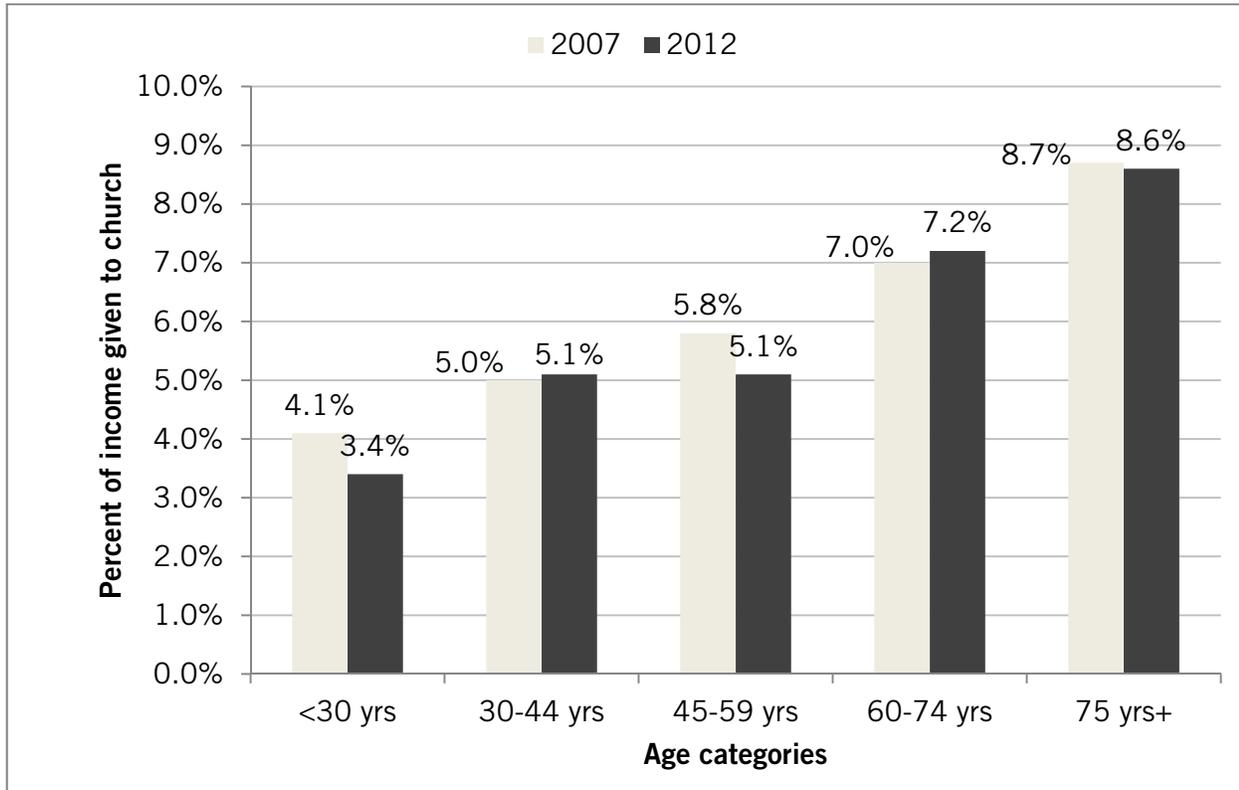
¹¹ A median average is the dollar amount given that divides the top 50% of the respondents from the bottom 50%.

¹² However, these apparent changes and others shown below should be interpreted with some caution. Because these numbers are calculated from range midpoints both for income and giving (see footnote 9 on page 20), relatively small changes in real income can be exaggerated into large changes and vice versa, resulting in imprecise estimates of the changes to their giving share as well. Of course, such errors will tend to cancel out over large numbers of respondents, but any particular comparison might be sensitive to the "stair-step" nature of our estimates.

Age of respondent

What is the pattern of percentage giving by age? **Figure 12** shows clearly that the percentage of income given increases with age. The value at the top of each column is the median percent of income given to the local church for everyone in the respective age category. Percentage giving among the age group 75 and older is more than double that of the youngest age group, those under 30. This doesn't mean there are no generous givers among those under 30. Some, indeed, are tithers, but not enough to offset their peers under 30 whose giving percentage was much lower.

Figure 12 Percent giving to church by age category

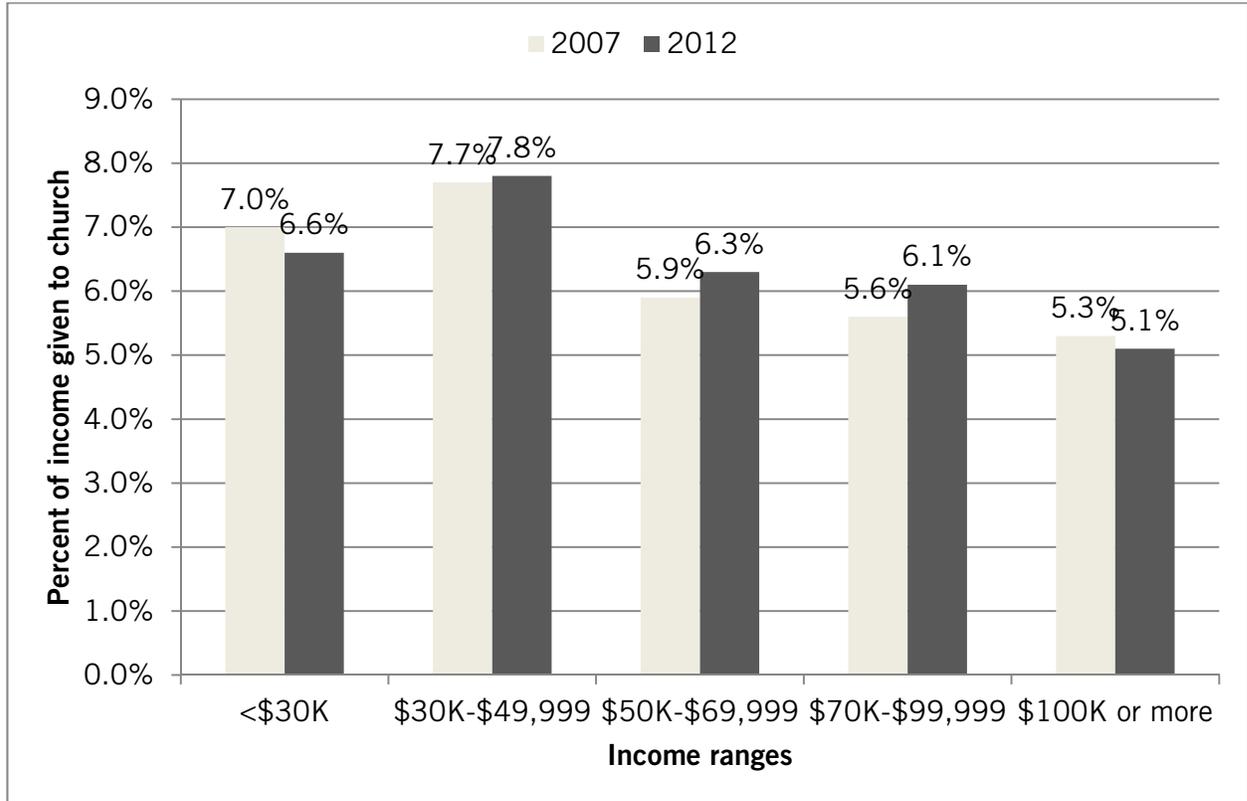


While the 2007 and 2012 patterns for age are quite similar, two age categories seem to have experienced reduction in their giving to the church over the last five years. Those from age 45 to 59 went from an average of 5.8% to an average of 5.1%, and those under 30 dropped from 4.1% to 3.4%.

Annual household income

While percentage giving to one's local church increases with age, it is not so with household income. To the contrary, as shown in **Figure 13**, higher income levels are associated with lower giving rates. In fact, in both surveys, the lowest median percent of income given to church is associated with those earning the most income, those with annual incomes of \$100,000 and more. In both the 2007 and 2012 surveys, higher percentage giving is representative of households with below average incomes (see median household income figures for both surveys in the trends section of this report, **Figure 5** on page 14).

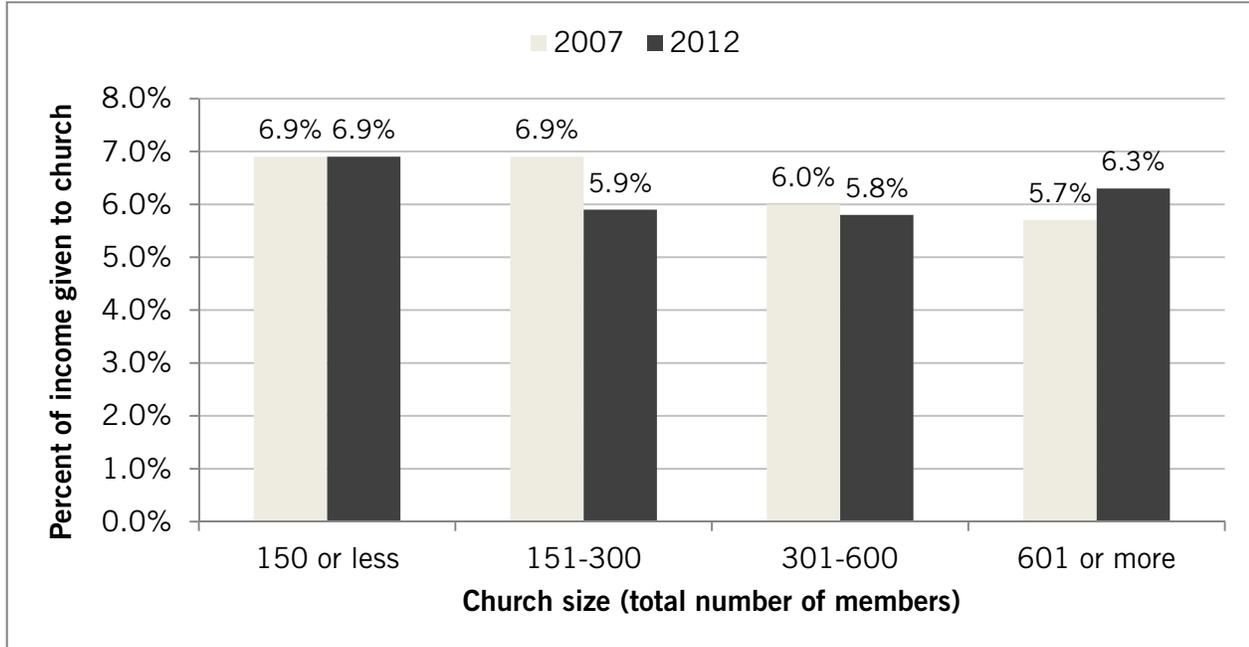
Figure 13 Percent giving by income range



Church size

According to **Figure 14**, the smallest churches (determined by total number of members) tend to have the most generous members. In both surveys, respondents in churches with 150 or fewer members show the highest median percentage giving to their church (6.9%). With respect to the largest churches, those with more than 600 members, between 2007 and 2012, the median percent of income given jumped from 5.7% to 6.3%. During the same five years, giving to medium sized churches, those ranging from 151 to 600 members, show a decline. And the biggest decline was for churches with 151-300 members.

Figure 14 Percent of income given by church size



Loyalty to CRC and local church

Here we examine whether loyalty results in more generous giving to the church. Let's consider first loyalty to the denomination as a whole, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). We see in **Figure 15** that percentage giving to one's local church is weakly associated with loyalty felt for the CRC; curious is that those not very loyal to the CRC in both surveys give more percentage-wise to their local church than those describing their loyalty as "somewhat loyal." How loyal one feels toward one's local church, however, is strongly associated with percentage giving in a positive direction in both 2007 and 2012.

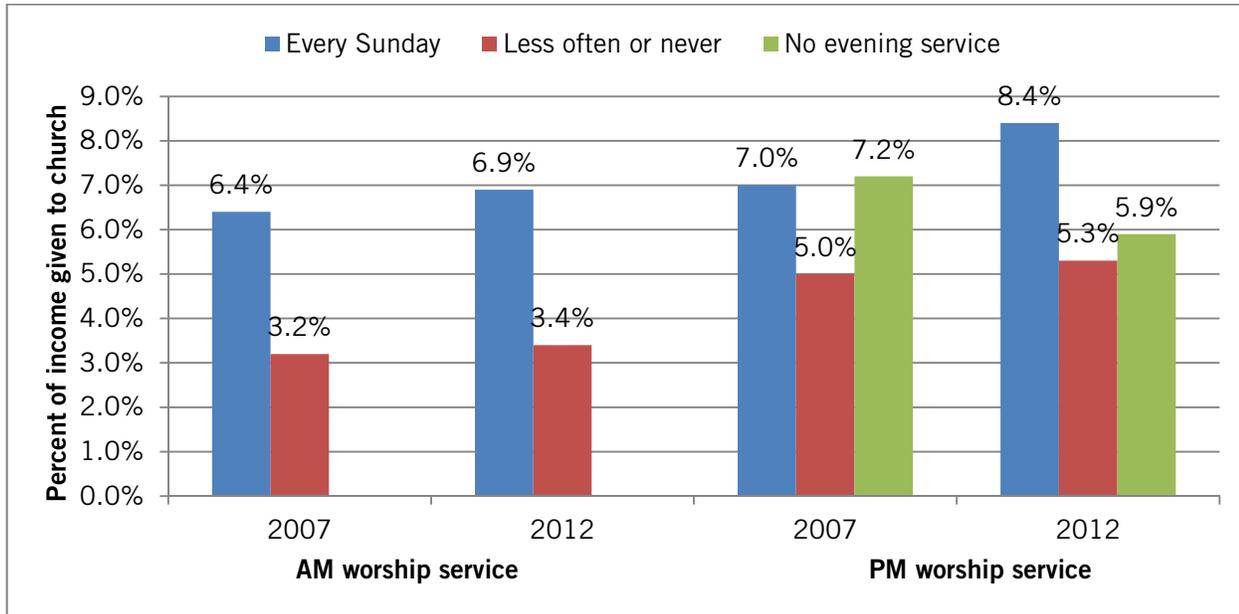
Figure 15 Percent of income by loyalty to CRC and congregation



Worship service attendance

Those who say they attend morning worship services every Sunday are much more likely to give a higher percent of income to their church than those who say they attend less often. As **Figure 16** shows, in the 2007 and 2012 surveys, the median percent of income given to one's church among every-Sunday "AM" attendees is about double that of all others.

Figure 16 Percent of income given to church by church attendance

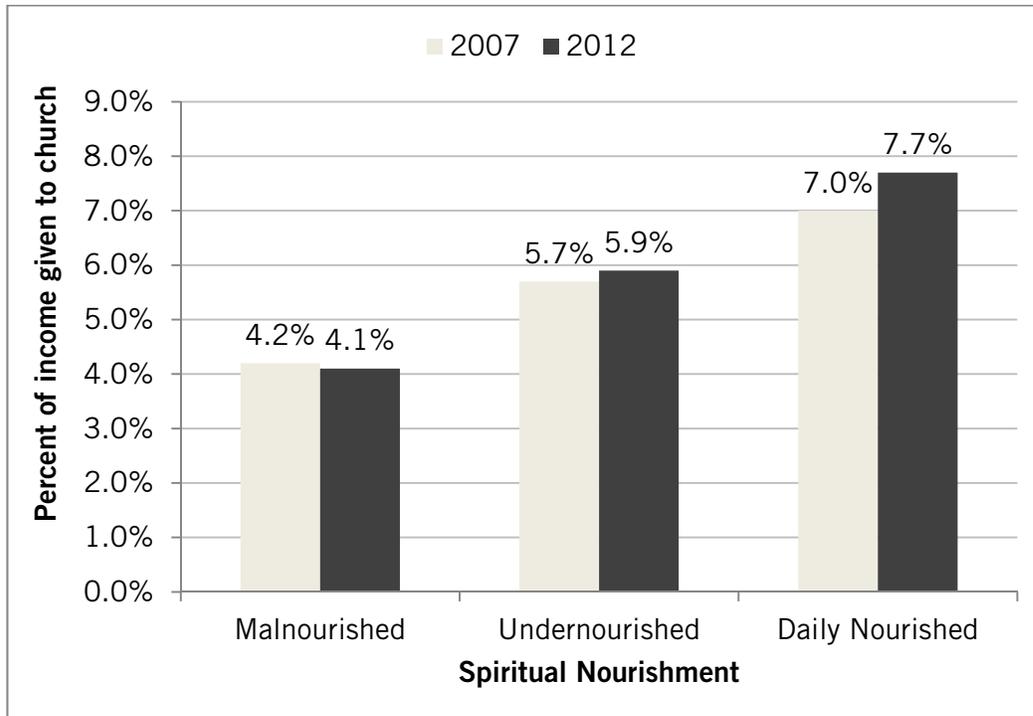


In both the 2007 and 2012 surveys, percentage giving to the local church is considerably greater for those who attend evening worship services every Sunday than for those who attend less often or never attend. From 2007 to 2012, median percent of income donated to the church jumped from 7.0% to 8.4% for the every-Sunday evening attendees and even rose for those who do not attend every Sunday evening, from 5.0% to 5.3%. These increases are mostly side-effects of continued declining evening attendance (see **Figure 9** on page 18), which is increasingly concentrated among older congregants who give at higher rates. In contrast, giving dropped from 7.2% to 5.9% of household income among those who don't attend because their church has no evening service. As the share of churches offering Sunday evening services shrinks, the median for those at churches without services mathematically must approach the median for all givers, as this group now contains all congregants except the small group of disproportionately older and higher-giving congregants who attend churches that have evening services.

Spiritual nourishment

Spiritual nourishment in **Figure 17** is a multi-item scale. Three devotional practices—praying privately, reading the Bible, and having personal devotions—were combined to create this spiritual nourishment scale. Praying, bible reading and having devotions are three primary ways by which faith is nourished. The greater a respondent’s score, the more often he or she engages in these three practices. Maximum score is 12 and minimum is 0. Those respondents designated “Daily Nourished” score between 9 and 12. They tend to follow a daily or nearly daily routine of prayer, bible reading and personal devotion. Those designated as “Undernourished” score between 5 and 8 and are likely to do these practices between weekly and several times a week. Those labeled “Malnourished” score from 0 to 4. Generally, they do the three practices less than weekly or never.

Figure 17 Percent given to church by spiritual nourishment

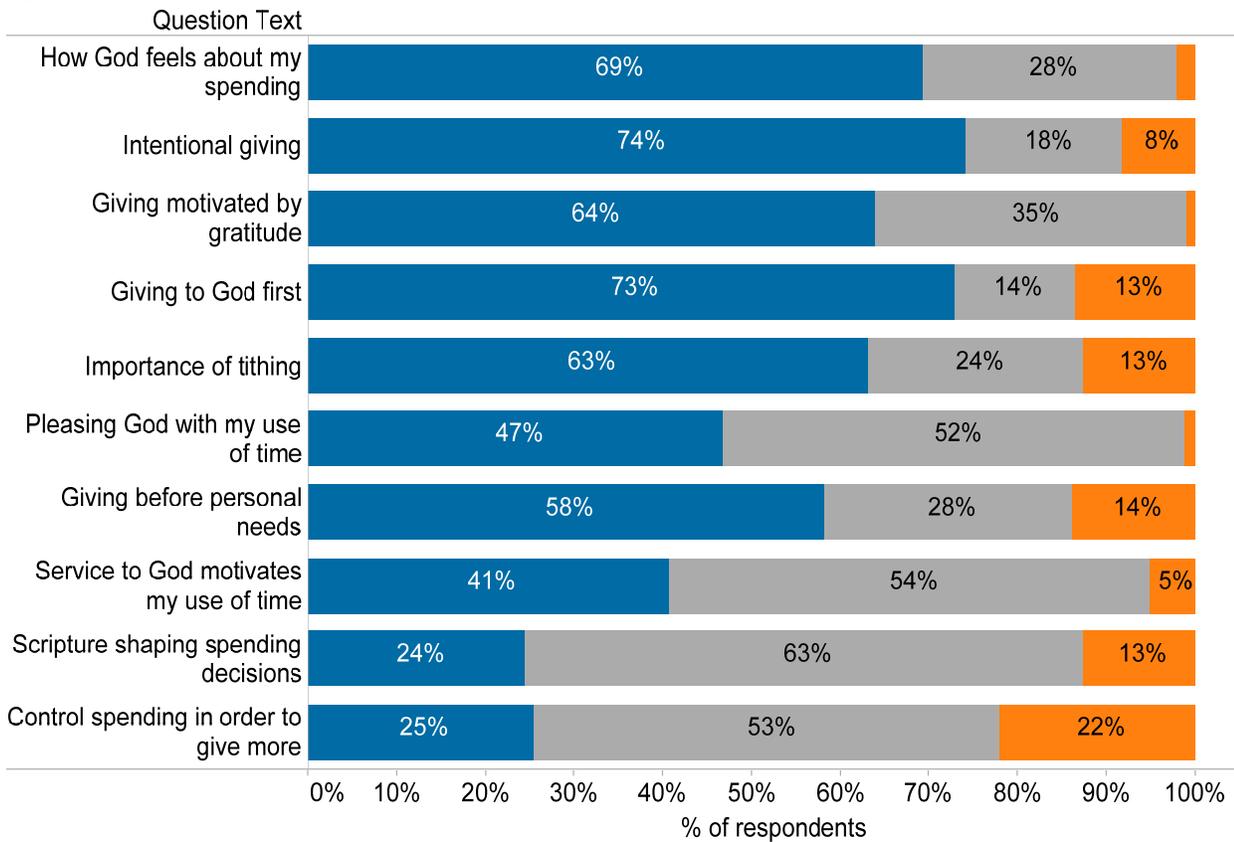


Results in the figure give evidence of a strong, positive connection between spiritual nourishment and generous giving. Only respondents daily nourished by the three devotional practices show a significant increase in percent of income given to the local church (from 7.0% to 7.7%) from the 2007 to the 2012 survey. Once again, this increase over five years may reflect the decreasing share of daily-nourished congregants.

Stewardship health

Stewardship health is another multi-item scale. To measure stewardship health, we combined responses to 10 stewardship lifestyle sets. These are based on the assumption that stewardship health is a matter of giving one’s heart to God and developing healthy habits that support that commitment. Each set of items contains a trio of statements, with one statement representing the healthiest lifestyle, another the least healthy lifestyle, and another something in between.

Figure 18 Stewardship health items¹³



Answer options

■ Healthy answer ■ Mediocre answer ■ Unhealthy answer

To create the scale, individual responses are weighted so that, as a result of adding the weights (0, 5 or 10 points for unhealthy, mediocre and healthy answers, respectively), the maximum score is 100 and minimum score zero. “Heart and Habit” stewards, we determined, score between 80 and 100, “Heart Desire” stewards between 60 and 79, and “Heart Neglect” stewards less than 60.

¹³ Our first version of this figure incorrectly showed “Giving before personal needs” as the least healthy item; we have corrected it here. That trio is the only reverse-ordered item in the set. Other analyses using the item were correct.

Figure 19 Percent giving to church by stewardship health

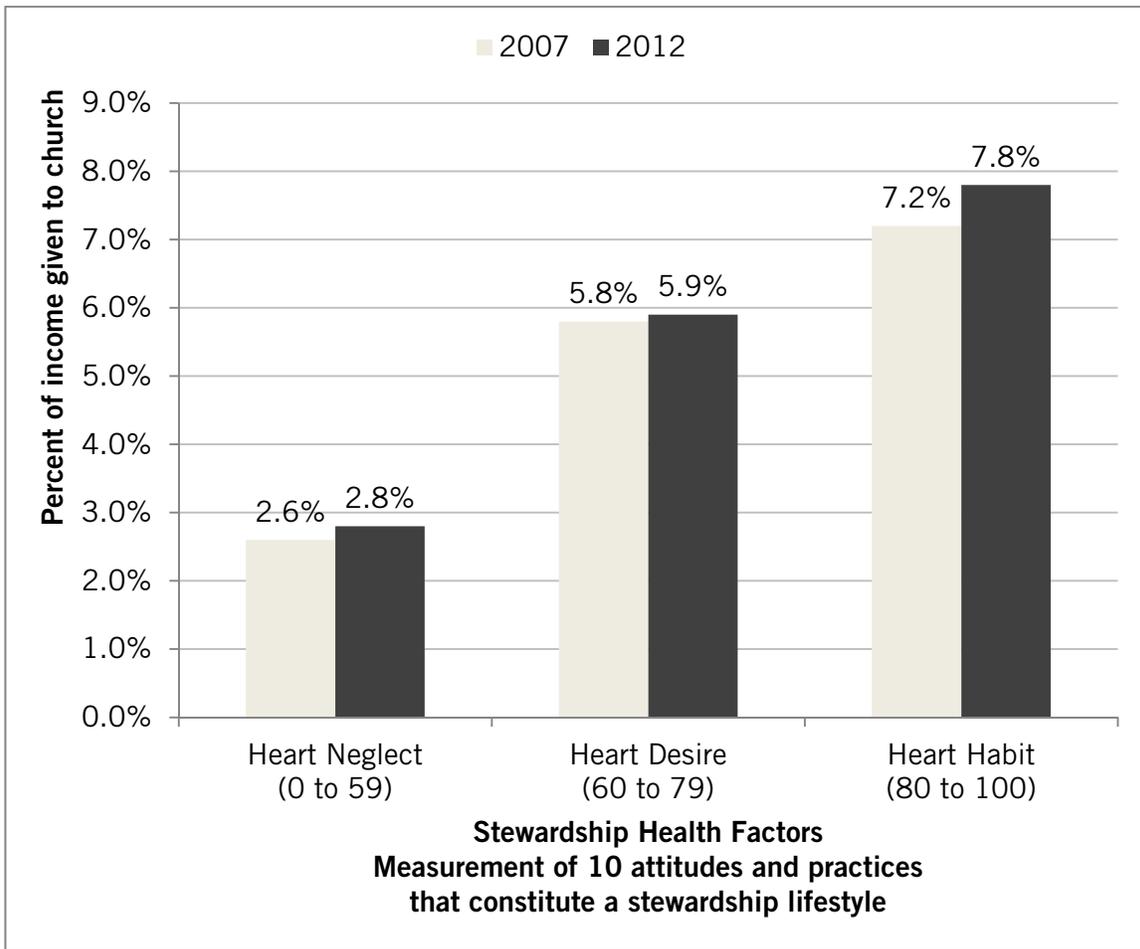


Figure 19 shows that stewardship health is quite predictive of generous giving. Stewardship health is positively associated with median percent of income given to the local church. In both surveys, median percentage giving is highest for “Heart and Habit” stewards and lowest for “Heart Neglect” stewards, with “Heart Desire” stewards falling between. “Heart and Habit” stewards also show the greatest increase in percentage giving, going from 7.2% in 2007 to 7.8% in 2012.

Spiritual disciplines

Spiritual disciplines are practices that have been found to draw people closer to God, “into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom” (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 156). The spiritual disciplines listed in **Figure 20** are in no way a complete list, but they are some of the most frequently practiced: worship, prayer, fellowship, service, study, and tithing. The disciplines are listed in the table in the order of the percentage of respondents practicing them, from most frequent to least frequent.

Using these six spiritual disciplines, we created a multi-item scale. For each discipline, respondents received 1 if they practiced it and 0 if they did not. Adding these values for each respondent produces scores ranging from 0 (none of the disciplines practiced) to 6 (all of them practiced).

Figure 20 Percent giving to church by spiritual disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines	%practicing		%income given to church	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
Weekly Worship Attendance	91%	86%	3.0%	3.1%
Daily Prayer	80%	75%	4.5%	4.8%
Fellowship at Church Events (3+ hrs/mo)	62%	52%	5.0%	5.3%
Volunteer Service at Church (3+ hrs/mo)	56%	50%	6.1%	6.9%
Daily Personal Devotions	45%	39%	8.0%	9.1%
Give 10% of Annual Income to Church (pre-tax)	22%	19%	13.6%	12.9%

Looking at the connection between the spiritual disciplines scale and percent of income given to the local church, we see a very strong positive association. Respondents who practiced only one of the disciplines (typically weekly worship) were least generous. Percent of income given to one’s church for these respondents averaged 3.0% in the 2007 survey and 3.1% in the 2012 survey. In contrast, respondents who practiced all six disciplines were most generous with their giving to church. In 2007, these respondents gave an average of 13.6%, and in 2012 they gave 12.9%.

MULTIVARIATE MODEL

Multiple regression estimates the effect of each of the predictor variables used in this section on percent of income given to one’s church, while removing the effect of all the other variables. Evidence suggests that three of the variables are most predictive:

1. household income (which has a negative association with percent given),
2. stewardship health (positively associated), and
3. spiritual disciplines (also positive).

The apparent relationships with other variables (age, church size, loyalty, and worship attendance) appear to be spurious. For example, older congregants give more on average not because they’re older but because they are more likely to practice spiritual disciplines and have a healthy approach to stewardship.

Curiously, we do not find easily available evidence that generosity is related to perceptions of congregational health (see chapter V). The correlation between percent of income given to church and the congregational health scale is essentially zero in both the 2007 and 2012 surveys.

DISCUSSION

Stewardship is the financial lifeblood of the church, and it depends critically on spiritual disciplines (the spiritual lifeblood of the church) and healthy attitudes about money. Aging is associated with increases in both of these important factors, so aging in the church is in turn associated with increased giving. Increases in giving over time in some congregations may be due primarily to an aging population. But aging is not itself necessary to encourage giving; stewardship education and discipleship in spiritual disciplines will likely produce financial fruits in any age group and any church, even when current congregational health is suffering.

IV. Church life cycles and congregational health

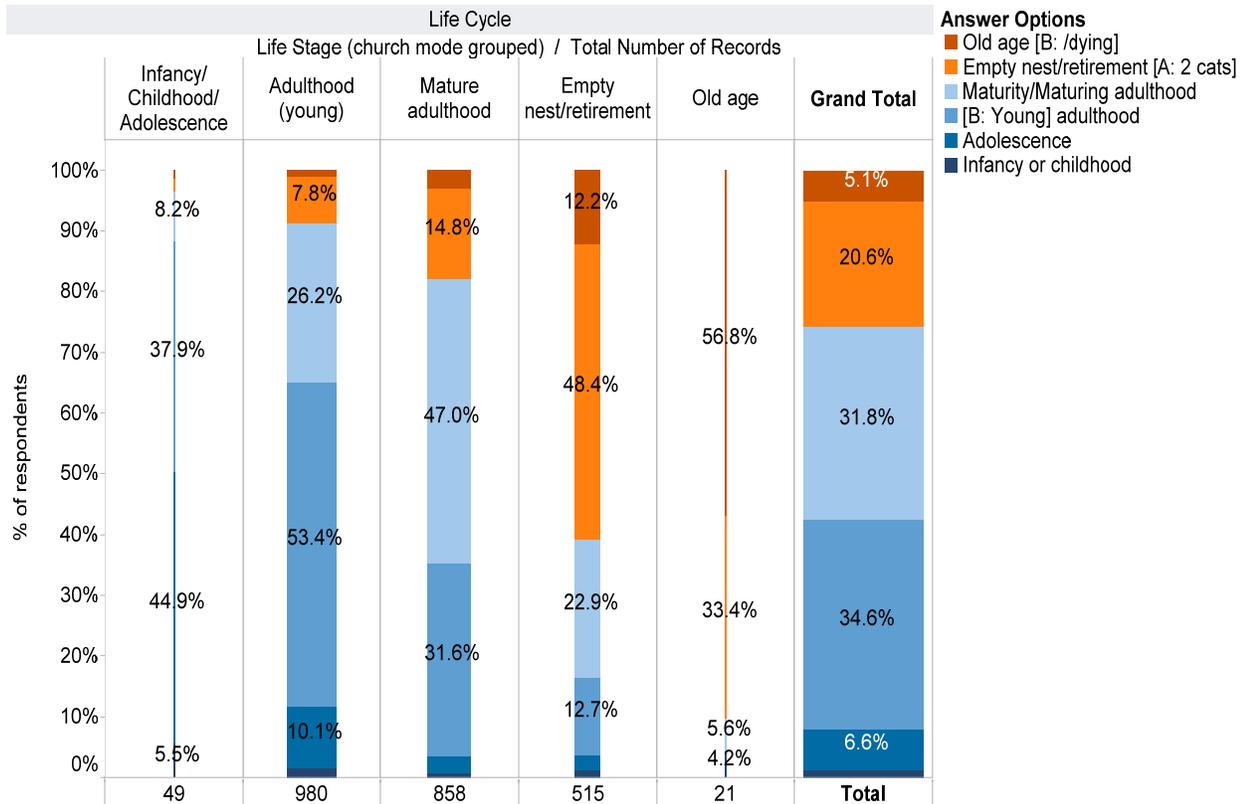
Church life cycle is another approach to looking at the health of congregations. George Bullard, among others, has written extensively about church life cycle and the stages congregations typically follow as they age (see George W. Bullard, Jr., *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*). He sees these stages in the life of a church: birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, maturity, empty nest, retirement, old age, death. Leaders should know where their congregation is located in these stages, because the issues they face vary from stage to stage. For example, through the first five stages congregations tend to be focused on vision, but thereafter their emphasis shifts more toward management. Recognizing the shift and working to renew vision is critical to church health. In this section, we explore the characteristics of Christian Reformed congregations associated with various church life cycle stages.

ESTIMATING THE LIFE CYCLE STAGE OF A CONGREGATION

From a list of life stages, respondents were asked to identify the one they thought came closest to where their congregation was at the time of the survey. Two slightly different sets of response categories were used; half of the respondents were given one set and half the other set. The first set named seven stages (infancy or childhood, adolescence, adulthood, maturity, empty nest, retirement, and old age) and the second set used six stages (infancy/childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, maturing adulthood, empty nest/retirement, and old age/dying) with brief descriptions accompanying the stage names. The two sets were merged to create these six church life cycle stages: infancy/childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mature adulthood, empty nest/retirement, and old age/dying. The mode average (the category selected by the most respondents from a given church) was used to assign each congregation to one of the six stages.

Not everyone in the same church identified the same life cycle stage, of course. **Figure 21** shows how respondents from “young adulthood” congregations most frequently identified their congregation as young adulthood (53.4%), by definition. The other life cycle stages are similarly distributed. This figure also indicates by relative size of the column area that most respondents have been assigned to one of three stages: young adulthood, mature adulthood, and empty nest/retirement. Relatively few are respondents who participate in churches classified as “infancy/childhood/adolescence” and “old age/dying,” the beginning and end of the church life stages.

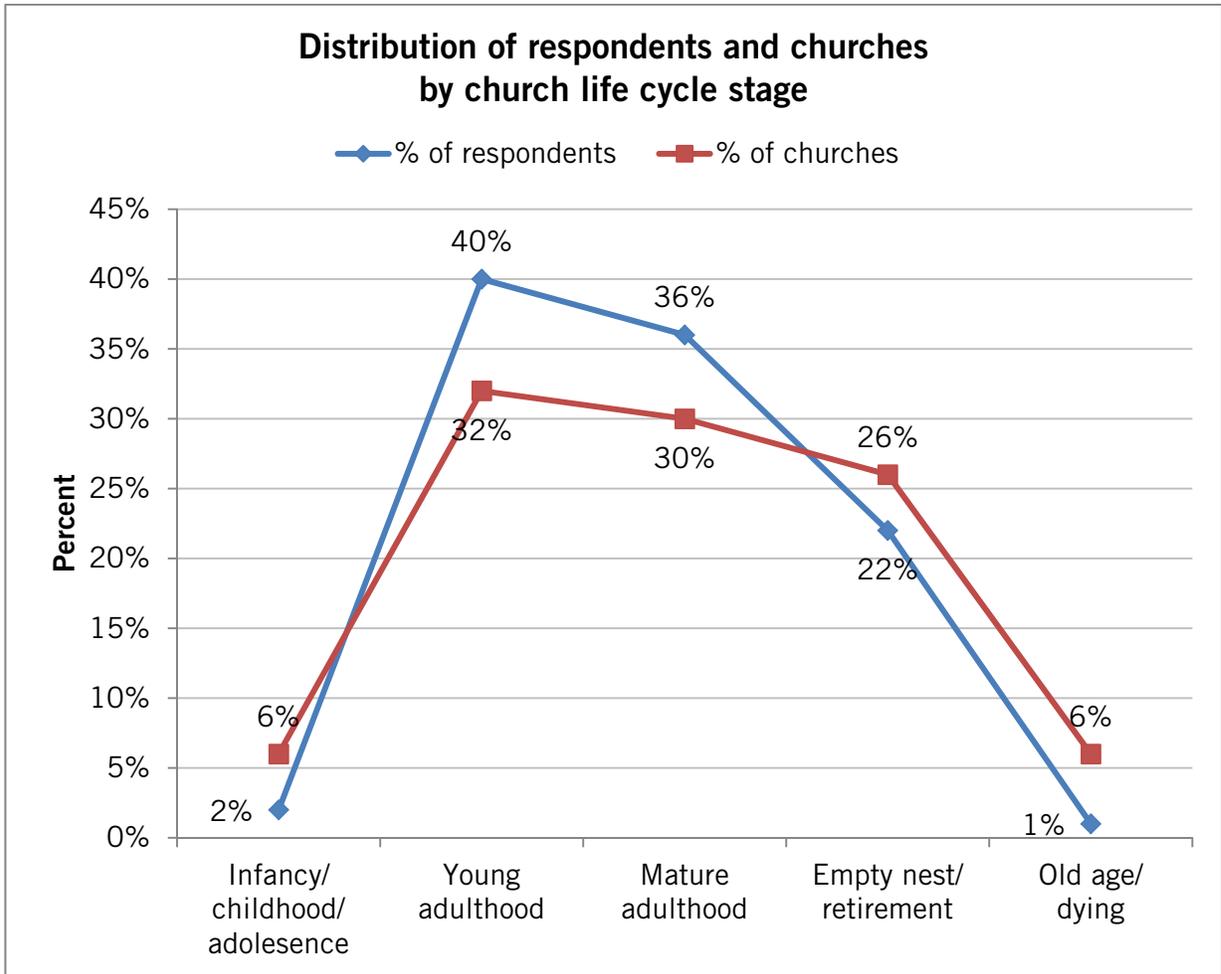
Figure 21 Respondents' perceptions of church's life cycle stage



Quite likely, infancy/childhood/adolescence and old age/dying are types of congregations underrepresented in our sample. Both ends of the spectrum tend to have smaller memberships, for obvious reasons; church plants and emerging churches would most likely have been included in the infancy/childhood/adolescence stage. Bullard estimates that between 75 and 80 percent of all congregations are on the aging side of the life cycle (Bullard, p. 88). In **Figure 22**, based on our classification of Christian Reformed congregations, about 62%¹⁴ of the churches are on the aging side (from mature adulthood to old age/dying).

¹⁴ Corrected; our first version said "67%" here. We apologize for the error.

Figure 22 Distribution of respondents and churches by church life cycle stage



CHARACTERISTICS OF CHURCHES BY LIFE CYCLE STAGE

Do churches in different stages of the life cycle vary in size and rate of membership change? The table below provides affirming evidence. Growth is associated with the early stages and decline with the later stages. Rate of decline increases as churches move from mature adulthood to old age/dying.

Table 4 Church size and membership change by life cycle stage

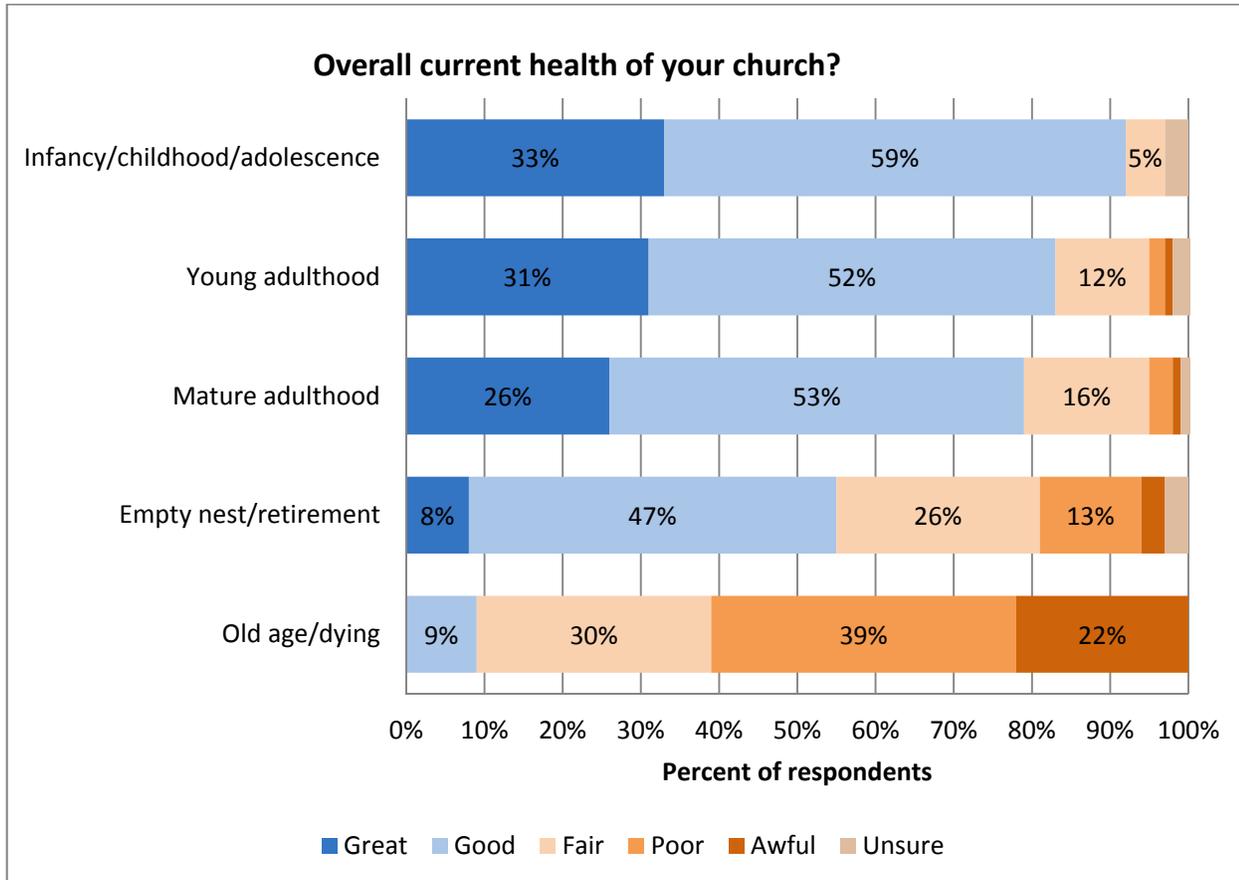
Life Cycle Stage	Average number of members*	% change last five years*
Infancy/childhood/adolescence	102	19%
Young adulthood	439	1%
Mature adulthood	385	0%
Empty nest/retirement	259	-15%
Old age/dying	186	-29%

*Source: 2008 and 2013 CRC Yearbooks, 2007 and 2012 CRC Congregant Surveys

Overall church health

Does health of a church differ over the life cycle stages? **Figure 23** presents responses to the question about how respondents perceive the overall current health of their church. The percent judging their church as either “great” or “good” in overall health drops dramatically from 92% in infancy/childhood/adolescence congregations to just 9% among old age/dying congregations.

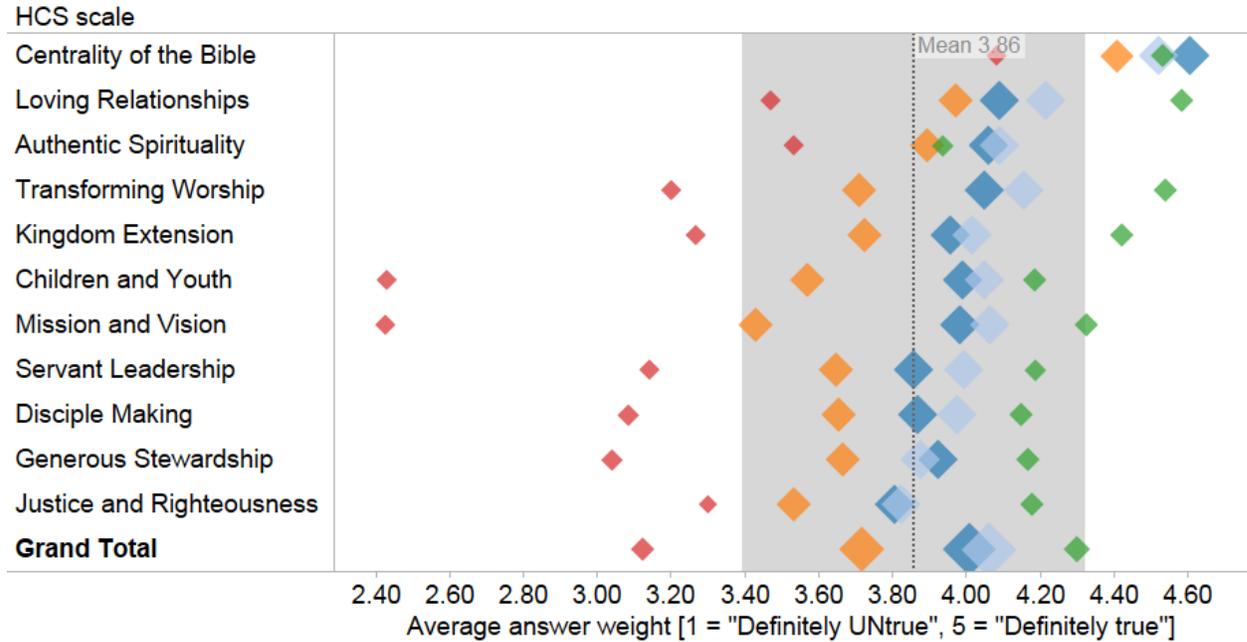
Figure 23 Overall current health of church by church life stage



Healthy Church scales

Figure 24 looks at health area scales by life cycle stage. Each scale displays a diamond mark for each life cycle stage. The smallest difference among the life stages is with Centrality of the Bible. Average scores for Centrality of the Bible for all stages are above the overall mean for all Healthy Church items. It is striking that, in nearly all health areas, the healthiest score is among infancy/childhood/adolescence congregations, with averages declining as congregations “age.” Old age/dying congregations have the lowest average score in all health areas. Notably, two areas that seem to be particularly troublesome indicators for “aging” churches are “Children and Youth” and “Mission and Vision.”

Figure 24 Healthy Church area scales by church life cycle stage



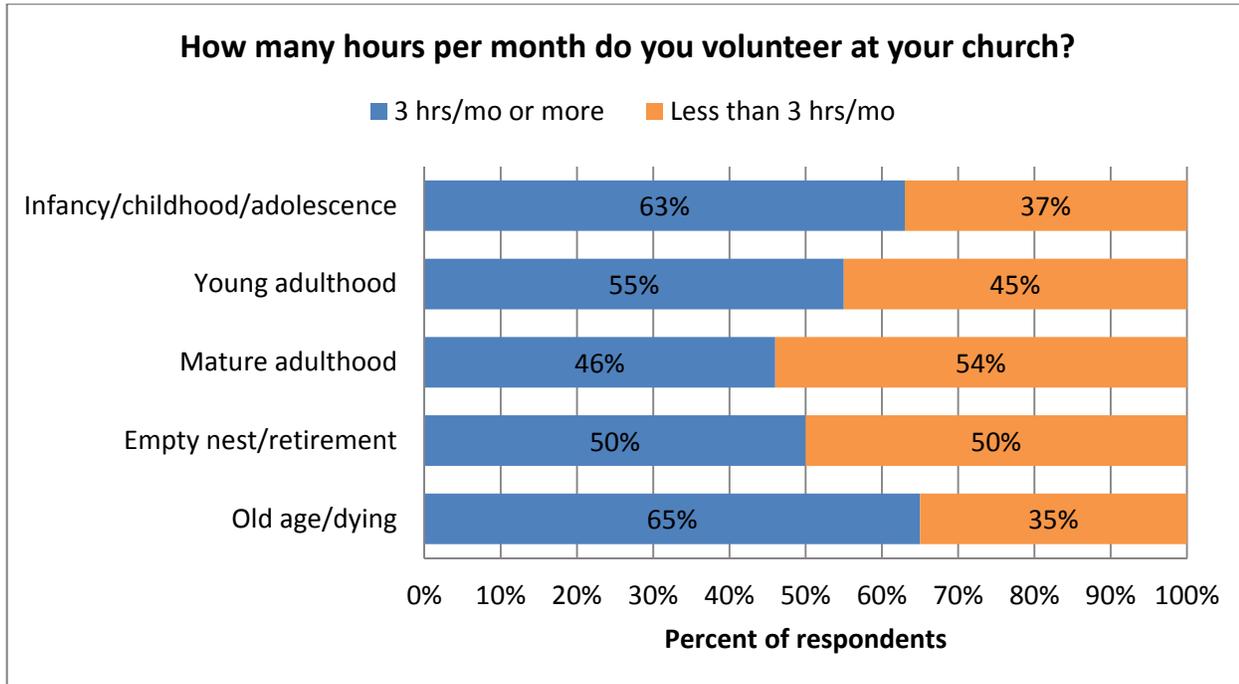
Crosstabulation

- Infancy/ Childhood/ Adolescence
- Young adulthood
- Mature adulthood
- Empty nest/retirement
- Old age

Volunteer hours

Figure 25 compares the amount of time per month spent volunteering at church by life cycle stage. Volunteer time is greatest among the youngest and oldest churches. As churches experience growth until maturity, the average attendees can put forth less time for the same or greater total service output. However, as churches move beyond maturity toward old age and dying, the average attendee must again expend more time.

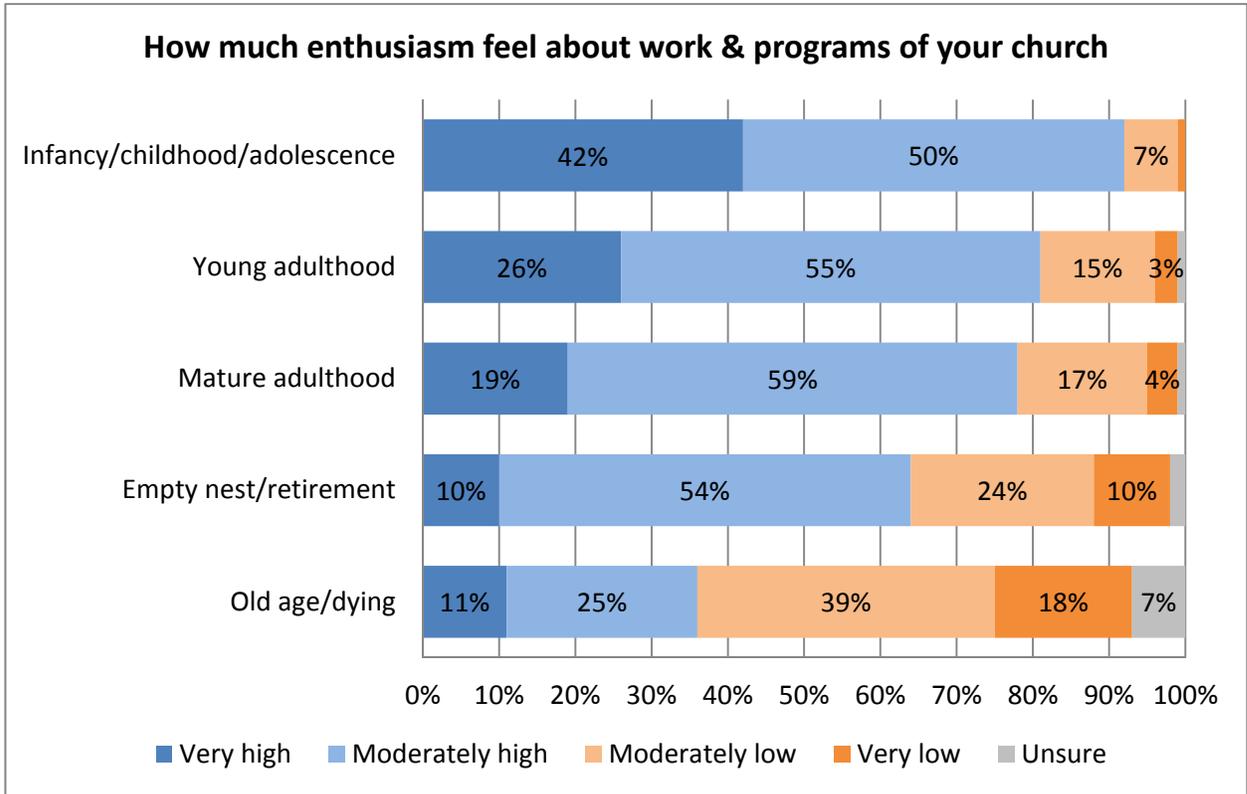
Figure 25 Volunteer hours per month by church life-cycle stage



Enthusiasm

Next, we look at how much enthusiasm people feel about the work and programs of their church (see **Figure 26**). Predictably, enthusiasm is highest in infancy/childhood/adolescence congregations and then wanes through each subsequent life cycle stage.

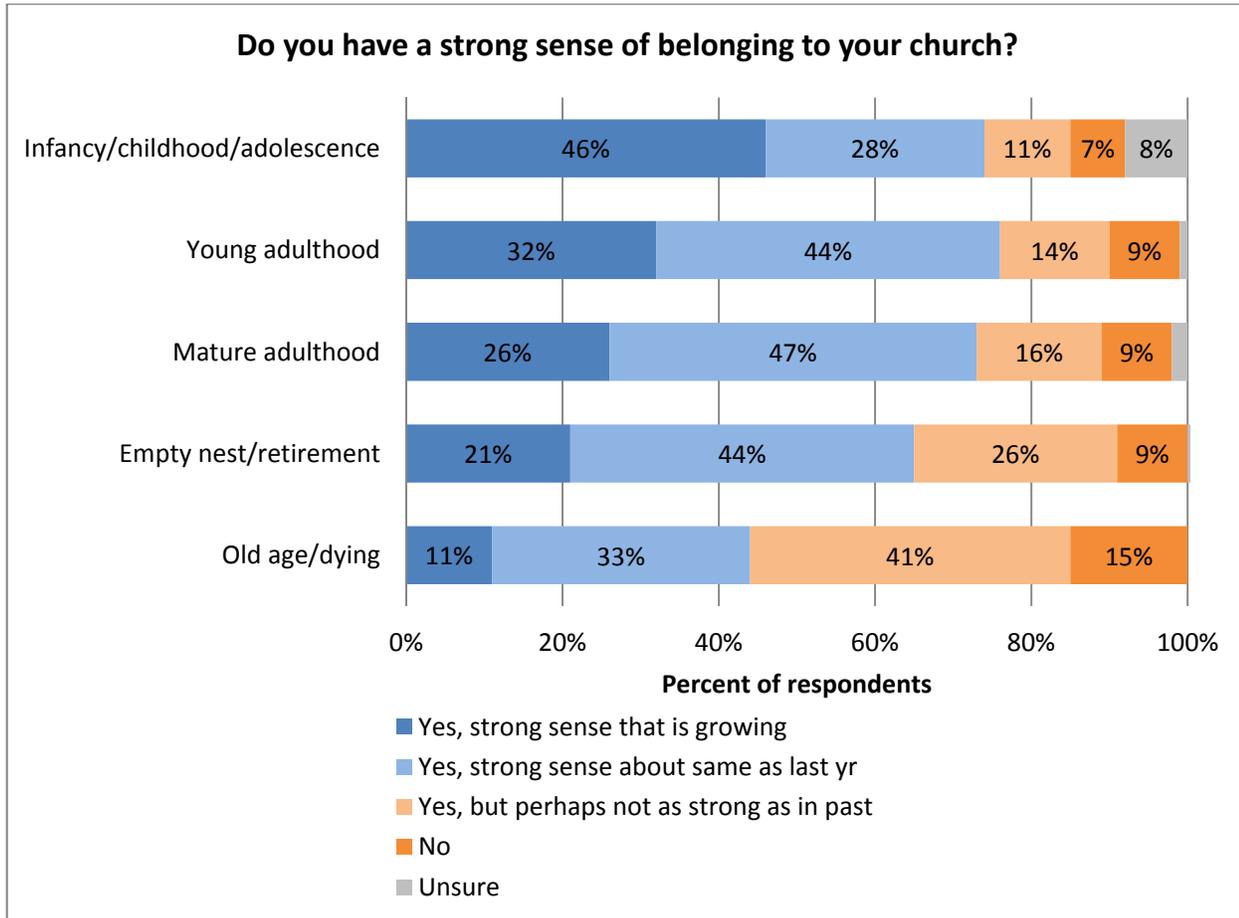
Figure 26 Enthusiasm about church work and programs by church life cycle stage



Belonging

Figure 27 views what happens to a sense of belonging to one's church across the life cycle stages. The survey asked the question, "Do you have a strong sense of belonging to your church?" The first three bar segments from the left are the "yes" answers combined, and together they show very little difference across the life cycle stages. But how strong is that sense of belonging seems to erode as a church reaches maturity and then ages.

Figure 27 Sense of belonging by church life stage



Relationships

We asked survey respondents in 2007 and 2012 whether they preferred a long-term relationship with a church or were more likely to go where the church meets their needs and uses their gifts. Since we have not previously introduced this question, we'll digress a bit to introduce it. The precise question wording is:

Every individual and family has particular needs and gifts with which to serve. Do you prefer a long-term relationship with a particular congregation, even if some needs go unmet and gifts go unused? Or do you find it best to attend the congregation that meets your (and your family's) needs and uses your gifts in the present?

Answer options were:

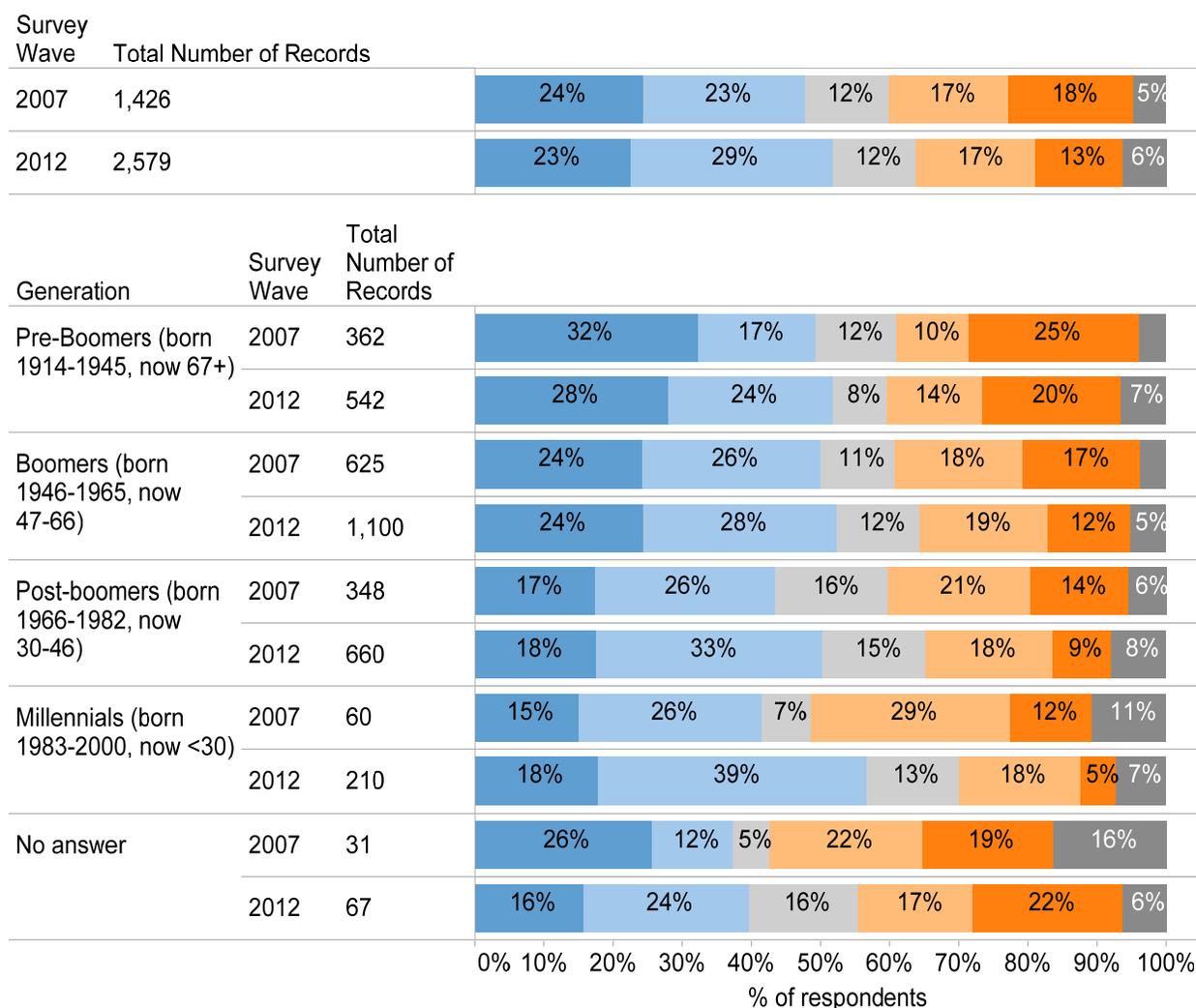
- Definitely prefer to meet needs and use gifts now
- Lean toward going where needs are met and gifts are used
- Neutral, don't lean either way
- Lean toward the long-term relationship, regardless of whether needs are met and gifts are used
- Definitely prefer a long-term relationship

The question was devised as a proxy measure for “consumerist” vs. “communitarian” views of church participation. We described the consumer perspective as positively as possible for survey respondents and respect the disposition of those who select a church for “a good fit for me and my family” rather than “a community.” However, our perspective is that the communitarian disposition is healthy and advantageous both to the congregation and the congregant.

Figure 28 shows the overall frequencies for each wave and by generation. In 2007, 47% of respondents indicated a definite preference for or “leaning” toward a long-term relationship with a church, as opposed to 35% definite or preferring the other direction. In 2012, we find a 5% increase in the “communitarian” preference for a strong relationship to 52% and a corresponding decrease in “consumerist” preferences to 30%.

Figure 28 Church relationship preferences by survey wave and generation

Preference for long-term relationship with church vs. going where needs are met and gifts are used



Answer options

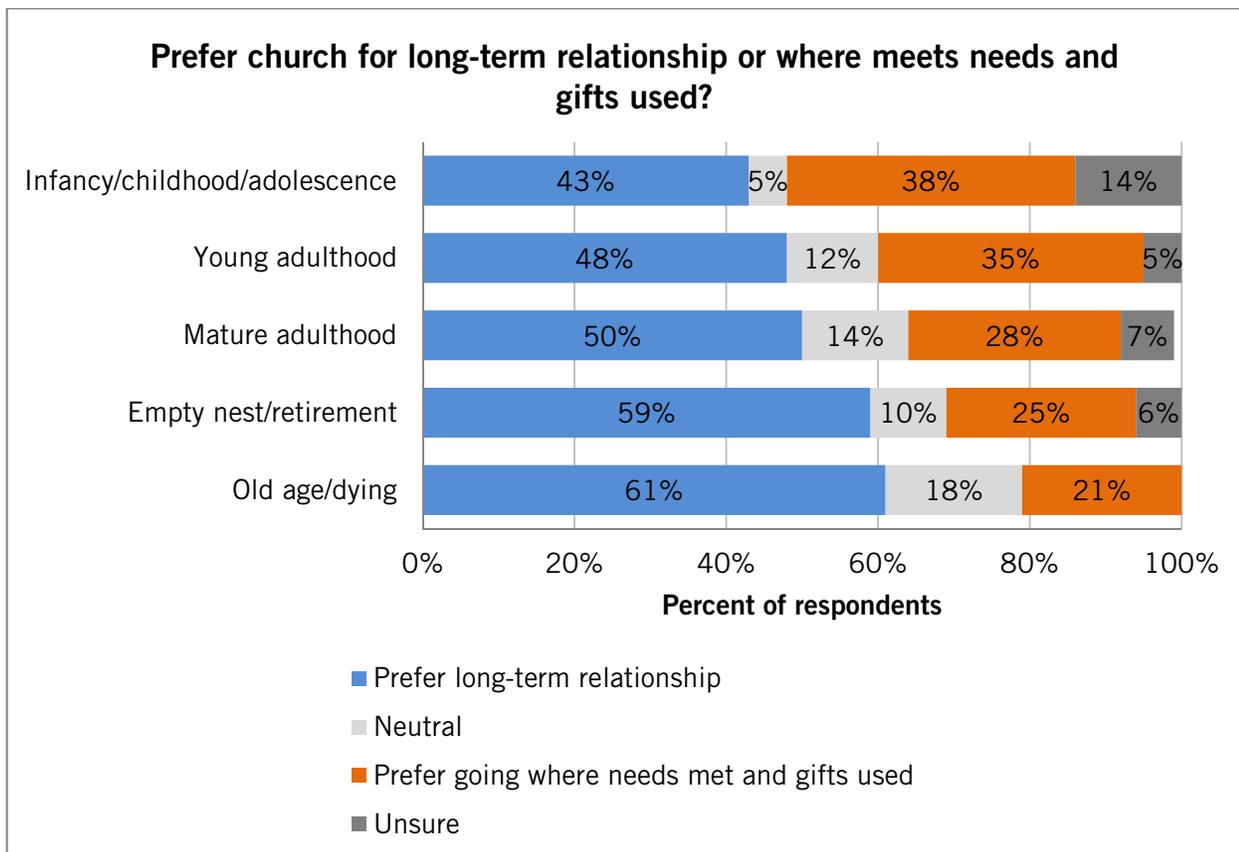
- Unsure
- Definitely prefer to meet needs and use gifts now
- Lean toward going where needs are met and gifts are used
- Neutral, don't lean either way
- Lean toward the long-term relationship, regardless of whether needs are met and gifts are used
- Definitely prefer a long-term relationship

As always, the change since 2007 could reflect random sampling variation or a selection bias effect as more consumerists leave the CRC than enter. But the data on generational differences from the bottom panel of **Figure 28** suggest these interpretations would be unlikely, however. It appears that the maturation of the post-boomer and Millennial generations is producing increases in those generations' appetite for long-term church relationships. In 2007, Millennials reported the lowest rate of "communitarian" preferences, 41%; in 2012, they reported the highest rate, 57%, as well as the lowest rate of "consumerist" preferences, 23%. Post-boomers also shifted toward a preference for long-term relationships, though less so than Millennials. Interestingly, the oldest generation of pre-boomers has the greatest share of consumerist preferences, with a steady 34 to 35% of respondents indicating they prefer to attend churches where their needs are met and gifts are used; boomers were only slightly less likely to choose a consumerist perspective.

This relationship-preference variable appears to tap an underlying personal disposition independent of many other factors; it is not correlated with loyalty to congregation ($r = 0.06$), in spite of having been asked immediately following that question. More educated respondents also tend to be more "communitarian."

How do these preferences relate to churches' life stages, our chief subject in this section? Across all life cycle stages, the plurality preference was for long-term relationships (see **Figure 29**). And, for sure, people value a church for both reasons. But a preference for churches that meet needs and use gifts is strongest among the young and growing churches.

Figure 29 Relationship type preferences by church life stage

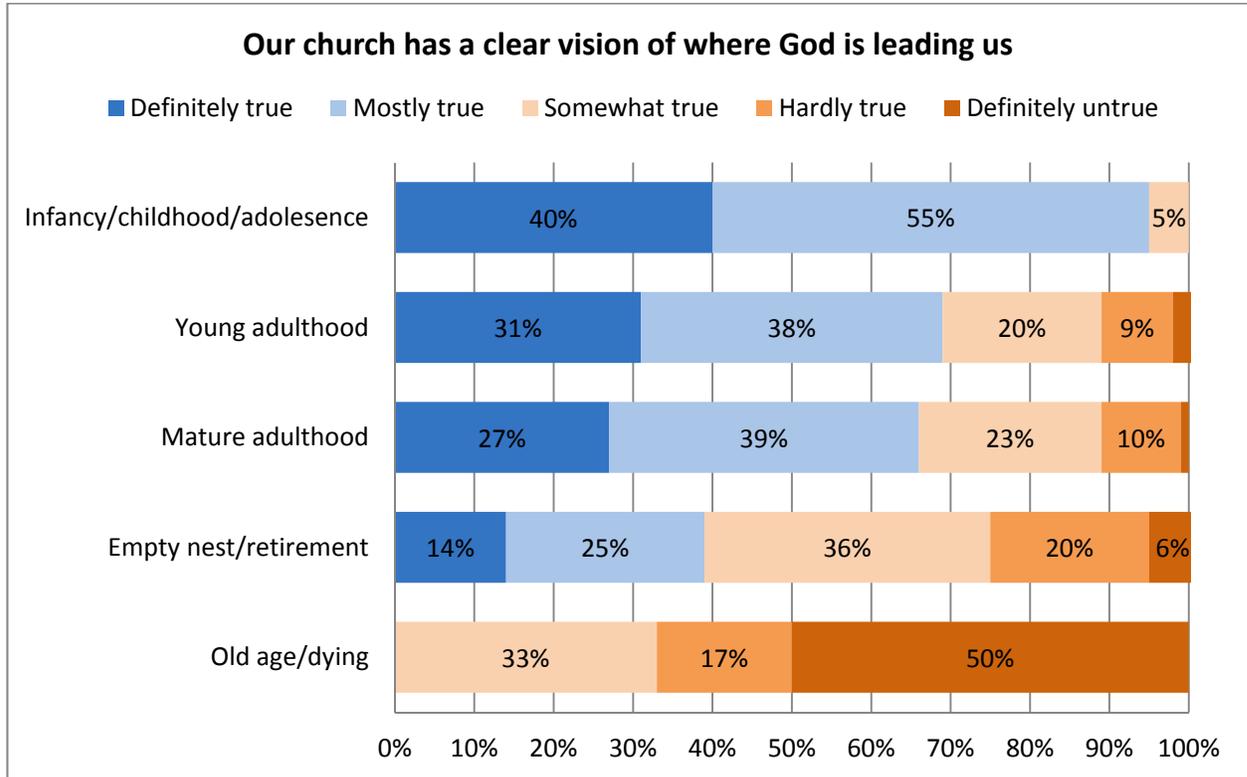


It is important to recall that while members of "younger" churches are more interested in needs and gifts, younger *people* may actually be more interested in long-term relationships with churches.

Vision

One of the most telling factors that distinguish congregations across the life cycle stages is vision. Bullard observed that the focus and enthusiasm about a church's vision are strongest in the early stages of the life of a church but that vision, if not recast, becomes unclear and less and less the driving force for a church. Put another way, management replaces vision as the church's driving motivation. Data in **Figure 30** supports this observation. Respondents were asked how true it was that their church had a clear vision of where God was leading them. In infancy/childhood/adolescence congregations, 95% said this was definitely or mostly true. In young adulthood congregations, this percent was 69%; in mature adulthoods 66%. The percent fell to 39% for empty nest/retirement churches and then to zero (0%) by the old age/dying stage.

Figure 30 Vision of God's leading by church life stage

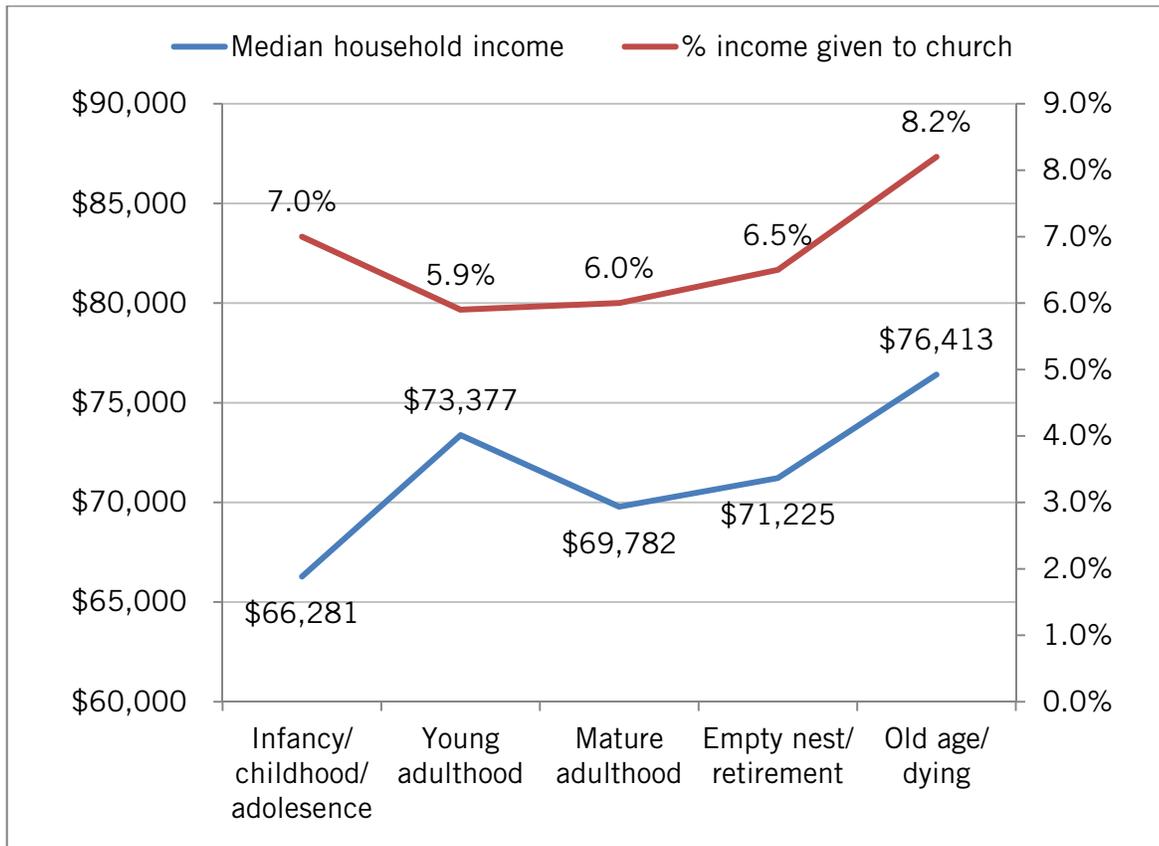


INTERVENTION (OR, “CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”)

We've established that Christian Reformed congregations differ in terms of the life cycle stage they are experiencing. Leaders may be unaware of their church's present life stage and its consequences for their church. But the analogy to life cycles is only an analogy; unlike mortal individuals, churches do not inevitably die. In fact, reversal of a church's movement through the church life cycle can be achieved through church renewal and recasting the vision.

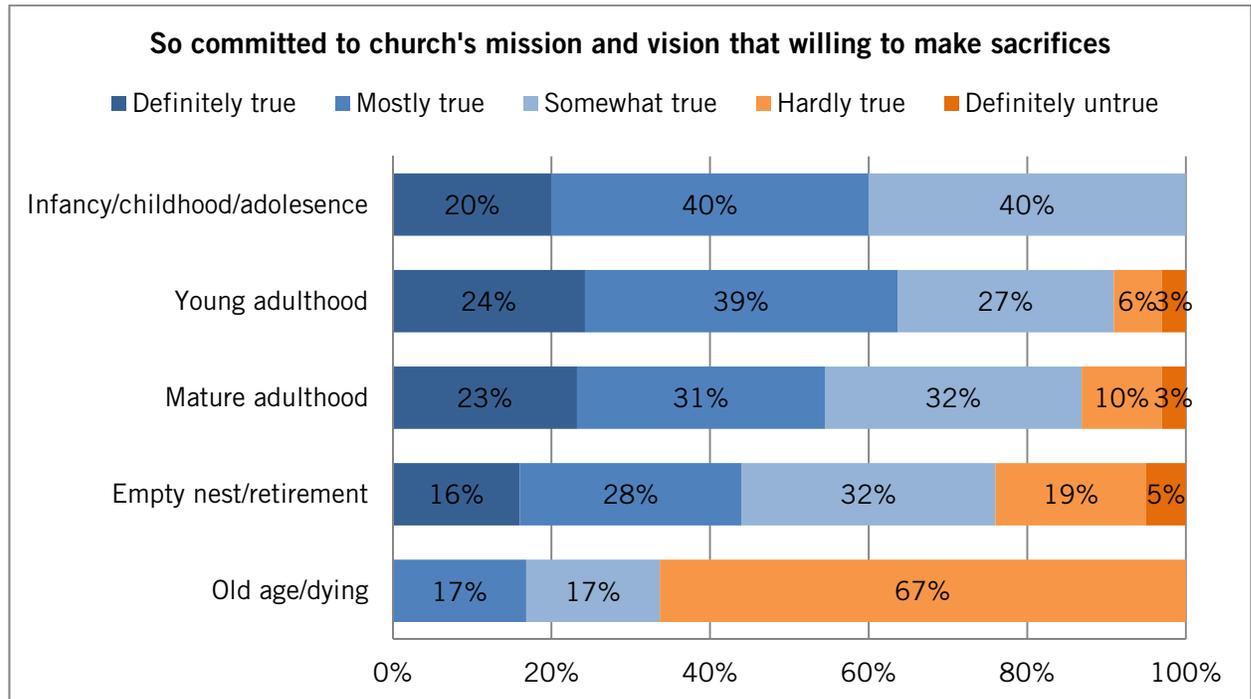
Aging congregations still have gifts and resources God has given them. These gifts can be renewed to help a church move toward a new sense of purpose. The next two figures show that aging congregations are not without financial resources. Both median household income and percentage giving to the church do not decline uniformly over the church life cycle. In fact, they both show very little variation across life cycle stages.

Figure 31 Median household income and percent given to church by life stage



But are attendees of aging congregations willing to make sacrifices for a new mission and vision? **Figure 32** gives evidence that that might be the case. Although no respondents in old age/dying churches said it was “definitely true” that they were so committed to their church’s mission and vision that they were willing to make sacrifices, and only 17% said this was mostly true, the mature adulthood and empty nest/retirement churches still have attendees who are willing to make such sacrifices. Church renewal and recasting church vision can result in congregational rejuvenation, with the help of God’s Spirit, of course.

Figure 32 Willingness to sacrifice for vision by church life stage



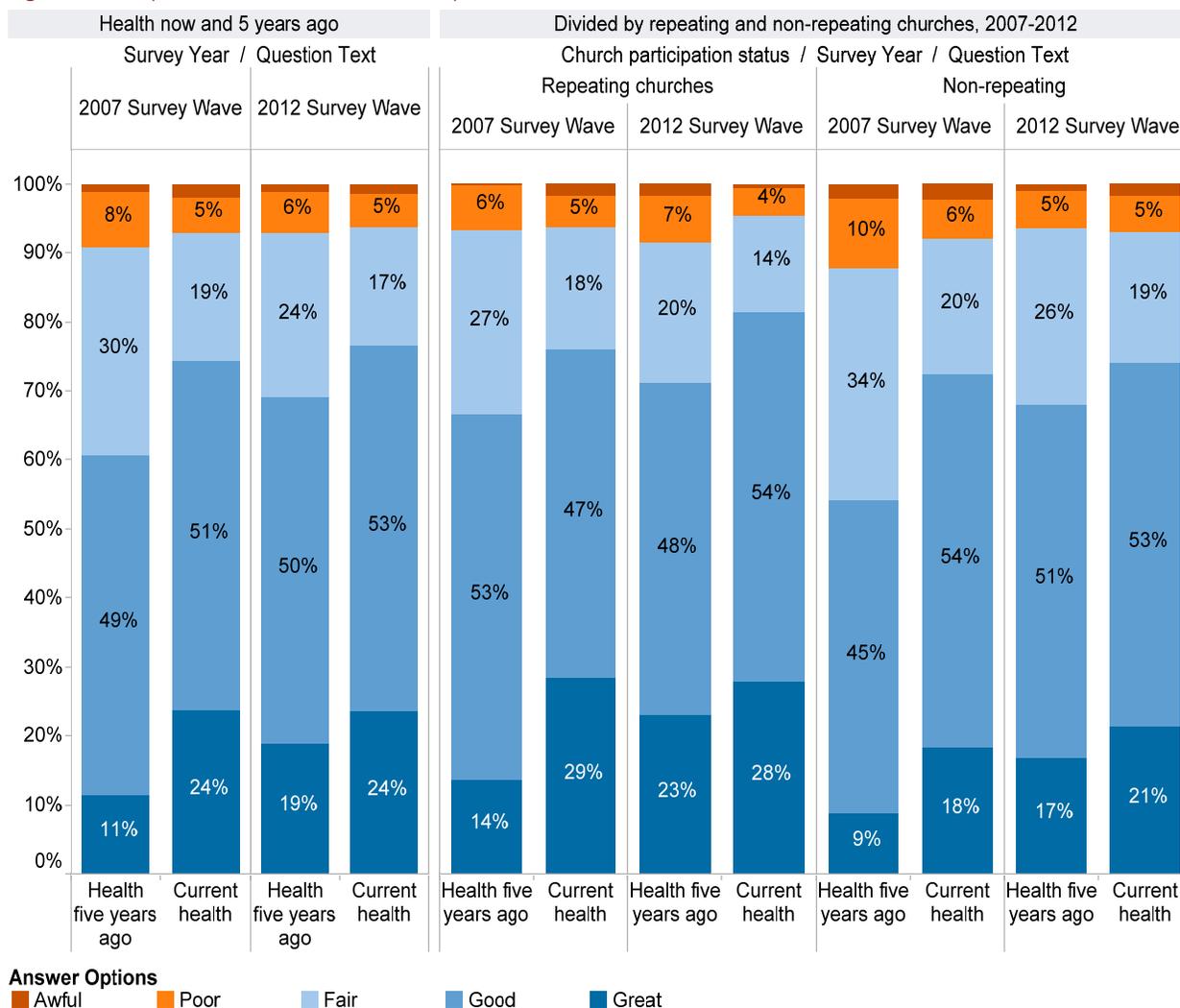
V. Measuring and explaining perceptions of congregational health

The 2007 and 2012 surveys broke new ground by adopting the CRCNA's developing focus on healthy congregations. The questionnaires asked respondents about 11 areas of congregational health originally developed by denominational leadership to inform the "Healthy Church Survey" (HCS) instrument. A 2011 revision of that survey is now being used on a regular basis as a support for coaching of individual congregations, on a schedule convenient to each congregation.¹⁵ The 2012 CRC survey replicated most of the content of the HCS; comparing the two survey data sets will allow the Healthy Church coaching team to extend interpretation of HCS results and better understand and advise churches.

OVERALL HEALTH EVALUATIONS

As in the Healthy Church Survey, we asked survey respondents to rate their congregation's health from memory of five years past and currently, on a 5-point scale from "Awful" to "Great." **Figure 33** shows the results.

Figure 33 Perceptions of overall current health improve over 2007



The leftmost 4 columns in the figure show that perceptions of health 5 years ago (2002 and 2007, respectively) and current health have both improved since 2007, though only very slightly for current

¹⁵ Visit <http://www.crcna.org/HealthyChurch> for more information about the Healthy Church Survey

health (the “good” category increased from 51% to 53% while “fair” fell a corresponding 2 points from 19 to 17). Overall, in 2012, 77% of respondents considered their congregation to be in “good” or “great” health, while just 6% think the congregation’s health is “poor” or “awful.”

To test the sensitivity of this information to our sample’s composition, the middle 4 columns (the 4 to the left in the right panel of **Figure 33**) break down the results for repeating churches that participated in both 2007 and 2012, while the rightmost 4 columns show churches that participated in only one of the waves. The results reinforce the conclusion that perceptions of congregational health have improved since 2007; repeating churches are healthier on average (consistent with their interest in and capacity for participating in surveys!), with 82% of respondents rating them as in “good” or “great” condition. They also improved more since 2007, up 6 points from 76% “good” or “great” in 2007. The values for non-repeating churches are interesting, primarily as confirmation that we do not appear to have drawn and recruited responses from an unusual sample of churches that are especially healthy or unhealthy compared to 2007.

INDICATORS OF CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

Respondents in 2012 were asked 163 questions in 11 areas or “rubrics” of congregational health, half evaluating the church and half evaluating themselves.¹⁶ Answers range on a 5-point scale from “Definitely UNtrue” (1) to “Definitely true” (5). We average all the items in each of the 11 areas for each respondent, producing a more precise estimate of each respondent’s evaluation of the church and themselves in each rubric.

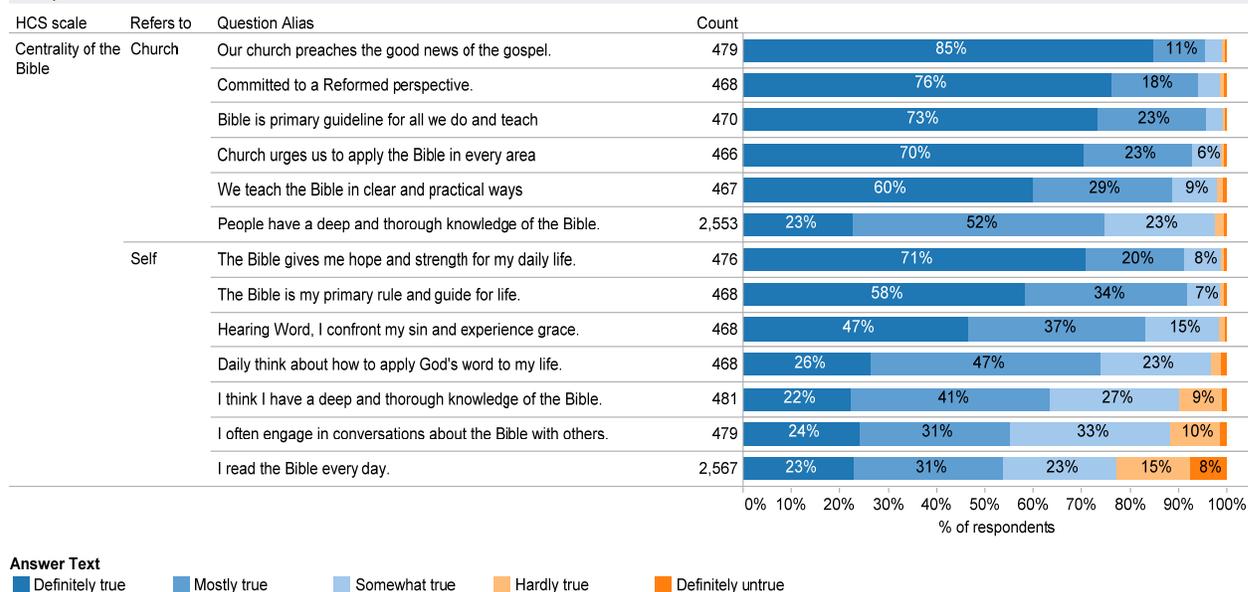
Example: Items for Centrality of the Bible

For example, **Figure 34** shows the 13 items in the Centrality of the Bible scale, sorted from most affirmed to least affirmed. 85% of respondents say it is “definitely true” that their church “preaches the good news of the gospel”; just 23% say it is “definitely true” that the church’s people “have a deep and thorough knowledge of the Bible.” Similarly, 71% say it’s “definitely true” that “The Bible gives me hope and strength for my daily life,” but just 23% say the same for “I read the Bible every day.”

Figure 34 Healthy Church scale items for Centrality of the Bible

Healthy Church scale items for All

Items come from the Healthy Church Survey (HCS). For full support in using these items to guide a congregational conversation, please contact Home Missions about working with a trained Healthy Church coach.

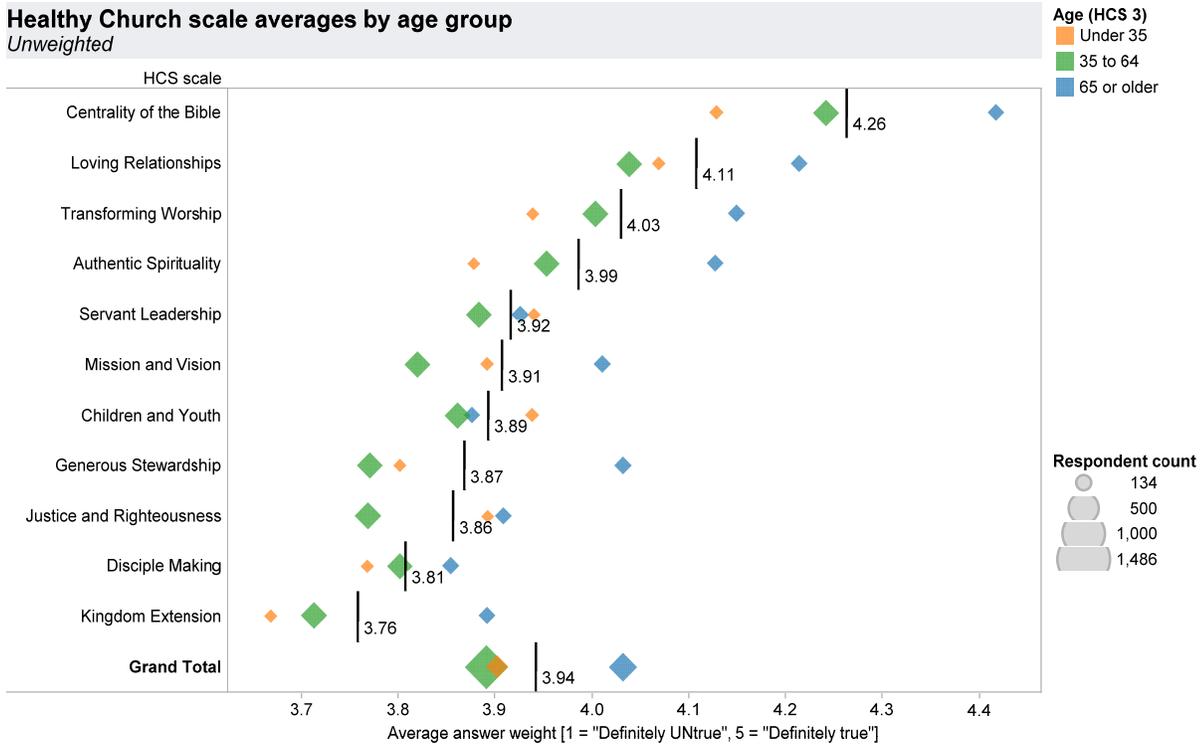


¹⁶ Technically, though all 163 questions were used, to save respondents’ time, we asked each respondent just 40 to 50 HCS questions. Each respondent answered a standard set of 22 items (one church- and one self-rating item from each of the 11 scales), plus a randomly-selected half of the church- and self-rating items from 4 randomly-selected scales.

Scale averages

Figure 35 shows the results of averaging the 11 scales, sorting them descending by the average score.¹⁷ Black lines show overall averages, while colored diamonds show three age groups.

Figure 35 Healthy congregations (11 areas or rubrics)



2012 CRC survey respondents rated Centrality of the Bible items 4.26 on average, well above the 4.0 that corresponds to “mostly true.” Biblical focus remains a perceived strong point of the denomination’s churches and people. Older respondents rate their churches and themselves much higher than younger respondents, but even the youngest respondents give higher ratings to Centrality of the Bible than to the next-highest scored scale, Loving Relationships, which averaged 4.11.

The least-affirmed scales are Kingdom Extension (mean 3.76) and Disciple Making (mean 3.81); these outreach and discipleship areas are challenges for many CRC congregations and congregants. There are especially wide gaps in rating between younger and older respondents for Transforming Worship, Authentic Spirituality and Generous Stewardship. Interestingly, the different age groups perceive things very similarly for Servant Leadership, Children and Youth, and Disciple Making.

¹⁷ Results in this section are unweighted for the sake of simplicity in our graphics production; however, weighted results are very similar.

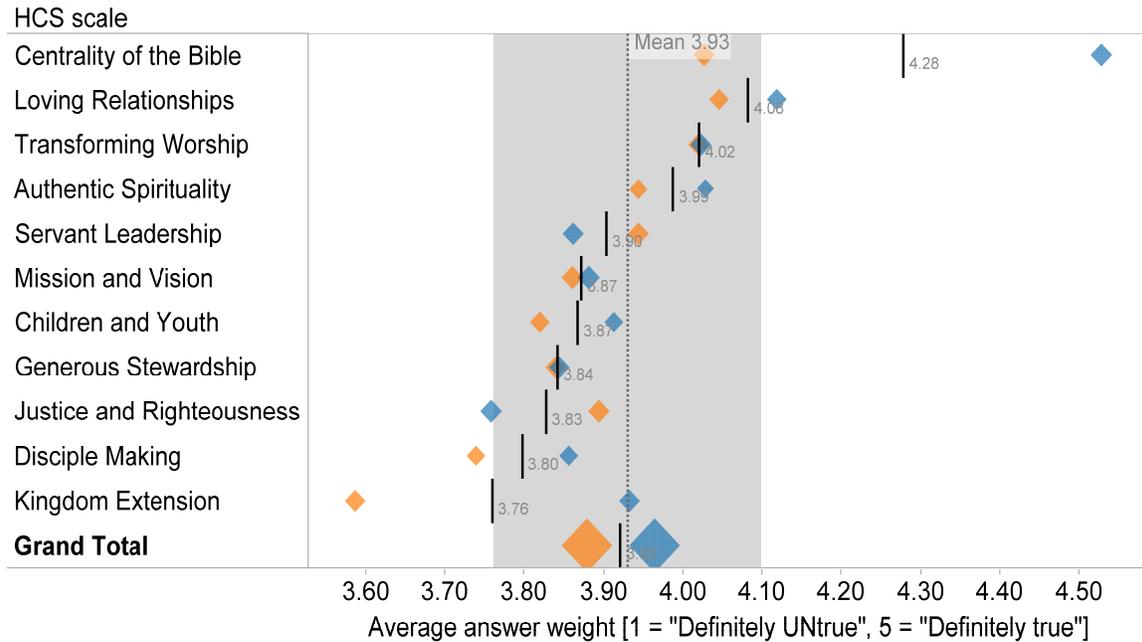
Comparing church- and self-ratings

Figure 36 compares respondents' ratings of the congregation to their ratings of themselves, revealing how the ratings are affected by these different sections of the HCS data. The figure reveals that Centrality of the Bible scores are much more positive for congregations than for individuals, largely due to less than daily rates of actual Bible reading, as seen in the bottom half of **Figure 34**. Still, the average for self-ratings on this scale is over 4.0. Another wide gap in evaluations affects Kingdom Extension, which scores much more favorably for congregations than for individuals. Healthy churches don't just have leaders who visibly do well with Biblical teaching and evangelistic preaching; they also have a broad base of individual congregants with strong habits of Bible reading and relational evangelism. These are the areas where the Healthy Church paradigm suggests we need the most work as a denomination.

Figure 36 Healthy Church scale averages, comparing church- and self-ratings

Healthy Church scale averages by Referent (Church/Self)

Unweighted; questions refer to All



Crosstabulation

- Church
- Self

Overall, we find a picture of a denomination that perceives generally healthy churches, with many items at least “mostly true” or better. We perceive strengths in our Biblical foundations, our worship and our love for each other, while noting that we need the most improvement in extending the good news and righteousness of the Kingdom to others outside our community.

Church variation

Figure 37 shows a mark for four selected congregations with at least 50 responses.¹⁸ The figure illustrates the wide array of variation among churches. Church 1 in blue scores best and has a lot to teach Church 2 in green about Justice and Righteousness work, for example. (Both are suburban Michigan congregations.) but Church 1 falls well behind Church 2 when it comes to Children and Youth; an exchange of ideas and practices and values, perhaps through coaches, could be constructive for both churches. Likewise, Church 3 in red and Church 4 in orange (both in agricultural regions in Iowa and Alberta) score relatively lower. Both might learn something about Mission and Vision from Church 1 and 2, though suburban *versus* rural differences might present challenges. But each could learn much from the other, as Church 3 struggles

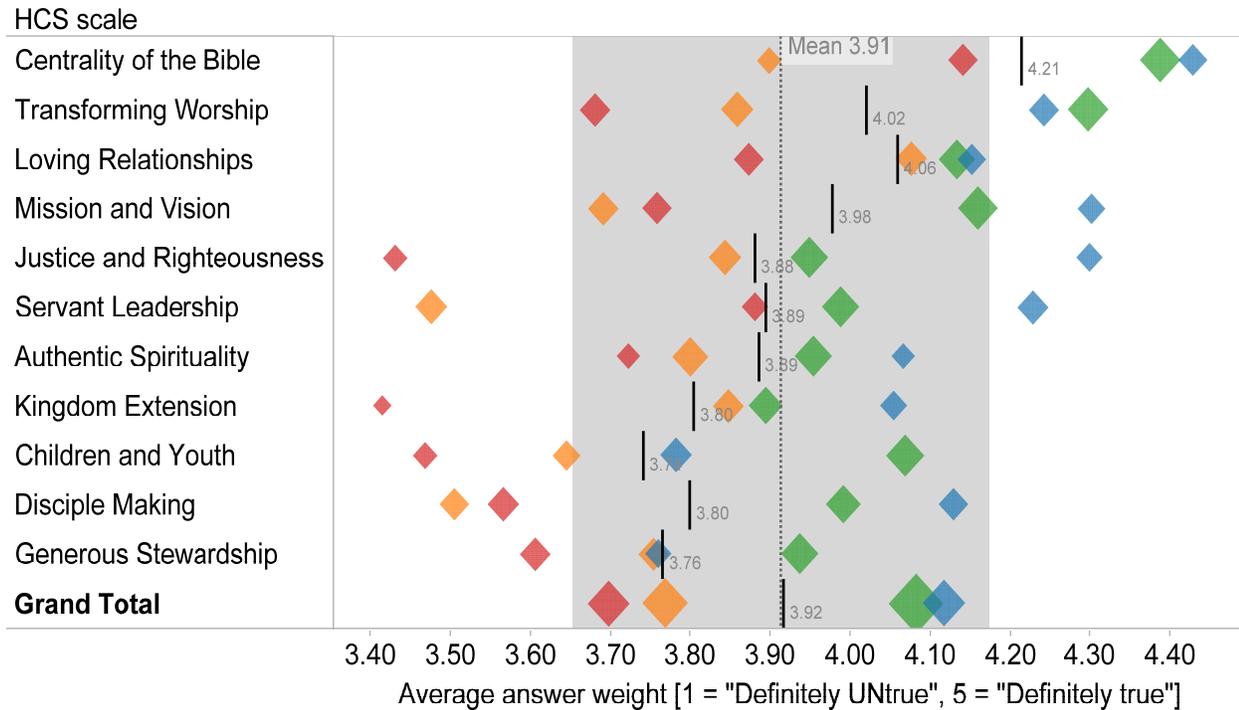
¹⁸ These congregations are a bit healthier than average, as evidenced by their higher participation rates.

particularly with Justice and Righteousness and Kingdom Extension, while Church 4 could benefit from Church 3's perspective on Servant Leadership practices. There are a multitude of "church personalities" indicated by the data, suggesting that almost every church has a strength to share with others and areas to learn from others. The Healthy Church team seeks to communicate this developing contextual wisdom through the coaching network, while avoiding direct horse-race comparisons that might discourage or distract congregations.

Figure 37 Healthy Church scale averages for four selected congregations

Healthy Church scale averages by Church

Unweighted; questions refer to All



Crosstabulation

- Church 1
- Church 2
- Church 3
- Church 4

MULTIVARIATE MODEL RESULTS

Statistical models allow us to try to disentangle which of many variables actually influence Healthy Church scores. For example, in **Figure 35**, we see that older respondents give higher scores, on average. But statistical models show that when we compare the influence of age and devotional practices, it's the devotional practices that have leverage; the association of healthier churches with age is primarily due to older people being more likely to report regular devotional activities.

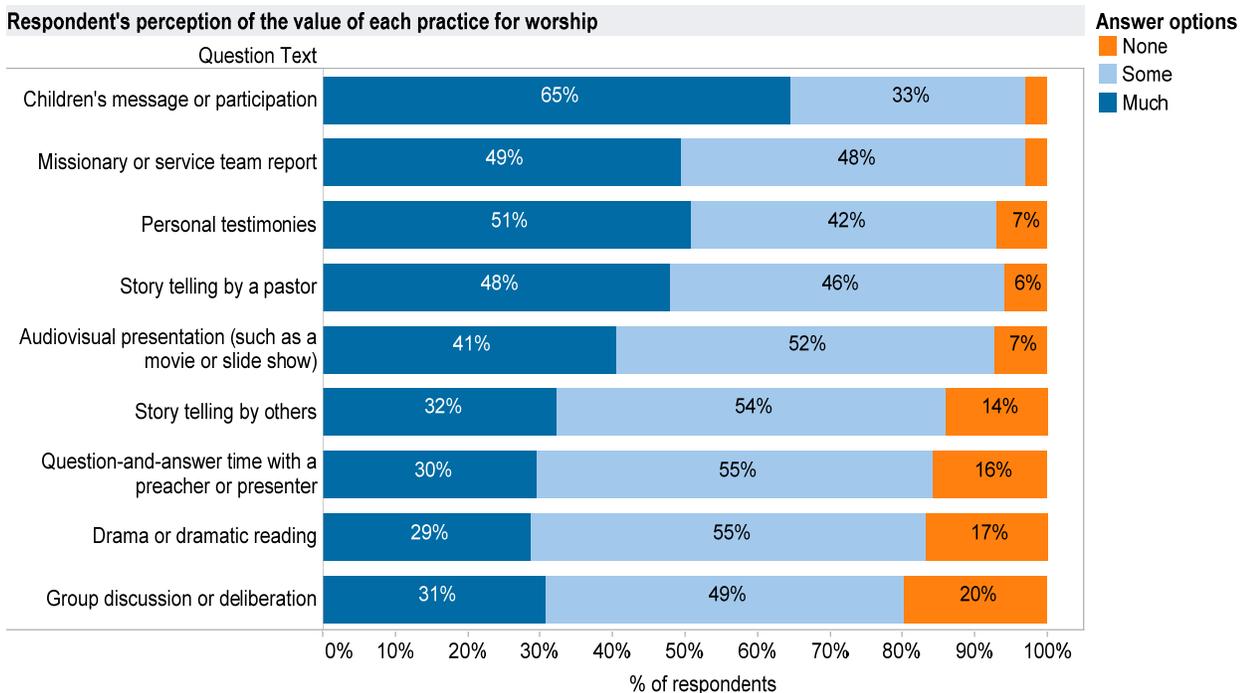
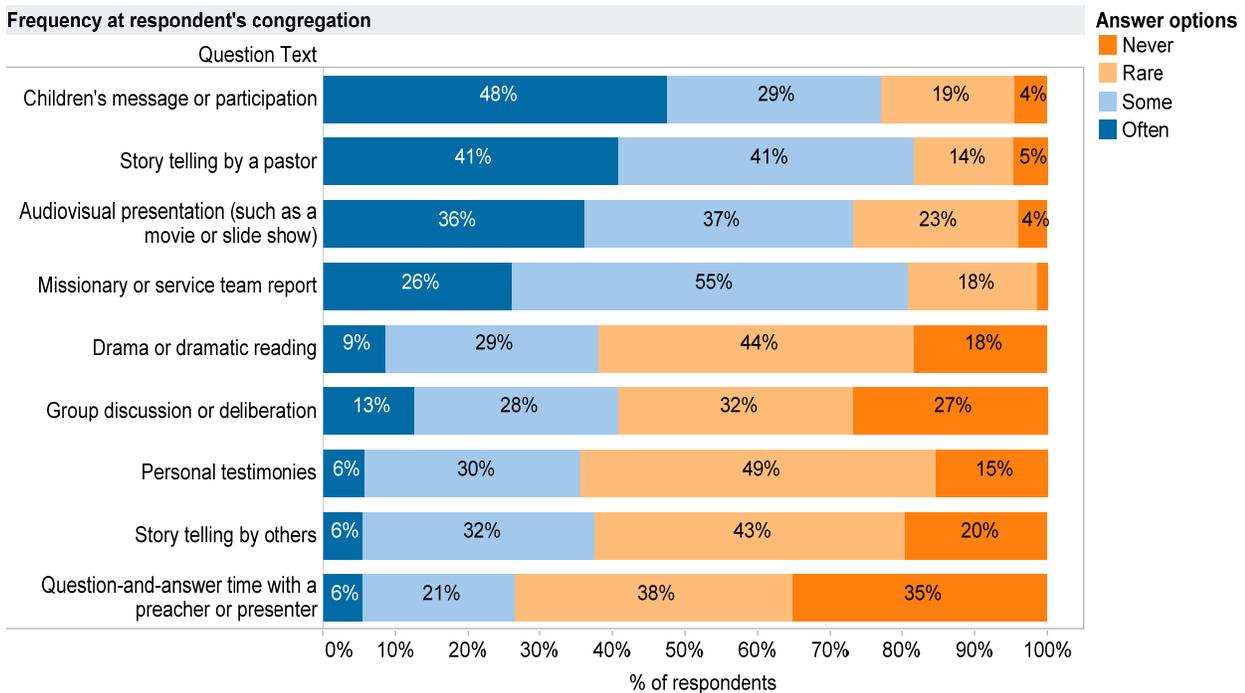
A full exposition of the array of statistical models is beyond the scope of the current report. Instead, here is a brief summary of some robust results from several modeling strategies:

1. **Geographic region:** As we observed in 2007, American respondents are notorious among survey researchers for giving unusually positive responses to survey questions, even when referring to the same objective reality. This pattern recurs in our data; American respondents give their churches higher ratings than do Canadian respondents, even when many other factors are held constant. The effect is small, probably less than a tenth of a point, possibly as much as three tenths on a scale from 1 to 5. We think this is likely to be a cultural effect and doubt that American churches are actually even a little bit healthier on average; however, the difference appears to affect church-rating items much more than self-rating items, so there may be some basis other than survey response psychology.
2. **Church size** is entirely unrelated to HCS scores.
3. Apparent **age** effects on HCS scores disappear when other controls are added.
4. **Education:** the least-educated respondents (high school or less) are the most positive about church-rating items and also rate themselves slightly more highly than college grads do, while the most-educated respondents (graduate degrees) also rate themselves more highly than college grads, but without the parallel increase in church-rating items.
5. Respondents who feel a strong and increasing **sense of belonging** score higher than those who have a strong but stable sense of belonging, while those who have no sense of belonging or whose sense is decreasing give their churches substantially lower scores—as much as a third of a point lower.
6. Those who were offered opportunities and acted on **participation in decision-making** give higher scores than those who either don't receive such opportunities or don't wish to take them. Self-ratings are lower for all of these, but church ratings are lower only for those who wish to participate and are unhappy about feeling they have not been offered such opportunities. Likewise, those who believe that “ordinary people” have “just the right amount” of influence on congregational decision-making perceive a healthier church than those who believe ordinary people have too little or too much influence. The former group is much larger than the latter, by a factor of over ten to one (26% versus 2.2% of respondents in 2012).
7. Congregations that employ **contemporary learning modes** are healthier—much healthier. Does a low-scoring congregation want to see gains of half a point to a full point in their scores, with the accompanying blessings of godly obedience, compassion, and mutual understanding? They could make a concerted effort to take several of these practices (such as children's sermons, movie clips, storytelling, drama and interactive discussion; see the next section) from infrequent to frequent, and they could teach their congregants to come to value them. This is the largest and most robust effect in our models, and it offers simple, practical leverage. Respondents who perceive these practices to be frequent give much higher scores on church-rating items and moderately higher scores on self-rating items. Respondents who also consider them more valuable for worship also report much higher self-ratings—probably because experience of frequent engagement results in spiritual growth, greater wisdom and greater respect for creativity and shared experiences.
8. **Devotional frequency** is also associated with healthier churches. The size of the effect is moderate, greater than decision-making participation but less than frequent exposure to contemporary learning modes. Recent declines in devotional frequency (see **Figure 10** on page 19) suggest that churches have ample room to rebuild this traditional foundation of the church, perhaps partly by using new modes of worship and learning to instruct congregants in the value of devotional life.
9. Finally, **stewardship health** (see **Figure 18** on page 28) has an apparently complicated relationship to the Healthy Church scales. Respondents with high stewardship health scores also evaluate themselves somewhat more highly on self-rating scales. However, they also evaluate the church less highly (though this negative association is not consistently statistically significant). Perhaps those who are dedicated stewards (and also tend to give high shares of their personal income to the church) are prone to have somewhat higher expectations of the church than those who are less committed to supporting the church.

DISCUSSION: CONSIDER CONTEMPORARY LEARNING MODES

As mentioned in the previous section, one of our key findings in 2007 and confirmed in 2012 is that “contemporary learning modes” are strongly associated with healthy congregations. The “contemporary” label comes from the trendiness of audiovisual content and interactive conversations in worship, but many of the practices we are interested in are fairly traditional, like storytelling (parables on the mountainside, anyone?) and children’s sermons (suffer the little children to come to the front of the sanctuary!). **Figure 38** shows responses from 2007 and 2012 combined. Many CRC congregants see few of these effective tools for engagement; there is opportunity for churches to grow through some very practical initiatives.

Figure 38 Contemporary learning modes, 2007 and 2012 data



VI. 2012 CRC Survey respondents' comments

Survey respondents were given two opportunities to provide comments. First, there was an “Optional comment: Do you have any specific suggestions about how ministries and agencies could better serve your church?” Secondly, respondents were asked at the end of the survey to comment on “the survey and our life together as part of Christ’s body.” These comments provide a robust exploration of attitudes and insights of congregants, as many respondents offered thoughts or topics not found in other sections of the survey. CSR staff reviewed the comments, identified common themes and coded which themes, if any, were found in each comment. This chapter will provide an overview of different themes found in many of the comments as well as several actual comments for analysis.

Respondents’ comments are a great source of insight into rich ideas and themes that are not well-captured by dry, mechanical multiple-choice questions. However, their richness also makes them a vehicle for intense opinions and emotional controversies that cannot be quantified. Please read this section with the assurance that the survey team did not bring any conscious agenda to the selection of quotations included here, and we have endeavored to suppress any unconscious agenda. For several reasons, the number and intensity of these comments are not measurements that are well-suited to assessing which perspectives are more common or more intensely held or, of course, more accurate. We have tried instead to present the range and depth of opinion in the CRCNA without assessing the merits of these opinions. We are more interested in describing the internal tensions and perceptions of external challenges than we are in suggesting ways to address those tensions and challenges. Comments quoted below are unedited except for minor punctuation or bracketed edits to increase clarity.

The comments have a wide range in tone and may tend somewhat toward extremes, whether positive or negative. In the context of an anonymous survey, respondents with intense viewpoints may also be the most vocal. Some respondents were very unhappy with the direction the CRCNA and/or their local churches were headed, whereas others were very pleased with the efforts of their church and the community they enjoy.

The top ten themes coded from the final comment are shown in **Figure 39**, while the top ten themes from the optional comment regarding specific agencies and ministries are shown in **Figure 40**. Themes are not mutually exclusive; a single comment may be coded for multiple themes. It is also important to remember that comments take additional time in an already long survey, so fewer than 20% of the 2,609 survey respondents offered comments.

Figure 39 Coded final comments (*N* = 448), in response to “Your comments on the survey and on our life together as part of Christ’s body are welcome”

Final Comment Theme	Percent Mentioning Theme
Misc.	21.2%
Praise for CRC or for individual church	17.9%
Pastor or church leader	14.3%
Anxiety over CRC decline	13.2%
Call for biblical adherence	10.5%
CRC doctrine (Reformed identity)	10.0%
CRC governance	9.8%
CRC exclusiveness	9.4%
Church as a serving agent: External (community)	8.5%
Church as a serving agent: Internal (within the congregation)	6.5%

Figure 40 Coded comments (*N* = 331), in response to “Do you have any specific suggestions about how ministries and agencies could better serve your church?”

Optional Comment Theme	Percent Mentioning Theme
Misc.	29.9%
Not sure/No comment	26.0%
CRC governance	13.9%
CRC exclusiveness	7.3%
Church as a serving agent: External (community)	7.3%
Pastor or church leader	6.9%
Church as a serving agent: Internal (within the congregation)	6.9%
Call for biblical adherence	6.0%
Evangelism	5.1%
Young Adults	4.8%

THEMES FROM CLOSING GENERAL COMMENTS

Respondents were given the following prompt at the end of the survey: “Your comments on the survey and on our life together as part of Christ’s body are welcome. *If you wish to remain anonymous, please do not use any names or other information that might reveal your identity.*”

Many respondents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to complete the survey. These comments reflect a hunger to have open and honest conversation about the direction the CRC should take, as this respondent wrote:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this survey, I found it very therapeutic. I now have the feeling that maybe someone is listening and working to strengthen the CRCNA.

Another comment shows gratitude for all efforts dedicated to improving the denomination in which the respondent is deeply invested:

*I appreciated this opportunity to give my opinion about the CRCNA. This is my native denomination and I continue to feel a deep sense of loyalty and concern for its future. I am profoundly thankful for the training, nurture, and faith development I received as a child from my parents, Sunday school teachers, Christian day school teachers, and college professors. **I owe so much of what I am today to the CRCNA and the local church in which I grew up.** I struggle with how to move into the 21st century as a Reformed denomination, with the difficult, complicated, global issues we face. **I continue to pray mightily for ‘us’.** One thing I found tricky to answer in this survey was the fact that [although] I feel somewhat disconnected (currently) to the CRCNA as a denomination,[yet] my faith, giving, [and] stewardship, is alive and well. It just is not connected to my local church. I felt my answers were inconsistent because of this.*

Many respondents expressed the kind of caring disposition found in the comment above, and many respondents mentioned praying regularly for direction for the denomination.

Praise for the CRCNA or the local church

Many comments expressed **praise for the CRC or for their individual churches**. The remarkable comment below speaks about the work together of the congregation and the denomination, while simultaneously touching on related concerns about unity and outreach. Emphasis is added:

*I love the CRC and how it has shaped me, but in some ways I lament the church's ethnic isolationism and fear of having difficult conversations. There is something wonderful about the unity of the church surpassing individual differences, but we've seen too many schisms in the past. **Our congregation has broached some very difficult topics recently, and the leadership has***

facilitated these conversations with grace and truth. I'm thankful to assistance in this from denominational experts in restorative justice practices and safe church practices.

I find the term 'unchurched' a bit off-putting. In our context almost everyone we encounter has some history with church of some sort, but the ministry we are excited about is the good news of what new life in Christ can mean for individuals and communities. I believe that this is the future of 'home missions,' and I am excited about it.

Respondents expressed feeling at home in a strong church community.

I haven't been at the church very long, but one of the things that impressed me is how friendly people are.... I really enjoy being part of this church family.

Another comment speaks directly to the fulfillment respondents feel in their churches through a variety of ministries.

We love our church! God's mission for our lives is challenged each Sunday by our two pastors. Our Worship Teams choose music that brings us into God's presence each Sunday.... Our drama teams re-enforce the focus of our worship and our pastor's message. Our leaders continually challenge us to 'be in the Word,' 'serving others,' 'giving from your heart,' and to continually 'Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' Amen.

For the sake of brevity, we do not print additional positive comments here, but readers should take note of the prevalence of this theme in **Figure 39** (17.9%, the largest single theme) and should not mistake the number of critical quotes below as evidence of a primarily critical survey sample.

Comments about the pastor or church leadership

Many comments mentioned positive or negative practices by their pastor or other church leaders, as shown in the following comments:

I appreciate our pastor and his concern for people living in the community surrounding the church. He visits weekly and asks for prayer requests. These requests are presented to the congregation for prayer.

[Our pastor] is a godly leader. He articulates well the love and way of Jesus Christ. Despite some resistance, he challenges the local church to reach out and love others outside the security of our cultural 'playpen.' The spiritual life of our church is much improved since he came to serve in [our church].

While some respondents were very happy with their church pastors and leaders, several comments expressed a need for change. Several comments mentioned issues specific to their congregation, pastors, and community. After stating that he wished things were better at his church, one respondent mentioned that:

[I am] hoping that the CRC does not try to apply a 'one size fits all' fix to our church situation as has been done in some situations in the past.

Comments like these express a desire for more attention to the specific needs of local churches by their leaders. Many comments mentioned wanting more in-depth preaching as opposed to a "dumbed down" kind of preaching.

I am hungry for our pastor to dig more deeply into Scripture and to trust the power of the Word to be dynamic and active.

Many respondents expressed a need for improved relationships with **pastors and other church leadership**. Several churches seem to be experiencing discord between leaders and members; here is a representative example:

There are things which our Pastor will not do that many of our congregation feel would be beneficial to our spiritual life as a church. These changes never happen! It had been years since we have heard the Ten Commandments or the Apostles' Creed. What has happened to Communion for the home bound? I think these are important components of our faith...

Anxiety about change in the CRC

Many of the comments, unsurprisingly, reflect what seems to be a **tension between adherence to traditional CRC teaching and increasing openness to new traditions and cultural trends**. One respondent expressed a mixture of feelings over declining traditional teaching:

*As much as I appreciate my contemporary worship services, I feel that we are falling away from the knowledge of the CRC doctrines and belief that have made our congregation strong. **Our kids don't know any of the catechism**, and I blame myself and my church for not doing a better job. I feel that my children know what's most important, though, in that Jesus is first and foremost in their lives.*

Many congregants expressed anxiety about a perceived devaluation of traditional CRC doctrine, as shown in the comments below.

*I worry about the future of the CRC ... it feels like we are trying too hard to be 'the church' for 'everyone,' and **in our quest to become that all-encompassing, any-style-goes church, we seem to be losing our 'reformed-ness,'** that which makes us unique ... Can we not be inclusive and retain our Reformed identity?*

*I dearly love the CRC, but it is dying because denominational loyalty is gone. CRC people are **ignorant about our distinctive creeds and confessions**. Our church [is] trying to imitate what they see on TV. Our young people are consumer-driven and seek churches that make them feel good*

...

*In general, **I sense a drift away from the historical reformed and evangelical faith** and toward a [broader], mainline, even liberal Christian faith. I do not find this to be a favorable drift. I used to see close connections between the CRC and the OPC, PCA, RCUS, EPC, etc. These have become very weak due to this drift, and now the close connections are between the CRC and the RCA, PCUS[A], etc.*

Perceived decline in Biblical adherence and Reformed identity

Several respondents specifically mentioned concerns about how their local church, and the CRCNA, have adapted to changes in the broader culture. Respondents mention that this includes placing a higher emphasis on what they see as cultural trends, such as the worship style of the service, and less emphasis on the traditional dogmas of the CRC, such as centrality of the Bible.

*I would like to see more emphasis put on our commitment and relationship with our God/Father. In my humble opinion, I feel as a church we are **drifting away from our strong heritage**. With trying to be [relevant] in today's society, we are losing our deep knowledge and teaching of the past. The Bible is still true for today and we must search the Scriptures to find our answers for today. **I love how we are more eager to reach out to our neighbors**, but we must keep our strong Bible teaching and worship. Our love for God and our commitment to him will win others for him.*

I have concerns for the CRC, as it seems we focus totally on the grace and love of God and minimize the topic[s] of sin, temptation, power of Satan in the lives of Christian[s]. How we live seems not to be important, just knowing that God loves us no matter what is what we stress. I believe God wants us to live differently than the world in order to be a light and to bring glory to Him. I fear our young people are not being prepared to stand strong in their faith in the coming years of Christian persecution.

This aspect of the CRC is especially important to some respondents. They mention questioning their loyalty to their local church and the CRCNA in reference to the decline in traditional Reformed teachings.

I hope our local church can continue to discern the false teachings coming out of the CRC denomination and the colleges we support. My wife and I are currently seeking God's will in finding a denomination that upholds scripture.

I am very concerned about the direction that the CRC is going. My loyalty to the denomination has declined significantly. I think that decisions at the denominational level are unduly influenced by cultural concerns rather than scripture. Most of my extended family have left the denomination over these concerns.

Several respondents perceived this tension to be the direct cause of “dying churches,” offering the diagnosis that churches lose membership due to compromised principles. Some perceived cultural compromise to be a misguided measure to keep up attendance, especially among **youth and young adults**:

It is very sad to see hardly anyone carrying Bibles into Church anymore. It is also very sad to see the Youth Ministries focused on doing community together by having all fun-times and not doing bible studies. Our church Middle School/High School Leader has told me if we do only Bible Study and One night out of the month a fun activity then we will not have the number of students we need because they will go to other churches. ... Church[es] are to train the youth in God's word and apply it, not dumb it down with a verse and then let play games and watch movies.

Concern about exclusivity, pro and con

There are plenty of commenters offering diagnoses other than doctrinal compromise for the perceived core issue of struggling churches and falling attendance. Here as well there are differences of opinion; some believe churches struggle because they have become too welcoming and need to reinforce a message of discipline and commitment; others find these very same practices to be unneeded obstacles to fellowship with believers from other Christian traditions and to outreach to other cultural groups.

The comment below attributes CRC churches' struggles to **ethno-cultural exclusivity**:

I feel like the Christian Reformed denomination is a dying breed. I feel that we've relied on our history and Dutch connections to stay 'alive' as a church, but we've missed the point of reaching out to our community... our neighbors. We've missed the point of loving our neighbors and bring others to Christ. As a result, we've become obsolete as a denomination... almost like a club linked together by Dutch connections.

Exclusive patterns in leadership selection are an issue for this commenter:

*My church often **chooses lay leaders based on traditional values**. For example, most of the elders in our church were first deacons. And most of the leaders (elders and deacons) have one (or usually more) of these things true of them: a) grew up CRC, b) went to—or work in—a Christian School, c) graduated from Calvin or Dordt. It is very rare that a lay leader does not have one of these traditional qualifications. Even though the church has members for whom these things do not apply, the leaders are often chosen from those who fit into one of those buckets.*

In counterpoint, a comment from a different church perceives church leadership as exclusive, yet having *too little* connection to traditional denominational experiences:

*Leadership is very stale. [It] goes from one white guy within 5 years of age of the pastor to another and then back to the first one. Most in the leadership have not attended Christian day school, nor Calvin College, just like the pastor, and don't particularly support either one. **Only 2 out of 8 elders have either sent their children to Christian day school or Calvin College.** New ideas are considered [dissent] and not being part of a 'unified' body. [I am] patiently waiting for this pastor to move on (doubtful) or retire (hopeful).*

Another commenter identifies the CRC's public rhetoric about Reformed heritage as a barrier to fellowship:

*[There was] nothing in [the] survey about doctrine. I have found that CRC and Reformed in general is **closed-minded and superficial about accepting other denominations and individuals of STRONG Christian faith into the leadership of the church.** They have a snob-appeal, country club attitude regarding the Reformed doctrine. In other words, it seems that Reformed doctrine is more important than acting out love for Christ and personal and heart-felt salvation. YUCK!!*

Several commenters also identify the denomination's commitment to **Christian schooling** as either a threatened asset or a cultural obstacle. For example, this commenter believes a lack of support for Christian schools is alienating families:

*I wish our church actively supported our Christian schools. To my knowledge they do not. There is no offering taken for the schools. **There is no encouragement to the families that send their children to the Christian school.** There is no assistance for the families who choose to send their children to the Christian schools. Our school sends a letter to my church every year asking for help with tuition, and we never hear anything from the church. I'd have to apply to the charity fund for help. I'm not a charity case ... simply a family who believes that Christian education is one of the best gifts I can give my children, and I wish my church supported that decision in prayer and support.*

In contrast, the comment below posits that Christian schools are an obstacle to successful Christian mission:

*In regards to Christian schools, I am coming to the opinion that we hamper our kids from witnessing to others by setting them in a safe Christian school. We could be a more effective presence in the public schools. We have become an elite community, where not all children feel accepted, [especially] those from poorer homes. My last child went to public school in her [12th year], and there she established friends with other Christians and non-Christians. **Her former friends from the Christian school cut the friendship with her because she left their school,** but still attended the same church. Something seems wrong in this picture. Perhaps this needs looking at, as the Baptists and Pentecostals dare to put their children in public schools.... Why did so many things change in the public school? Because our voices were no longer there.*

COMMENTS ON MINISTRY AND AGENCY SERVICE TO THE CHURCH

Respondents were also given an opportunity to comment on ministries and agencies of the CRCNA. A list of CRCNA ministries and agencies were displayed to the respondent (e.g. Back to God, Calvin College, Home Missions, Partners Worldwide). The following prompt was displayed after the list of agencies for respondents, "Do you have any specific suggestions about how ministries and agencies could better serve your church?" The top coded themes based on these comments are shown in **Figure 40**. The following section will provide several examples of comments coded for the top themes from this question.

CRC governance

A number of respondents mentioned the relationship between local congregations and the CRCNA denomination.

Some respondents were happy with the way their churches were being run, both locally and with regards to the whole denomination.

As a transplant from another denomination, I am very impressed with the connection that the local church has with the CRC as a denomination. The Banner is a great resource for communicating all of the ministry that is going on in the church and through the church. In addition, I am so excited about the work of the CRC locally and internationally—Back to God, CRWRC [World Renew], creation care. Wow! What a witness to the world around us!

On the other hand, however, the respondent below (like several others) was quite upset with the direction the CRC denomination was heading and showed a lot of disappointment for how the church was perceived to be changing:

You have missed the point.... You ask questions regarding whether my choices are based on faith or culture when it is clearly culture driving the denomination. My faith didn't change, the CRC changed and it wasn't based on the Bible. It was politics.

When I was growing up and during early adulthood, it seemed to me there was more of a feeling of belonging in the CRC. I think that has changed to where there is a feeling that there is an oversized church bureaucracy that relates more to the ministries/agencies than to local congregations, particularly congregations that are smaller and farther away from the Grand Rapids area. It almost feels like there is a top-down, centralized approach that sees those in outlying areas as a source of funding, rather than congregations that need serving. I'm generalizing; there are exceptions, of course. I think this is a factor in local congregations that have left to affiliate with new Reformed denominations. The feeling of belonging to a family that was there in the past has been deteriorating.

Several respondents mentioned feeling disconnected from what the agencies do, as shown in the comment below.

I'm finding the agencies disconnected from the average church-goer in our community. The Board structures are puzzling, even confusing.

It currently feels like a one-way relationship. We support many of those organizations, but I don't really see how they serve our church specifically.

On the other side of things, the respondent quoted below is aware of many of the resources made available through CRCNA ministries and agencies, but acknowledges that the congregation does not access these resources:

As a church, we don't always take full advantage of what the CRC has to offer. Balancing effective communication with avoiding information overload is difficult.

CRC exclusiveness

Respondents also commented on the specific focus of CRCNA ministries and agencies. Views on CRC diversity and ministry attention widely vary. For example, some respondents said there is not enough focus on race relations, while other respondents said there is too much. Typical comments from this theme are shown below.

[Agencies can help the church] by being more open, honest, and intentional when it comes to race relations.

Another respondent encourages agencies to broaden the scope of diversity discussions beyond age and race:

Understand diversities other than racial/age. Geography and culture in the CRC are also diverse. Location of headquarters is sometimes a deterrent to understanding the broader cultures of the CRCNA. Agencies need to read this survey and understand what the churches need and want and then direct their efforts to help the churches do their work, NOT do the work for the churches. Agencies serve the church, not the other way around.

Another area with contradicting viewpoints was feelings of focusing too much or not enough on a specific generation, as shown in these comments.

Though I agree the younger generation is the future church, not enough consideration is given to attending seniors needs in worship services, progressive worship has gone too fast; as a result I

believe many seniors go to church 'out of custom?' They are 'unintentional' ignored, because of 'youthful enthusiasm?'

I am a single young adult and sometimes am frustrated with the lack of connection I feel to the church. Sometimes it seems that the church doesn't know how to handle people in my position, but as soon as a young adult is married they have an easier time being part of the church. I wonder if a ministry could be developed to focus on young adults/singles in the church?

Church as a serving agent: External

Several comments mentioned ministries and agencies serving the needs of the world, both in North America and beyond. The general sense of these comments is that respondents feel disconnected from the specific work of the agencies. Some respondents believe the agencies should serve the local church, while others believe the agencies exist to do what an individual local church cannot do. Respondents also mentioned figuring out a way to have a more personal connection with agencies, while also not being overwhelmed with mailings and specific Sunday services for individual agencies.

We support all these ministries because we believe they are necessary, important and do the work that we personally cannot do. It is our support for them not their support for us.

I think the intent of a lot of these ministries is to help others – people in developing nations, church plants, etc. I know we get resources from many of them that we are able to use to inform people. They also provide guidance for the church in different areas.

While the respondents of the first two comments seem well informed about the agencies, the following comment would like to see more personal involvement from agencies with local churches:

More visible involvement and/or contact at the church level. For example, with World Missions, could we have a missions conference hosted by our church to learn more about international missions? Or could we have some sort of missionary day where missionaries on furlough held some sort of session for the congregation? Same thing with Social Justice...

DISCUSSION

In general, the survey comments illustrate that the largest group of vocal respondents is positive about the CRC. However, there is a sizeable sector of the church family that is dismayed by its perceptions of new ways supplanting old ways, cultural relevance subsuming doctrinal integrity, and social justice supplanting individual piety; let's call this group "traditionalists," for lack of a better word. Another significant sector of the denomination is most deeply concerned about their perceptions of insufficient movement to reject ethnic and economic exclusivity, embrace multicultural diversity and to engage in outreach efforts; let's call this group the "progressives."

Superficially, these two groups may seem internally cohesive and externally divided, as our broader North American public culture and politics expects them to be. But they are neither clearly cohesive nor clearly divided, nor is either sector clearly a majority or even a large minority of the denomination. The comments are rife with evidence that the CRC continues to be a place where these perspectives intermingle, cross-pollinate, engage in friendly fire against their own apparent allies, and find common ground with the opposition in unexpected ways.

Some apparent traditionalists appeal for a return to a consistent set of cultural and liturgical practices across congregations, a belief that is echoed by progressives who urge greater attention to a Reformed mission of holistic faith formation in all walks of life, not just personal piety. Some in each sector want to eschew politics and get back to religious basics, but there's no evidence that any group has a strong shared understanding of where religion stops and "politics" starts, and there are plenty of voices in both apparent "camps" urging the church to strengthen its witness in the political sphere, denominationally, locally, nationally and internationally. Some traditionalists and progressives are united in the belief that the CRC needs better to welcome non-CRC believers, though perhaps for different reasons: the traditionalists because the outsiders display a more intense piety like the piety they remember in their

grandparents; the progressives because they perceive welcome to these outsiders as intrinsically valuable in its own right.

The point of this excursus is that there is little evidence that our denomination includes very many truly consistent traditionalists or progressives. Every one of us has a respect for scriptural passages and traditional church practices that straddle the perceived, mostly false boundary between “camps.” Our judgment is that the anxiety the church feels as a whole is related not so much to compromise and disagreement about fundamentals as it is to basic discomfort with rapid change and increasing complexity. In short, we appear to be more troubled by our common human frailty and myopia than we are by a consistent, single set of besetting sins, compromises or temptations. Collectively, we are more frustrated that we do not share a common, single diagnosis of our shared assets and problems than we are by the deterioration of specific assets or the intensity of specific problems.

Yet we remain united by a strong common hope in the power of God and God’s word to direct us. Concerns about Biblical adherence are challenged by congregations’ consistently strong results on the Centrality of the Bible section of the Healthy Church Survey. While some outspoken individuals in some churches perceive their pastors and congregations as drifting from the Bible, not one responding congregation with at least 10 respondents scored below a 4.0 “Mostly true” average for assessments of the church’s commitment to the authority and applicability of scripture. Some of these critics may be prophets who should be heeded; but many are working from a very narrow view of scripture and are explicitly concerned with specific interpretive issues, not with a decline in broad orthodoxy.

Some of the best, most positive comments about the CRCNA in the survey, like the second comment in this section, quoted above on page 52, articulate appreciation for our tradition’s value for shared education, for shared understanding, and for participatory governance, conflict resolution, and consensus-building as a testament of divine grace and Christian love. The most frustrated comments often reflect contexts in which dialogue has never been engaged or has shut down. The reader gets the impression, difficult to quantify, that intentional dialogue about the biblical and procedural legitimacy of decisions and changes in practice is associated with commenters who explicitly intend to stay in their church, while those who say they are leaving seem to report no such efforts.

Our related recommendation, expanded in the concluding section below, is that the denomination and its congregations redouble efforts to generate mutual understanding and appreciation for the complexity of the church body with all its diverse parts, some held in honor, others not (I Corinthians 12:12-31).

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

WHERE SHOULD WE GO FROM HERE?

This survey series has allowed us to peer into the last 25 years of the CRC. What do we see? We see both crisis and opportunity. Many of the trends we are monitoring have not improved. Nor have the patterns of stewardship or congregational health changed. And, if we project into the future patterns found in the life cycle of our congregations, yes, the CRC is in crisis.

But not all is gloom. The data are full of evidence that God has given our congregations stewardship over gifts of all sorts. And God is calling us to use and manage them well. Will we hear his call? Through church renewal, believe it or not, congregations can actually reverse their aging! Miracles can and will happen, God helping us.

A chief ministry priority approved in 2005 remains in operation: creating and sustaining healthy congregations. Perhaps it's a bit like turning around the Titanic as it's headed toward a giant iceberg, but the ship has been turning. Our survey report of five years ago offered "five keys to healthier congregations in the CRC's future." We believe the survey results reported here still support a call to implement these same five keys. They are:

- Spiritual development,
- Stewardship education,
- Disciple-making,
- Leadership training, and
- Keeping in touch (communication with congregants).

This report suggests three additional keys for consideration, which may overlap with the first five:

- **Church renewal**, including Healthy Church coaching. For example, see **Figure 37** on page 48 and the surrounding discussion about how churches might learn from each other and be revitalized through the Healthy Church coaching network.
- **Contemporary learning modes**. See **Figure 38** on page 50 and the narrative about how churches might benefit by employing more simple tools like drama, storytelling, children's participation, and group discussion. Digital audiovisual tools are still new in the sanctuary, but their proper role is still just to tell parables that grip the imagination with a longing for holiness and compassion.
- **One body, with unity in diversity**: as mentioned in the conclusion of the preceding chapter on respondents' comments, we perceive that the CRC would benefit from a concerted "I Corinthians 12" effort by pastors, Councils, denominational leaders, educators and determined laypeople. We need to teach each other about—and immerse ourselves in—ways to recognize and appreciate the God-given gifts of those whose gifts differ from our own. We have too many congregants who perceive decay in other parts of the body near and far, but many of these perceptions are incoherent or are clearly based on circumstantial evidence and hearsay. The evidence given by the body itself in our survey data is that we are largely healthy by a broad range of standards, though struggling to adapt and maintain some important traditional practices and expectations to the present day. Any crisis in health may be due as much to division (to wrong prescriptions and unnecessary surgery, if we may extend the medical analogy) as it is due to actual decay. Before we do surgery on organs other than our own, let us each be sure we understand God's mission for the organ we seek to heal (or remove or transplant!) as God has revealed it to the members of that part of the body. This recommendation encompasses diversity in: Biblical interpretation; sexual ethics; management and governance; the proper relationship between piety and politics; geographic and social divides; and ethnic, linguistic, cultural and racial backgrounds.

Finally, as suggested by the last phrase, all of these recommendations and indeed the entire report must be read through a lens of concern about our ability to operate as one body with all races, ethnicities, languages and cultures. We plan to invite fresh participation by ethnic and racial minorities in CRC surveys in the near future.

Let us press on toward the goal.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES AND FUTURE PLANS

The Center for Social Research (CSR) team will continue to engage with denominational leaders and interested parties to find value in the survey data beyond the very limited insight offered by this report.

The CSR web site provides tools for understanding the survey, supporting documents (including a full printable and searchable copy of the survey questionnaire and a full “codebook” showing), coming by the conclusion of Synod 2013, interactive online access to the survey data for the general public.

If you are interested in learning more, please visit this web address:

<http://www.calvin.edu/go/crcsurvey>

Inquiries about the survey and this report may be addressed to csr@calvin.edu.



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