



Congregational Vitality Assessment

Hope United Church of Christ
St. Louis, MO

July 3, 2024

 CONVERGENCE

Our Partnership	1
Church Data	1
Membership and Demographics	1
Congregational Perceptions	4
Your Neighborhood	7
Nearby Congregations	9
Communications	9
External Community Engagement	10
Conflict Skills	11
Finances and Facilities	12
Finances	12
Facilities	12
Congregational Welcome	13
Openness to Change	14
Your Congregational Lifecycle	15
Recommendations:	17

OUR PARTNERSHIP

Convergence partnered with Hope UCC St. Louis in 2024 for Assessment and Consultation services. This report contains the data from your church assessment, an analysis of the data, and creative thinking about what the church could consider as you determine your future.

CHURCH DATA

MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOGRAPHICS

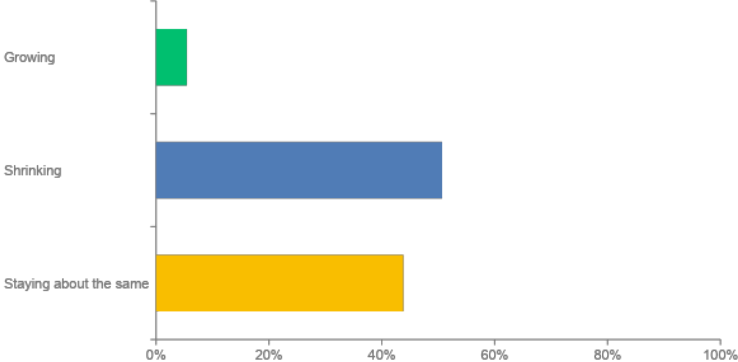
Hope UCC St. Louis has approximately 200 people who participate or support the church in some way. The church has 2 worship services a week, which have had an average of 5 people in attendance (8:15) and 75 in attendance (10:30 - 60 in person and 10-20 online) in recent months. This is down from approximately 100 per Sunday pre-pandemic.

Hope UCC St. Louis had an average of 3 visitors in worship per month in 2023. This was down slightly from an average of 5 per month pre-pandemic. While you had no new members in 2023, you had an average of 7 per year in recent past years. Most of these were joining as confirmands.

The church holds 16 non-worship activities per month with about 70 participating.

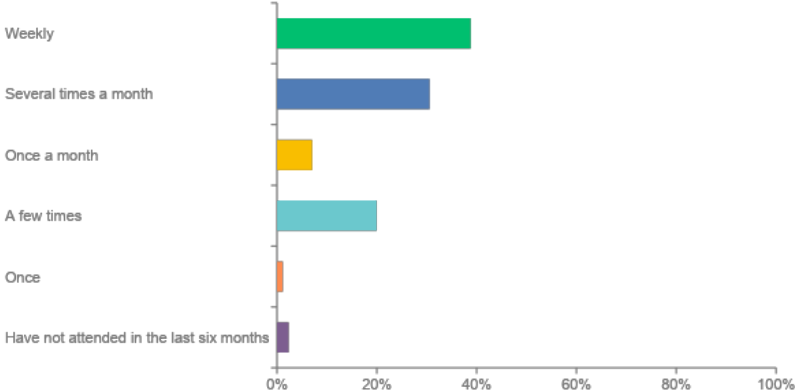
- Adult Choir
- Handbell Choir
- Sunday School (children and youth)
- Lunch Bunch
- Supper Club
- Prayer Is Essential group
- Book Club
- Bible Study
- Church Council
- Ministry team meetings: Worship, Environmental Justice, Pastoral and Staff Relations, Outreach, Building and Property, Stewardship, Finance and Insurance

You had 85 responses to your congregational survey. When asked, “Do you think your congregation is growing, shrinking, or staying about the same:”

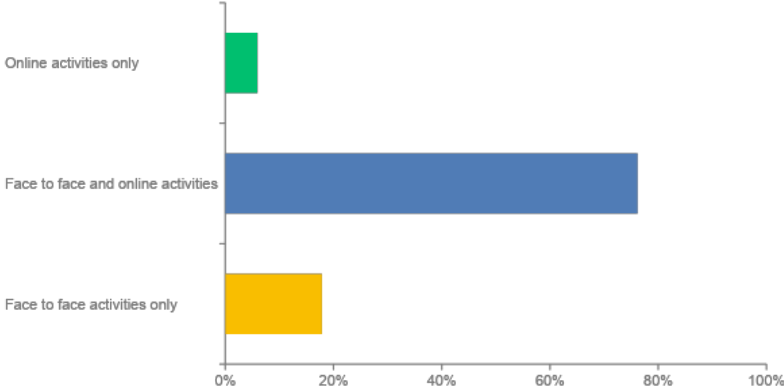


51% of survey respondents believe your congregation is shrinking, 44% that it is staying about the same, and 5% that it is growing.

Most survey respondents (69%) are attending at least several times per month. Another 7% attend once a month. 21% have only attended once or a few times in the past six months.



76% have participated in both face to face and online activities. 6% have only participated online, and 18% have only participated face-to-face.



Among congregational survey respondents, 7% of respondents were under 25, with 2 youth responding to the survey - way to go! 19% were 26-50, 32% 51-65, and 41% over 65. 100% of respondents identified as White / Caucasian. Your respondents were highly educated. 94% had some college, and 62% had attended or completed graduate school.

25% of respondent households contained children under 18, and 50% adults over 65.

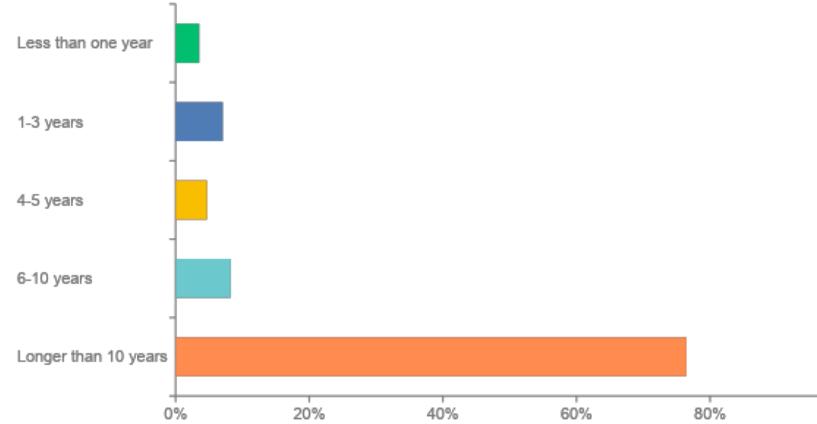
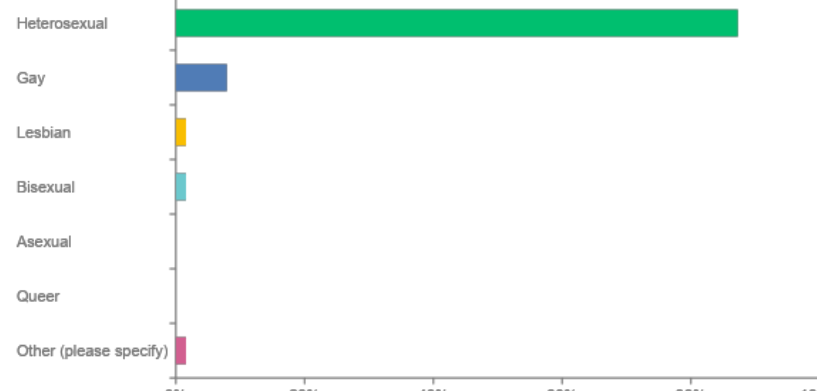
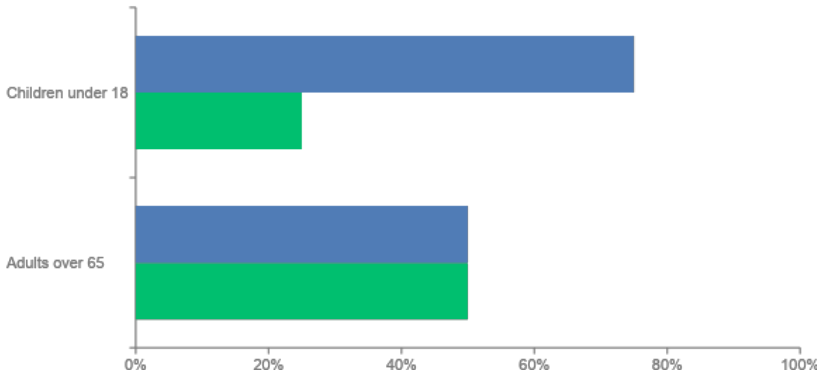
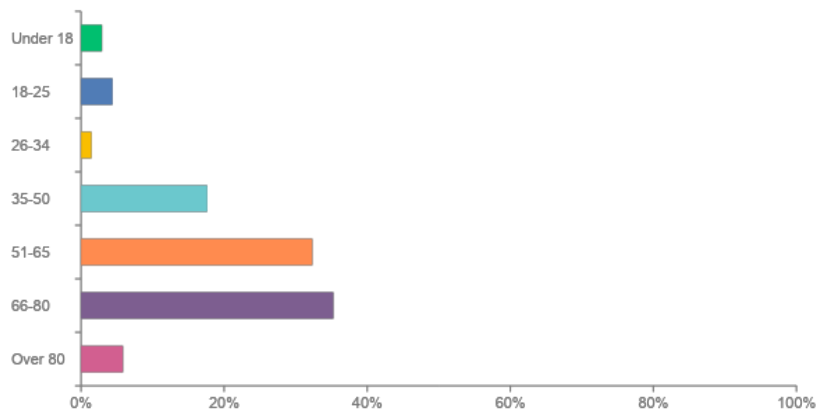
87% of survey respondents identified as heterosexual, with 13% identifying as LGBTQA/Other.

41% of respondents identify as male, and 58% as female.

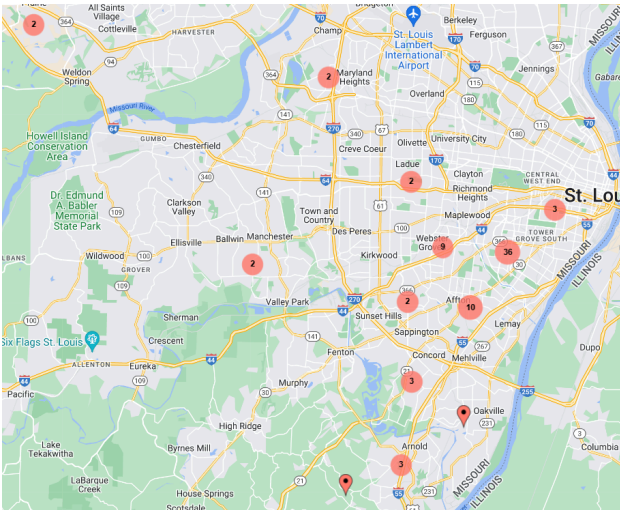
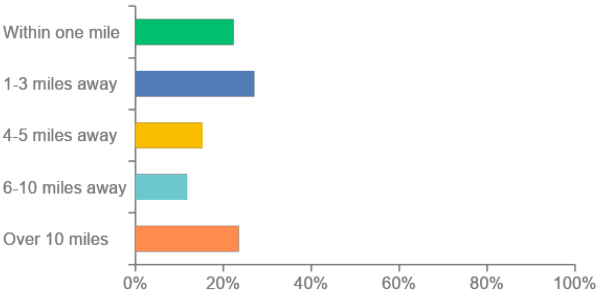
13% of respondents identified as a person with a disability or other chronic condition.

Respondents were mixed in income, with 47% having incomes under \$100,000/yr., 40% reporting incomes between \$100k and \$200k per year, and 14% reporting incomes above \$200,000/yr.

76% of respondents had participated for longer than 10 years. 11% had begun participation in the past 3 years.

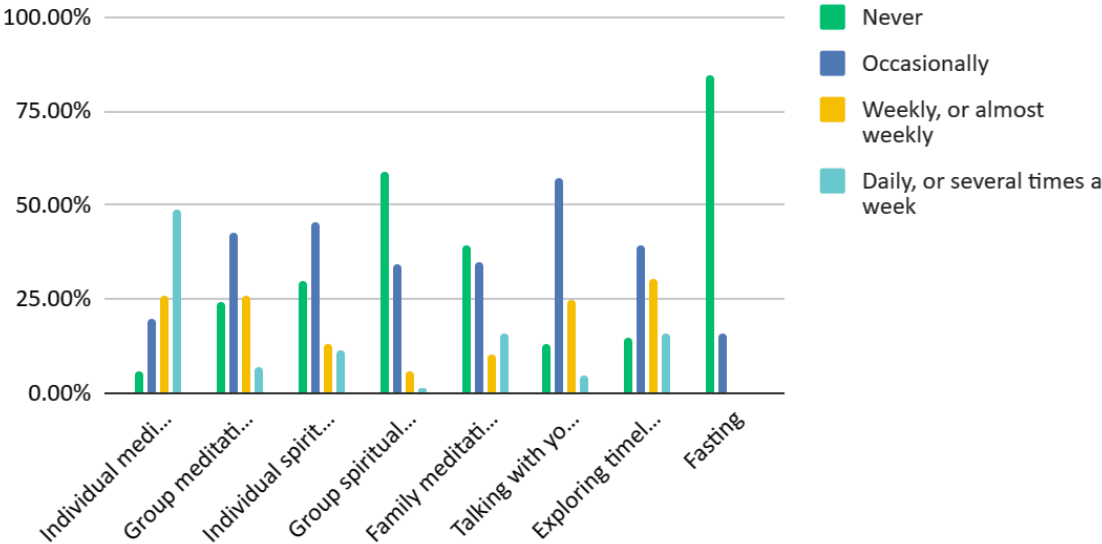


65% of respondents live within 5 miles of your church building. 49% live within 3 miles. 24% live over 10 miles away. This segment may have difficulty attending mid-week church events.



The most common spiritual practices among survey respondents were individual meditation, prayer, and/or devotions, followed by exploring timely topics in light of faith, talking with your family about faith, and group meditation, prayer, or devotions.

In the last 6 months, how often have you engaged in these personal and family religious practices?



CONGREGATIONAL PERCEPTIONS

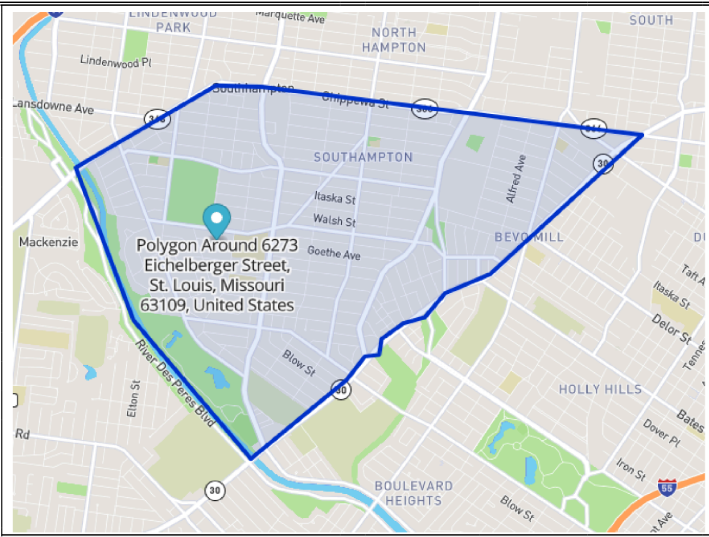
Survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their perceptions of the congregation and its situation. Over 90% feel your congregation:

Respondents would love to see more growth in the church, more community engagement/outreach, and additional programming for families/young people. When asked, “What do you see or sense could hold you back as a congregation?” your members responded with these words:

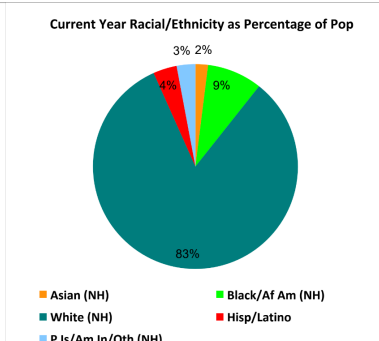
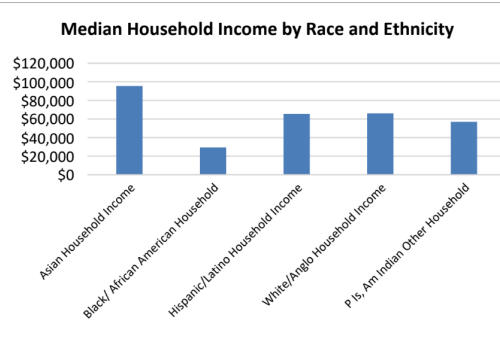
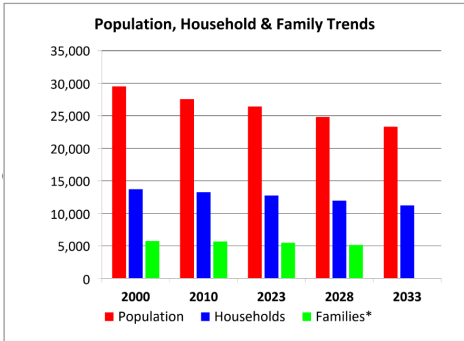


The main concerns of respondents are your declining numbers, lack of younger people and families, and too few people to do the work of the church. Many of these challenges are not uncommon to congregations such as yours.

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

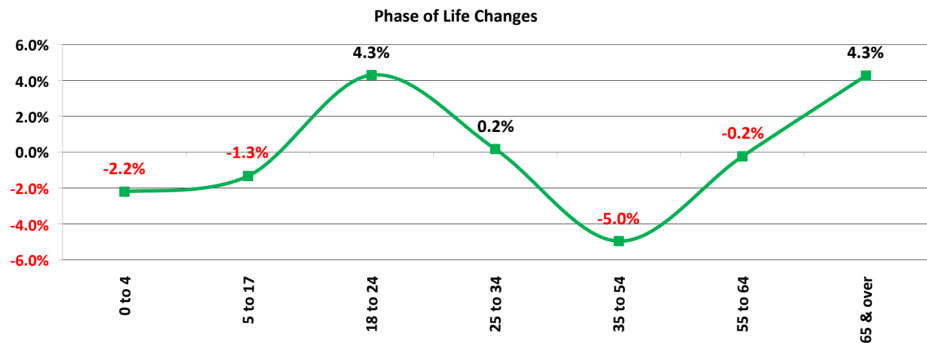


Your neighborhood population is declining over time, from about 30,000 in 2000 to ~26,500 today. Your neighbors are more racially diverse than your congregation, and while higher in education than the state average, are still lower in average income level than your congregation. Incomes in your area are mixed and tend toward middle-income, and there is a stark racial disparity in income levels. The fastest growing age groups in your area are 18-24 and over 65.



Your neighbors do not have many strong religious beliefs but believe in a loving God and that church participation is not required for faith.

Their cultural values range from conservative views on family and country to valuing tolerance/diversity and environmental stewardship, economic justice, and same-sex marriage.



	2023	2023%
Mosaic Segments		
G24 Young City Solos - Ambitious Singles	1,904	15.0%
B09 Flourishing Families - Family Fun-tastic	1,347	10.6%
L42 Blue Sky Boomers - Rooted Flower Power	930	7.3%
K40 Significant Singles - Bohemian Groove	906	7.1%
E19 Thriving Boomers - Consummate Consumers	827	6.5%
E20 Thriving Boomers - No Place Like Home	733	5.8%
O51 Singles and Starters - Digitally Savvy	615	4.8%
J34 Autumn Years - Suburban Sophisticates	499	3.9%
C11 Booming with Confidence - Sophisticated City Dwellers	465	3.7%
P56 Cultural Connections - Mid-Scale Medley	343	2.7%
A04 Power Elite - Picture Perfect Families	336	2.6%
A02 Power Elite - Platinum Prosperity	323	2.5%
R66 Aspirational Fusion - Ambitious Dreamers	306	2.4%
C13 Booming with Confidence - Philanthropic Sophisticates	284	2.2%
O54 Singles and Starters - Influenced by Influencers	278	2.2%

Only 39% of your neighbors are involved in a congregation, and this is likely to decline over time.

The population near your church building is an interesting mix between young adults and baby boomers/older adults. Some are very wealthy while others have more moderate incomes. The largest segments in your area could be described as Young City Solos, Thriving Boomers, and Flourishing Families. You can read more about all of the people in your area at this link: [MissionInsite Demographic Reports](#).

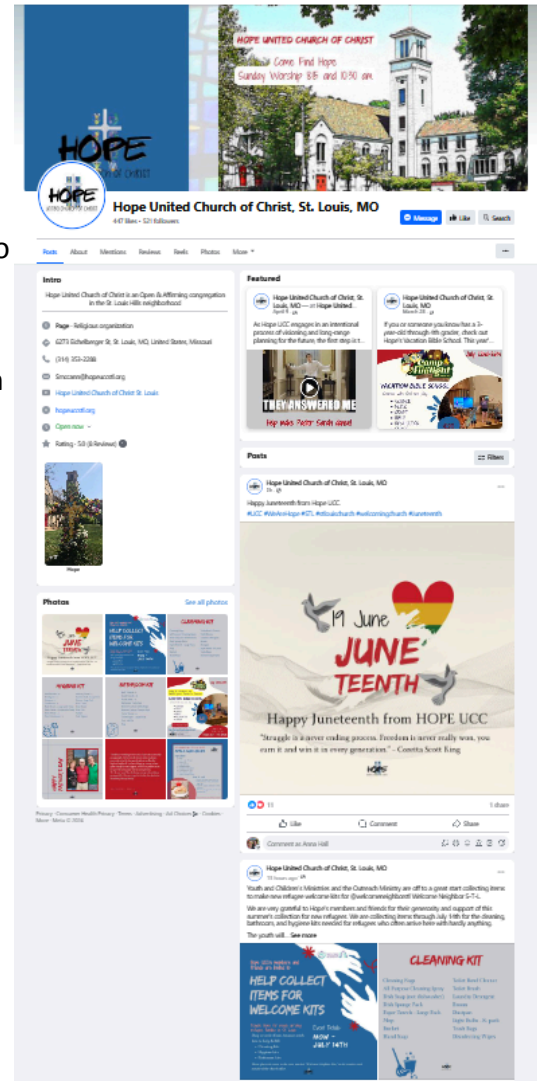
NEARBY CONGREGATIONS

People in your area have many churches to choose from. There are 10+ other churches of your denomination in your larger community. Churches in your area with similar values to yours are numerous. This provides many opportunities for partnership and collaboration. It also means that Hope UCC St. Louis will have to consider whether it has a unique mission and vision, one compelling enough to set it apart from all the other churches in its area, as well as how it communicates that mission and vision to the community.

COMMUNICATIONS

Email is the most common way survey respondents hear about church news, followed by announcements at events, word of mouth, and Facebook. All information seems up to date. However, you could be more newcomer friendly in both places. More pictures of your actual folks doing things together would make both seem more lively and help visitors get a sense of your faith community. It took many clicks to find your service schedule. The “New Here?” button on your website should lead directly to the “You Are Invited to Visit” page, before details on theology and beliefs. Even better, provide that information on the front page above the fold.

Keeping all communications formats fresh looking and up to date is a great way to be welcoming to those seeking a church and to engage your members and those in your community in the programs of the church.

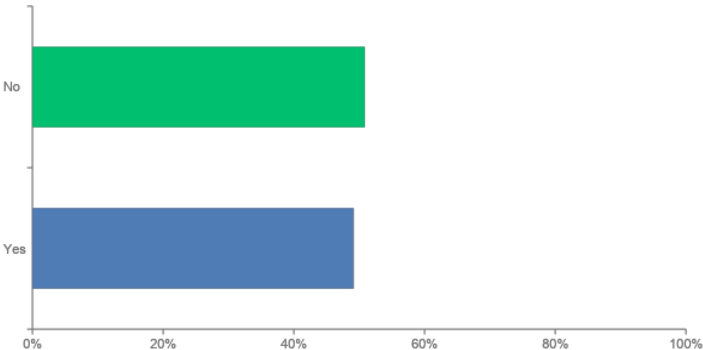


This is a good track record of community engagement! If your congregation vanished, you would be dearly missed by all who are impacted positively through this work. Using this solid foundation to become a hub where those in the neighborhood who are not part of the congregation can plug in to service and action in their community could be a way to maintain this energy and enthusiasm even in these times where so much service and action seems needed to create a just and generous world.

CONFLICT SKILLS

About half of respondents described some conflict in the past 2 years. The majority of these said it was easily reconciled. Respondents said the most common responses to conflict were to defer to the head pastor or other leadership, followed by negotiating to reach a solution. 79% believe your congregation deals with disagreements openly rather than hushed up and behind closed doors.

Q35: During the past 2 years, has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?



This suggests that conflict is not a pressing issue for your congregation. However, 68% had received no training on healthy engagement with differences and conflict. Any congregation working to grow or renew could benefit from healthy conflict skills. Perhaps those who have been trained in healthy conflict skills could encourage other participants to take a conflict course, or you could hold one just for your congregation. This could be a very beneficial part of the process as you all discern your next steps.

FINANCES AND FACILITIES

FINANCES

Your current finances include:

2023 Budget -	\$313,900
2023 Tithes/Offerings -	\$260,000
Other funds -	\$687,000
(2/3 of annual interest goes to budget - additional requires cong. vote)	

Average monthly giving - \$18,000

2018 Budget -	\$292,000
Tithes/Offerings -	\$250,000

Most respondents see your finances as tight or in some difficulty. Five years ago, most would have described them as good or tight but manageable.

If all 180 adults associated with your congregation were giving at national average levels (\$2350/year or \$195 per month), your monthly giving would be double this amount. People give toward impact and outcomes, so highlighting these in annual reports and asking for specific gifts towards supporting specific programs could help. Those outside the congregation might also give to specific programs like your Bread partnership or if they knew you were sharing space with community orgs at discount rents.

Vital churches have giving that sustains their normal operations and use their assets for impact in their community and world. One way to increase this ratio of gifts to budget is, of course, to grow your congregation. Another way is to increase the giving of your present members. A third way is to engage those in the greater community who support the work your church is doing in spirit to offer their financial support as well. We offer coaching and partnerships that can potentially help you take giving to your congregation to higher levels of sustainability, and would be happy to talk to you about these options.

FACILITIES

Most respondents believe that your facilities are in adequate to excellent condition and the right size for your congregation, although a significant minority believes your facilities are too big for your current congregation.

Photos on your social media show attractive and well maintained spaces, but of course can't get in all the nooks and crannies, especially after a period where many might be empty most of the time.

Continue to be attentive to your space. Make sure it is clean, well-repaired, smells good (ask a stranger to come and tell you the truth, we develop a tolerance to smells over time), and is clearly marked as to restrooms, elevators, and other necessary spaces. All of this will ensure your welcome to those in your space is as warm in practice as it is intended.

While facilities can be an asset, they can also become a burden for smaller congregations. Many congregations have found it helpful to spin the building off into its own 501c3 to become an arts facility, a coworking space, or center for community and justice or something of that nature. There are specialists in this transition that can help assess your building and discern the possibilities. Other congregations have sold their facilities and utilized the money for their work in the world. Still others have worked with developers to turn the site into housing or offices with a lifetime leaseback of some of the space for congregational activities. However you end up proceeding, it is worth considering all the possibilities available to you as you seek to do God's work as a congregation.

CONGREGATIONAL WELCOME

Your congregation is welcoming in many ways. In terms of congregational welcome, over 90% of respondents agree that your congregation:

- Wants to be racially and culturally diverse
- Wants more members [active participants]
- Is welcoming to people of all races
- Is welcoming to people of all sexualities and genders
- Is welcoming and accessible to those with disabilities
- Embraces differences of opinion and belief
- Empowers members to do ministry in ways that reflect their gifts, callings and passions

76% believe you love the enthusiasm of people with new ideas. And 79% believe it is easy for new people to join existing groups. One possible growing area is that only 66% make it a point to speak to new people in worship.

OPENNESS TO CHANGE

There are also some possible growing areas in your change skills. Only 66% believe that new ideas are always welcome in your congregation. Only 64% believe your congregation embraces change. Only 58% believe the members are willing to change in order to achieve shared goals.

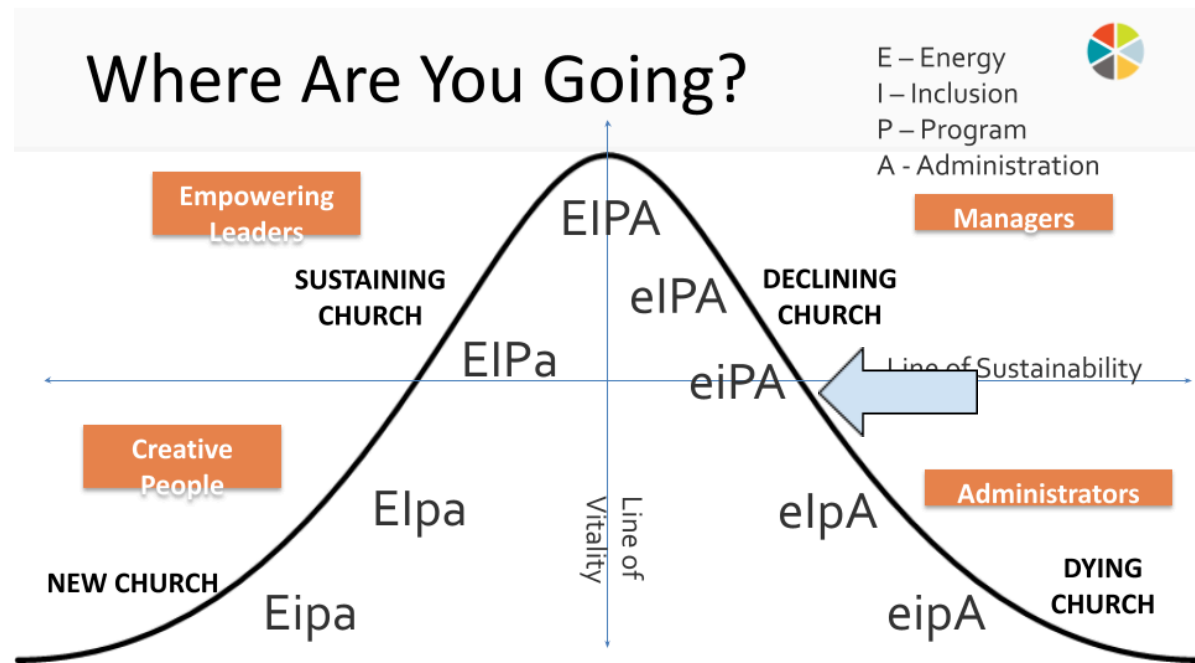
Less than half believe that your congregation regularly does new things in worship and/or frequently talks about change. Only 42% believe members are always willing to try something new.

59% believe putting new ideas into action takes a long time. And 80% believe your congregation is more comfortable when things remain the same.

With so many changes facing all of us these days, it never hurts to build change skills and help your folks learn how to find spiritual growth during times of change. See our recommendations for more on how to build these skills.

YOUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFECYCLE

Every congregation experiences growth and decline. These stages are marked by certain milestones that point to changes in organizational health and development. To better understand this, we use four indicators to measure health: energy, inclusion, programs and administration. At each stage in the life of a church, these indicators play a more or less active role. These roles are indicated by the upper and lower case letters on the graph.



The “Energy” indicator highlights the level at which the congregation is motivated into action around the vision and mission of the church. It speaks to the spirit of the faith community as well as its passion about its ministries.

The “Inclusion” indicator highlights the dedication and enthusiasm of church participants to invite people to be a part of the ministries of the church. It speaks to an outward focus on growth and an intentional commitment to hospitality.

The “Program” indicator highlights the level at which the church is able to start, grow and maintain ministries that transform both the community and the people within the church. These are particular to each church context and to the needs of the people within the church.

The final indicator, "Administration," highlights the need of every church to have systems that promote growth through policies, procedures and staffing. Collectively, these indicators tell a story of where a church might be in their lifecycle.

Currently your church would be considered upper Quadrant 4. You are strong in Inclusion and optimistic, but doing too much for your size can drain your energy. You have some solid Programming for your people and the community, although doing too much can lead to sparse attendance and volunteering. Your building, financial restraints, and congregational polity means you may still occasionally get bogged down in Administration. You are at a point where you must be intentional about your energy and attention in order to be a highly functioning church. Those churches in your position that do not invest that energy and attention wisely can easily slip into over-focusing on programming and administration which can eclipse inclusion and growth, leading to decline and loss of vitality.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Focus your efforts and energy

- End the early worship service. Your congregation is too small to sustain two worship services.
- Focus on one mission/justice area per year - One may seem like not nearly enough with so many issues facing our world, but you are small and can have the most impact when your effort is focused. Plus a focus can prevent burnout and being spread too thin, as well as the constant struggle for volunteers. We can provide suggestions about how to choose this focus and get buy-in from everyone - which can be difficult but not impossible, and builds a sense of unity and purpose. Pause or consolidate any efforts that are not aligned with that focus. Then make everything about that focus, from sermons to songs to small groups. Kids, too! Everything everyone does in 2024 should connect somehow to that theme.

Work on Change Skills

- You will need to intentionally develop your change skills to navigate streamlining and successfully welcome new participants.
- In fact, there is no way to truly listen to what God is calling your church to do and be without being open to doing things in new ways.
- Change is like a muscle. The best way to build your change skills is to practice change. Change something or try something new every week in worship. Be explicit about why you are doing this - change is built into any spiritual journey, and finding God in change is something we all need to practice.

Build relationships - with current participants and newcomers

- Consider Zoom for hybrid worship - This allows online folks, including those with limited mobility and travel options due to age/disability, to feel fully connected, seen, and included. Have an online participant who is more tech-savvy read scripture from home or offer a prayer. Show their faces on the screen to the congregation and have a camera aimed at the pews to show the congregation to them. If Zoom feels like too much, a first step might be to pre-record online folks reading a scripture or offering a reflection, and show that to those present in the sanctuary.

- Update your digital and physical welcome - On your website and Facebook, more pictures of your actual folks doing things together would make both seem more lively and help visitors get a sense of your faith community. It took many clicks to find your service schedule. The “New Here?” button on your website should lead directly to the “You Are Invited to Visit” page, before details on theology and beliefs. Even better, provide that information on the front page above the fold. Also, have a few folks trained and ready to greet visitors to worship and answer any questions they may have, as well as inviting them to any upcoming events.

Build relationships - with neighbors and partners

- Go deeper into community relationships - How well do you know your church’s neighbors? What are their needs and what are they passionate about? Conducting community interviews is a great place to start, and we have guidelines for how to get these done. Once you know your neighbors better, consider - How can you collaborate with more of your neighbors? What organizations need space and could use your church? Who is doing similar work and ministry that you could collaborate with? Be willing to go to them and meet them where they are.
- Consider strategic partnerships with closing or shrinking churches in your area. Sharing staff, inheriting resources, welcoming members of a closed church, etc. can be a way to have a greater impact as a small congregation.

WHAT IS NEXT FOR HOPE UCC ST. LOUIS:

*The question for you as members and leaders of Hope UCC St. Louis is: “**are you willing to live into God’s future**”? Our recommendations, born out of our expertise in the life cycle and renewal of churches, are for Hope UCC St. Louis to work on the above areas. If you get stuck, our consultants and coaches can help you make concrete plans for improving all these areas. Putting your energy into these things will help your congregation grow more vital and transformational in the years to come.*