

CONGREGATIONAL DIVERSITY, COMMUNITY SETTING, AND CHURCH GROWTH
IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA:
CONGREGATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES IN CONTEXT

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Kenneth W. Inskeep
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Michael Hillary
Columbia University

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ABSTRACT

Using questionnaire data from a sample of congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this paper explores the relationship of congregational characteristics and practices to change in average worship attendance within particular community settings. We find that it is particularly important for congregations in rural and medium size city settings to be very effective in many ministry areas; for congregations in small towns to having an effective youth ministry program and to offer an “alternative” form of worship; and for congregations in large cities to instill and reflect an orientation toward the future. In contrast, worship attendance in large city suburban congregations appears much less impacted by congregational characteristics and practices, but more affected by rapid population growth. We also note that congregations with a “outward” and “future” orientation toward ministry are more likely to grow no matter what the community setting. Finally, we argue that it is time to move to a more sophisticated understanding of the interaction of institutional and contextual factors and their relationship to growth using ethnographic studies of how particular orientations do or do not develop in congregations.

INTRODUCTION

After clear evidence emerged during the 1960's that membership in many mainline denominations was declining, a lively debate ensued over interpreting the trends. Coming from universities, seminaries and denominational organizations, many observers believed that religion in America was “restructuring” and interested researchers set about finding “causes.” In 1979, Hoge and Roozen collected much of the emerging empirical research in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950 -1978*. The book was an important contribution because it presented a wide-ranging collection of studies that intended both to explain and to describe the trends. The volume also left, as a major legacy, an analytic distinction between “institutional” and “contextual” factors as they relate to congregational growth that continues to shape most of the current research and ongoing debate on denominational growth (Roozen 1993:34).¹

No matter what the initial intention of the contextual-institutional distinction, it was soon in the center of a larger and more significant debate that often identified entire religious groups as “successful” or “unsuccessful.” Kelley's (1972) *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* argued that mainline churches had declined, unlike conservative churches, because they were not “strict” or “serious” about their religion. In his view, the “placid and circumspect” character of mainline denominations did not provide the belief system or the institutional ethos that would lead to member commitment and church growth. Kelley made the case for the overwhelming importance of institutional factors, and Hoge and Roozen (1979) presented an alternative, arguing that

¹ Hoge and Roozen (1979) divided the institutional and contextual factors along a local-national dimension as well.

contextual factors were just as important, if not more important than the institutional. More recently, the predominate emphasis of most research on congregational growth has shifted to the institutional (Roozen and Hadaway 1993), and institutional factors have received an additional boost from an economic model of religion (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1992, 1994, 1996). According to this perspective, growth and decline should be seen as the result of religious “firms” that are more or less successful in capturing consumers in the “religious market.”

The dynamics of this debate often contributed to framing the institutional-contextual question in a fairly blunt way, that is, “which is more important?” In much of the research over the past 25 years, the tendency has been to try to answer the question by supporting, or at least leaning toward, one direction or the other. This disposition toward leaning has been frequently adopted, even if reluctantly, when empirical results suggested that there were relatively small differences in the power of either set of factors or that they were interdependent. Thompson et al. (1993) present a typical case. In a study of Presbyterian congregations, they subtitle a key section “In a Declining Church, Context Outweighs Institutional Factors.” They (1993:205) note the importance of institutional factors and show that while “contextual factors were a bit stronger than institutional factors” their power “weakened a bit” from an earlier study in 1975. They (1993:205) conclude by strongly arguing for the *interaction of the factors varying by setting and church size*:

We found much variation in the strength of the various factors from location to location, from small churches to large churches. It is inappropriate to generalize about what makes for growing or declining churches without talking about location, size, region, and age. Unfortunately, many vague generalizations are being spread today, creating more confusion and disappointment than positive result . . . In the future we must learn to specify what affects growth and decline in particular types of congregations in particular locations. That task awaits further study.

Other researchers found themselves drawing equally complex conclusions. Royle (1993), in a study of United Church of Christ congregations taking part in a denominationally sponsored church growth program designed around the ideas of noted church consultant Lyle Schaller, found positive effects for the congregations engaged in the program even when the demographic context showed little or no population growth. She (1993:167) points out that “activities designed to attract, welcome, and include prospective members were related to growth, particularly when the congregation at large was involved. More efforts produced more growth.” But then she argues in her conclusions for the interaction of institution and context. Royle notes (1993:168):

Community context is an important factor in understanding church growth. Different activities were effective under different community growth conditions. For example, churches in communities with no growth need to work harder in providing high quality programming and seeking out and integrating new members,

while churches in rapidly growing communities must work harder at letting the community know they are there. Understanding the local context and its interaction with church climate and programming is crucial to understanding the dynamics of church growth and decline.

Rathge and Goreham (1989:72), in a study of rural congregations in North Dakota, state that their most “revealing finding” is the “lack of definable interplay between the contextual and institutional subsystems,” but then they (1989:72) conclude the “interplay” is fact.

The Catholic church was more sensitive to population shifts than were mainline or conservative Protestant churches: Catholic attendance systematically increased with population growth and decreased with population losses. Conservative Protestants increased regardless of population change, while the pattern for mainline Protestant attendance was just the opposite.

We observe a clear tendency that dates from *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950 - 1978* (Hoge and Roozen 1979) and continues through *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (And Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline* (Roozen and Hadaway 1993).

Researchers often present, as their major finding, some determination of the relative importance of institutional or contextual factors but then report significant levels of interdependence. We feel that substantial evidence exists to answer with confidence the question “Are institutional or contextual factors more important?” Our answer is a confident “It depends.” What we demonstrate in this paper is that there are differences between congregations both within and between settings and that these variations combine and interact in different ways with different implications for congregational growth. At the same time, we argue that congregations with a similar orientation toward ministry grow in a variety of different community contexts.

The use of studies of single denominations, or even a limited array of denominations (*e.g.*, mainline denominations), to address the different effects of institutional and contextual variables has been criticized on the grounds that in some denominations there is not sufficient variance in the institutional variables to assess their “real” impact on church growth (Iannaccone 1996). Though there are certainly many institutional variables that we do not examine, this data provides substantial evidence there is institutional diversity within a single denomination. We show that among congregations affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) there are differences among congregations from one community setting to the next with regard to congregational identities, assessments of effectiveness and congregational practices (Tables 1-6.) We also show that while these differences impact membership growth differently in communities of different size, a pattern exists. (Tables 7-13.)

METHODS

Data for this study was collected from a questionnaire of 400 randomly selected congregations in the ELCA. The questionnaire was fielded early in 1995. Questionnaires were sent to the senior

or solo pastor in each congregation. We also fielded questionnaires to two members of the congregation's council. The clergy and at least one member of the council returned usable questionnaires on 324 congregations. Census data for 1980 and 1990, with projections for 1994, were matched to the survey data by congregational zip codes.² Membership data were appended from denominational annual reports.

The questionnaire was initially and primarily designed as an assessment tool for use by ELCA denominational staff. It addressed most aspects of congregational life such as worship, planning for the future, "images" of the congregation, clergy leadership style, and commitment to ministry and ministry support. Because there is no practical way to determine the "actual" performance of congregations given the lack of "standards" and related empirical indicators, we are forced to rely on the general assessments of informants. We readily admit that these assessments and the questionnaire items designed to tap them are impressionistic. We do not believe, however, there is any evidence to suggest that the assessments are unreliable (see below) or that the differences we find using them are not "real." The questionnaire we fielded included three different types of questions. The first type were simple statements about congregations where the informants were asked to rate each statement on a seven-point scale with regard to how "true" the statement was about the congregation. The second type of questions asked the informants to rank how effectively the congregation carried out a list of activities using a five-point scale that ranged from "very effective" to "very ineffective." The third type of questions asked the informants to respond "yes" or "no" as to whether or not the congregation provided particular services or standing committees.

THE ACCURACY OF INFORMANT PERCEPTIONS ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONGREGATIONS

Assessing the characteristics of congregations is a difficult task particularly when resources are limited. Because surveying samples of congregational members was financially impossible, we used one pastor and two council members per congregation as informants. In a few instances, we were able to do rough checks of their evaluations. For example, we know from congregational annual reports that overall about 19 percent of the baptized membership of these congregations attended Sunday school in 1994, but in congregations with Sunday schools that were rated "very ineffective" by the informants the percentage drops to seven. In congregations where the informants ranked Sunday schools as "very effective," 22 percent of the baptized membership attended.

We did find occasional differences between the assessments of clergy and council members but many fewer than we expected. In general, council members tended to assess their congregation more positively. For example, council members were more likely than clergy to report that the congregation was open to new members or that it based much of its current program on the future rather than the past. Council members were also significantly more likely than clergy to report

² Zip code aggregates of the census data and the projections are by Claritas, Inc.

that the congregation was very effective at providing meaningful worship services and that the congregation was very effective in providing spiritual care for the members. But out of 24 different items measuring congregational effectiveness, there were significant differences between clergy and council scores on fewer than five items.³ As a result, and for ease and clarity of presentation, we show tables based exclusively on clergy assessments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As noted earlier, the congregations were grouped into one of the following five settings: rural congregations (agricultural settings or open country), congregations in small towns (50,000 or less), congregations in medium size cities or their suburbs (50,000 to 250,000), congregations in large cities (250,000 or more) and congregations in the suburbs of large cities.⁴

Variations by Setting: Congregational Images, Perceived Effectiveness and Congregational Practices

The clergy were presented with a set of nine possible congregational images.⁵ Responses for six of the nine images revealed significant differences by setting. (See Table 1.) For example, relatively few congregations in rural settings see themselves as partners with the local community when compared to congregations in the suburbs of large cities. Rural congregations were most likely to define themselves as congregations with a strong immigrant heritage. Comparatively, congregations in large cities were least likely to define themselves as “family” congregations and most likely to define themselves as “friendly.”

Despite variations in image, these congregations did not perceive themselves differently in terms of their effectiveness in worship, providing for spiritual care and nurture, creating a welcoming and hospitable environment for visitors, serving and supporting members in times of need and participating in social ministry activities. (See Table 2.) At the same time, congregations in rural areas were less positive about their effectiveness in providing for adult education and discipleship while the medium size city and large congregations were more positive. Congregations in rural areas were also less confident about their ability to encourage stewardship of time and financial resources, develop and sustain a common vision for the future or to plan for the future, while congregations in medium size cities, large cities and large city suburbs rate their abilities in these areas more highly. Finally, large city congregations rate themselves more effective at raising and

³ When more than one council member per congregation responded, we averaged their responses on the items.

⁴ Setting assignments were based on the self-reports of the congregations, but we cross-checked them using demographic data from Claritas. Because of the small number of congregations in the sample, we were unable to analyze congregations by size within settings.

⁵ We adapted these images from earlier work by Jackson Carroll and David Roozen (1990).

discussing social justice questions and in encouraging participation of persons of different backgrounds.

Table 1
Congregational Identities By Community Setting
Percentages

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	<u>Small Town: Under 50,000</u> (N=123)	<u>Medium City/Subs: 50,000- 250,000</u> (N=58)	<u>Large City: Over 250,000</u> (N=31)	<u>Large City Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
a partner with the local community	39.2%	55.4	57.8	72.2	74.6	57.7*
a haven and shelter for those experiencing serious difficulty in life	21.2	25.5	20.6	30.6	36.9	26.2
a youth oriented church	31.8	31.7	41.6	26.1	49.6	35.9
a moral beacon in the community standing for traditional values	14.6	15.7	9.6	5.6	16.6	13.6
a church with an immigrant heritage that that continues to shape the congregation	38.8	14.2	17.7	13.0	9.6	18.4*
the peace and justice church	1.9	4.7	10.2	5.9	12.4	6.6
the “family” congregation	93.6	72.2	63.3	59.9	74.5	73.7*
a church always on the edge of survival	36.4	21.7	21.8	10.3	10.3	21.4*
the “friendly” church	46.7	56.2	65.7	80.2	72.5	61.2*
the church that focuses on and excels at worship	33.5	49.7	61.2	69.7	43.6	49.7*

* p < .01

Perhaps most significant are the differences in congregational practice. For example, very few of the congregations in rural settings offer alternative worship.⁶ (See Table 3.) About one-third of congregations in small towns offer alternative worship, compared to almost two-thirds of congregations in large cities or the suburbs of large cities. Other significant differences were found in the “look” of worship services. Congregations in rural areas and large cities were more likely than congregations in small towns, medium size cities and large city suburbs to indicate that their services look more “Catholic or Episcopal” than “Baptist or Methodist.” Also, rural congregations were much less likely to have a stewardship or evangelism committee or an active junior or senior high youth group.

There were significant differences by congregational setting on four of the eight practices. (See Table 4.) Large city and large city suburban congregations are most likely to report taking a deliberate approach to planning, while rural, small town and medium size city congregations are most likely to design their programs primarily around the needs of members. Rural congregations

⁶ Alternatives or significant variations of the worship services in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

are most likely to say that their congregation is influenced by the past while the large city suburban congregations report the least impact of the past.

Table 2
Perceived Congregational Ministry Effectiveness by Community Setting
Means
(five point scale with the highest score indicating very effective)

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under <u>50,000</u> (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- <u>250,000</u> (N=58)	Large City: Over <u>250,000</u> (N=31)	Large City <u>Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
worship	4.30	4.25	4.00	4.24	4.10	4.19
spiritual care/nurture	3.91	3.77	3.62	3.75	3.66	3.75
Sunday School	3.40	3.36	3.30	3.15	3.87	3.42
ministry with grade school children	2.82	2.81	2.76	2.73	2.88	2.81
ministry with junior high youth	2.93	3.12	3.14	2.88	3.34	3.10
ministry with senior high youth	2.98	2.86	3.15	2.77	2.99	2.95
ministry with young adults	2.32	1.93	2.09	2.52	2.02	2.10
adult education and discipleship	2.77	3.27	3.50	3.49	3.29	3.24*
recruiting lay leaders	3.16	3.31	3.23	3.46	3.44	3.30
training lay leaders	2.91	2.84	3.10	3.47	2.91	2.97
creating a welcoming/hospitable environment for visitors	4.05	4.09	4.25	3.81	4.11	4.09
developing and sustaining a common vision for the future	2.61	3.17	3.48	3.52	3.61	3.24*
supporting members in times of need	4.22	4.29	4.13	4.41	4.14	4.24
planning for the future	2.87	3.25	3.60	3.63	3.58	3.34*
encouraging stewardship of time/financial resources	2.90	3.37	3.49	3.37	3.51	3.33*
participating in social ministry or social service activities	3.36	3.44	3.69	3.60	3.57	3.51
maintaining/enhancing church facilities	4.02	3.96	4.03	3.92	3.80	3.96
raising/discussing social justice questions	2.56	2.72	2.68	3.24	3.06	2.79*
encouraging participation of persons of different backgrounds	2.77	2.56	2.98	3.35	3.16	2.86*

* p < .01

Table 3
Congregational Characteristics by Community Setting
Percentages

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under <u>50,000</u> (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- <u>250,000</u> (N=58)	Large City: Over <u>250,000</u> (N=31)	Large City <u>Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
offer alternative worship	8.6%	33.5	40.7	59.9	60.0	37.3*
the "look" of worship is "Baptist" or "Methodist"	26.9	49.0	64.4	26.8	56.7	36.8*
have evangelism committee	34.4	82.4	90.1	91.3	91.7	77.6*
have stewardship committee	42.3	89.3	97.6	100.0	86.8	82.9*
have active junior or senior high youth group	48.7	71.9	77.8	78.5	91.3	72.8*

* p < .01

Table 4
Congregational Practices by Community Setting
Means

(seven point scale with the highest score indicating a very true statement)

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	<u>Small Town: Under 50,000</u> (N=123)	<u>Medium City/Subs: 250,000-</u> (N=58)	<u>Large City: Over 250,000</u> (N=31)	<u>Large City Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
take a deliberate approach to planning	3.31	3.58	4.01	4.59	4.69	3.89*
design program primarily around the needs of current members	5.03	4.96	4.70	4.15	4.43	4.76*
difficult to become a fully integrated member of the congregation community	3.55	3.17	3.38	3.23	2.72	3.21
little advertising except for the Yellow Pages	5.24	4.77	4.59	4.71	4.37	4.76
most people can influence how things are done if they choose to do so	4.40	5.01	4.77	4.88	5.37	4.90
there is a lot of turn over among leaders	2.54	3.10	3.34	3.51	3.20	3.10*
fairly loose about decision-making	4.20	3.82	3.44	3.37	3.66	3.75
congregational decisions are not overly influenced by the past	2.94	3.47	3.86	4.17	4.38	3.66*

* p < .01

There were no significant differences among these congregations on clergy commitment to ministry or in terms of how much support clergy receive from other local ELCA clergy, the ELCA synod or the ELCA denominational organization. However, differences in leadership style were evident. (See Table 5.) Clergy from large city suburban congregations were most likely to claim that they were original idea people while clergy in rural and small town congregations were most likely to say they know when to give up on good ideas. The large city suburban clergy were least likely to indicate they were “hands-off” administrators while rural, small town and large city congregations were most likely to report they depend upon others for help, guidance and support.

Variations by Setting: Demographic Factors

Between 1980 and 1990, the zip code areas of congregations in medium size cities, large cities and large city suburbs grew significantly more than the zip code areas of rural or small town congregations, although all settings exhibited some growth. (See Table 6.) Between 1990 and 1994, there was no significant difference in population change by setting and most of the shifts in ethnic populations occurred for congregations in large city settings. This may indicate that for the majority of congregations (other than those in large cities), the rapid and significant population shifts of the past several decades have slowed. Finally, the percentage of households with children under 18 is fairly consistent from setting to setting.

Table 5
Commitment to Ministry, Ministry Support, Leadership Style
by Community Setting

Means

(seven point scale with the highest score indicating a very true statement)

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under <u>50,000</u> (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- <u>250,000</u> (N=58)	Large City: Over <u>250,000</u> (N=31)	Large City <u>Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
Commitment to Ministry						
enthusiastic about doing ministry in general	6.10	6.17	6.19	6.06	6.16	6.15
enthusiastic about doing ministry in the congregation	5.93	5.67	5.86	5.28	5.97	5.78
very committed to ministry as a career	6.27	6.50	6.32	6.22	6.17	6.35
Ministry Support						
receive support needed from other ELCA clergy serving nearby	4.52	4.63	4.80	4.70	4.70	4.78
receive support needed from ELCA synod	4.48	4.44	4.30	4.57	3.99	4.36
receive support needed from the denomination	3.22	3.47	3.83	3.12	3.49	3.46
Leadership Style						
borrow ideas from others	4.17	3.74	3.51	3.73	3.22	3.69*
know when to call it quits even on a good idea	4.69	4.76	4.51	4.08	3.98	4.51*
publicly recognize members who give a lot of time and energy to the congregation	4.61	4.52	4.36	4.72	4.83	4.58
too involved in the congregation	3.49	3.51	3.38	4.11	3.86	3.60
depend on others for help, guidance and support	2.99	2.85	2.44	2.64	2.42	2.71*
a hands-off administrator	4.36	4.08	3.62	3.40	3.47	3.88*

* p < .01

Table 6
Demographic Factors by Community Setting**
Percentages

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under <u>50,000</u> (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- <u>250,000</u> (N=58)	Large City: Over <u>250,000</u> (N=31)	Large City <u>Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
1980-1990						
population	3.82%	2.67	10.02	9.44	15.49	6.96
1990-1994						
population	3.10%	2.73	3.73	3.73	3.67	3.23
Asian population	0.14	0.11	0.48	0.74	0.49	0.30*
African American population	0.00	0.15	0.56	0.65	0.33	0.28*
Hispanic population	-0.36	0.40	0.90	2.00	0.45	0.51*
Native American population	0.02	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.05
White population	-0.46	-0.40	-1.50	-2.10	-0.97	-0.86*
1990						
households-children under 18	38.02%	36.04	34.40	33.99	36.13	35.93

* p < .01

** based on zip code aggregations and projections by Claritas, Inc.

Summary of Congregational Variation by Setting

In general, these survey findings show considerable variation between congregations by community size. The contrast is greatest between congregations in rural settings and congregations in the suburbs of large cities. Congregations in rural settings are less likely to see themselves as friendly, or as partners in the community while they are more likely to retain aspects of their immigrant heritage. They are less likely to deliberately plan for the future or to rate themselves as effective in providing meaningful worship or encouraging the participation of persons from different backgrounds.

Change in Worship Attendance

We determined membership growth based on the change in average worship attendance between 1990 and 1994.⁷ Congregations in rural settings lost 3.1 percent of their worship attenders between 1990 and 1994. Congregations in small towns lost 5.1 percent and congregations in medium size cities lost 9.5 percent. Large city congregations lost 8.3 percent. Congregations in large city suburbs gained 5.8 percent in worship attenders between 1990 and 1994. Put literally in context, while there was population growth of three percent or more in four of the five community settings, ELCA congregations gained in worship attendance in only one of the five settings between 1990 and 1994. At the same time, some congregations in each of these settings grew. Six percent of the small town congregations grew by 10 percent or more between 1990 and 1994; 18 percent of the large city congregations; 21 percent of the congregations in medium size cities; 23 percent in rural settings; and 27 percent of those in the suburbs of large cities. The question is, within each community setting are changes in average worship attendance related to differences in the characteristics and practices of the congregations? First order correlation coefficients for the congregational factors and membership growth are presented in Tables 7-11 and summarized in Table 12.⁸

Congregational Image. “Friendliness” and excelling at worship are strongly related to change in worship attendance for rural and small town congregations, but these two characteristics are much less important for large city suburban congregations. (See Table 7.)

⁷ Among ELCA congregations, the correlation coefficient between average worship attendance and baptized membership between 1980 and 1990 was .69. Between 1990 and 1994 it was .63. We use average worship attendance simply because denominational staff in the ELCA feel it more accurately reflects membership change activity in ELCA congregations.

⁸ We treated the questionnaire scale data as “interval” and dicotomized “yes/no” responses for the purposes of correlation and regression.

Table 7
Congregational Images by Community Setting
with Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Correlation Coefficients

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	<u>Small Town: Under 50,000</u> (N=123)	<u>Medium City/Subs: 50,000- 250,000</u> (N=58)	<u>Large City: Over 250,000</u> (N=31)	<u>Large City Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
a partner with local community	.41	.20*	.17	-.29	.23	.17**
a haven and shelter for those experiencing serious difficulty in life	.06	.00	.21	-.15	.10	.08
a youth oriented church	-.11	.21*	.33*	-.05	.21	.17**
a moral beacon in the community standing for traditional values	-.12	-.02	-.05	-.19	-.07	-.06
a church with an immigrant heritage that continues to shape the congregation	-.22	-.12	.20	-.05	-.16	-.06
the peace and justice church	.03	.10	.11	-.33	.31*	.14*
the “family” congregation	-.21	-.13	-.16	-.18	-.02	-.08
a church always on the edge of survival	.33*	-.25*	-.24	-.03	-.14	-.08
the “friendly” church	.45**	.28**	.38*	.23	.24	.29**
the church that focuses on and excels at worship	.49**	.19	.54**	.13	.20	.24**

* p < .01

** p < .001

Congregational Effectiveness. Providing effective youth ministry is strongly related to change in worship attendance for congregations in small town and medium size cities. (See Table 8.) For congregations in medium size cities and congregations in rural settings, providing effective young adult ministry is strongly related to change in worship attendance as is recruiting and training lay leaders, developing and sustaining a common vision for the future, and effectively planning for the future. For congregations in rural settings, participating in social ministry or social service activities and effectively encouraging participation of persons of different backgrounds is also related to change in worship attendance as is encouraging stewardship for congregations in medium size cities.

Table 8
Congregational Effectiveness by Community Setting
with Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Correlation Coefficients

	Rural (N=58)	Small Town: Under 50,000 (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- 250,000 (N=58)	Large City: Over 250,000 (N=31)	Large City Subs (N=54)	All (N=324)
worship	.36*	.13	.21	.16	.23	.15*
spiritual care/nurture	.33*	-.06	.02	-.02	-.03	.03
Sunday School	-.11	.25*	.30*	-.34	.15	.18**
ministry with grade school children	-.17	.43**	.40**	-.17	.23	.22**
ministry with junior high youth	-.10	.40**	.26	.06	.02	.13
ministry with senior high youth	.06	.23*	.40**	-.20	.17	.20**
ministry with young adults	.57**	.17	.53**	-.23	.03	.25**
adult education and discipleship	-.24	.18	.01	-.33	.10	.04
recruiting lay leaders	.33*	.06	.48**	-.10	.33*	.26**
training lay leaders	.38*	.15	.42**	-.16	.26	.25**
creating a welcoming/hospitable environment for visitors	.26	.01	.20	-.25	.25	.16*
developing and sustaining a common vision for the future	.63**	.23*	.57**	-.23	.37*	.35**
supporting members in times of need	-.03	-.20	-.13	.09	.03	-.09
planning for the future	.55**	.06	.69**	.00	.31*	.30**
encouraging stewardship of time/financial resources	.07	.01	.56**	-.01	.12	.15*
participating in social ministry or social service activities	.54**	-.08	-.02	.30	-.10	.02
maintaining/enhancing facilities	.26	.00	.08	.02	-.07	.02
raising/discussing social justice questions	.14	-.08	.31*	-.11	.06	.12
encouraging participation of persons of different backgrounds	.54**	.12	.46*	-.42*	.37*	.34**

* p < .01

** p < .001

Overall, it is particularly important for the congregations in rural and medium size city settings to be very effective in many ministry areas; while for congregations in small towns, having an effective youth ministry and offering “alternative” worship is very important. In contrast, congregations in large cities and their suburbs had “effectiveness” measures that were much less related to change in average worship attendance.

Congregational Practices. Designing the congregational program around the needs of current members was negatively related to change in average worship attendance for congregations in rural and medium size cities as was making it difficult for newcomers to become fully integrated members of the congregational community. (See Table 9.) On the other hand, the ability to influence congregational practice was strongly related to changes in worship attendance in these

two settings. Taking a deliberate approach to planning was strongly related to change in worship attendance for congregations in medium size cities. Only the practice of making congregational decisions about the future without being overly influenced by the past was strongly related to change in worship attendance in all the settings but rural.

Table 9
Congregational Practices by Community Setting
with Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Correlation Coefficients

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under 50,000 (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- 250,000 (N=58)	Large City: Over 250,000 (N=31)	Large City Subs (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
take a deliberate approach to planning	.05	.18	.52**	.12	.20	.25**
design program primarily around the needs of current members	-.46**	-.02	-.56**	-.38	-.09	-.27**
difficult to become a fully integrated member of the congregational community	-.44*	-.16	-.43**	-.16	-.20	-.28**
little advertising except for the Yellow Pages	-.14	-.05	.01	-.34	-.11	-.10
most people can influence how things are done if they choose to do so	.46**	.16	.47**	.16	.28	.29**
there is a lot of turn over among leaders	-.30*	.12	.16	.21	-.11	.00
fairly loose about decision making	-.09	-.22*	.03	.16	-.13	-.07
congregational decisions are not overly influenced by the past	.21	.41**	.49**	.66**	.40**	.41**
provide alternative worship	.02	.29**	.35*	.32	.13	.19**

* p < .01

** p < .001

Leadership Characteristics. Very few of the leadership characteristics were strongly related to change in worship attendance. (See Table 10.) For congregations in rural settings, enthusiasm about doing ministry was important, as was feeling unsupported by other ELCA clergy nearby. Depending on others for help, guidance and support was negatively related to change in worship attendance in medium size city congregations while feeling supported by the ELCA denominational organization was positively related to change in worship attendance for congregations in large city suburbs.⁹

⁹ This finding may be explained by the relationship between a pastor who is developing a congregation and the denominational organization which takes a primary role in starting new congregations.

Table 10
Leadership Characteristics by Community Setting
with Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Correlation Coefficients

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	Small Town: Under <u>50,000</u> (N=123)	Medium City/Subs: 50,000- <u>250,000</u> (N=58)	Large City: Over <u>250,000</u> (N=31)	Large City <u>Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
Commitment to Ministry						
enthusiastic about doing ministry in general	-.02	.08	.25	-.08	.29	.11
enthusiastic about doing ministry in the congregation	.42**	.19	.19	-.01	.33*	-.22**
very committed to ministry as a career	-.30*	-.14	.09	.06	.18	-.01
Ministry Support						
receive support needed from other ELCA clergy serving nearby	-.54**	.01	-.26	-.36	.12	-.11
receive support needed from ELCA synod	-.22	.20	-.10	-.04	.26	.05
receive support needed from the denomination	-.18	.13	-.15	-.07	.47**	.14*
Leadership Style						
borrow ideas from others	.06	-.02	-.34*	.02	.17	-.03
know when to call it quits even on a good idea	-.28	-.12	-.15	.01	-.01	-.13*
publicly recognize members who give a lot of time and energy to the congregation	-.24	.06	-.18	-.15	.10	-.03
too involved in the congregation	.10	.00	-.04	.14	.20	.09
depend on others for help, guidance and support	-.16	-.15	-.42**	.12	-.15	-.16*
a hands-off administrator	.07	-.09	.22	-.28	.00	-.04

* p < .01

** p < .001

Demographic Factors. The change in population between 1980 and 1990 is strongly related to change in average worship attendance for congregations in rural, small town and large city suburban settings. (See Table 11.) Population change between 1990 and 1994 is also important for congregations in rural settings. The number of households with children under the age of 18 is strongly related to change in worship attendance for large city suburban congregations. In general, population growth is most related to change in worship attendance for congregations in rural settings and in large city suburban settings.

Table 11
Demographic Factors* and Year of Organization by Community Setting**
with Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Correlation Coefficients

	<u>Rural</u> (N=58)	<u>Small Town: Under 50,000</u> (N=123)	<u>Medium City/Subs: 50,000- 250,000</u> (N=58)	<u>Large City: Over 250,000</u> (N=31)	<u>Large City Subs</u> (N=54)	<u>All</u> (N=324)
1980-1990						
population	.44**	.39**	.28	.25	.80**	.56**
1990-1994						
population	.57**	.14	.27	.20	.31	.28**
Asian population	.07	.08	.48*	.24	-.20	.16*
African American population	.09	.04	-.19	-.14	.32*	.04**
Hispanic population	.27	-.15	-.06	-.24	-.12	-.07
Native American population	.17	.05	-.05	.08	-.17	.01
White population	-.13	-.03	-.29*	.14	-.07	-.08
1990						
households with children under 18	.21	.16	.18	.11	.40**	.23**

* p < .01

** p < .001

*** based on zip codes aggregations and projections by Claritas, Inc.

The most striking aspect of the summary of these findings presented in Table 12 is not the variety but the consistent and somewhat powerful appearance of institutional indicators. Because many of the congregational characteristics, however, are intercorrelated and because of the large number of significant relationships in the rural and medium size city context, a simple stepwise regression approach was used to explore change in average worship attendance by setting. (See Table 13.) We developed a model for each setting. For congregations in rural settings, the congregation's ability to develop and sustain a common vision for the future explained the most variance in worship attendance with none of the other variables showing significant power. For congregations in small towns, change in worship attendance was impacted most by the effectiveness of the congregation at providing ministry with grade school children and the extent to which the congregation is affected by the past. For congregations in medium size cities, effectiveness in planning for the future impacted change in worship attendance most, followed by alternative worship. For congregations in large cities, only the extent to which the congregation is affected by the past is significant. In general, it appears that a congregation's orientation toward the future (*e.g.*, vision or planning) and the extent to which the congregation is willing to break with the past for the sake of the future are positively and significantly related to changes in worship attendance. Population change shows some impact for congregations in rural and small town settings, and has little, if any, impact for congregations in large cities. On the other hand, population change has a huge impact on congregations in large city suburbs.

TABLE 12
Factors Associated with Change in Worship Attendance by Setting
Correlation Coefficients (p < .001)

Congregations in rural settings	
effectively develop/sustain a common vision for the future	.63
effective ministry with young adults	.57
growing population from 1990-1994	.57
effectively plan for the future	.55
effectively participate in social service activities	.54
pastor receives support from other ELCA clergy living nearby	-.54
effectively encourage participation of persons of different backgrounds	.54
effectively provide meaningful worship	.49
design program primarily around the needs of current members	-.46
open to influence by all members if they choose to do so	.46
friendly	.45
growing population from 1980-1990	.44
pastor enthusiastic about ministry	.42
Congregations in small towns under 50,000	
effectively provide ministry with grade school youth	.43
congregational decisions about the future are not overly influenced by the past	.41
effectively provide ministry with junior high youth	.40
growing population from 1980-1990	.39
provide alternative worship	.29
friendly	.28
Congregations in medium size city and their suburbs: 50,000-250,000	
effectively plan for the future	.69
effectively develop/sustain a common vision for the future	.57
effectively encourage the stewardship of time/financial resources	.56
design program primarily around the needs of current members	-.56
effectively provide ministry with young adults	.53
take a deliberate approach to planning	.52
effectively provide meaningful worship	.49
congregational decisions about the future are not overly influenced by the past	.49
effectively recruit lay leaders	.48
open to influence by all members if they choose to do so	.46
difficult to become a fully integrated member of the congregational community	-.43
effectively train lay leaders	.42
pastor depends on others for help, guidance and support	-.42
effectively provide ministry with grade school youth	.40
effectively provide ministry with senior high youth	.40
Congregations in large cities: over 250,000	
congregational decisions about the future are not overly influenced by the past	.66
Congregations in large city suburbs	
growing population from 1980-1990	.80
pastor receives support from the ELCA denominational organization	.47
congregational decisions about the future are not overly influenced by the past	.40

For congregations in rural, small town and large city settings, we can account for 30 and 42 percent of the variance respectively with these models, but for congregations in medium size cities and for those in large city suburbs, the models are much stronger. For the medium size city

congregations, effectively planning for the future and providing alternative worship are strongly related to change in worship attendance with effective planning showing almost twice the impact of alternative worship. Population change is important only for congregations in large city suburban settings where shifts in population change between 1980 and 1990 account for more change in average worship attendance than any other variable.

Table 13
Change in Worship Attendance: 1990-1994
Multiple Regression

<u>Pearson's R</u>	<u>Beta</u>
Congregations in a Rural Setting	
effectively developing/sustaining a common vision for the future	.62 .62
Multiple R = .62	Adjusted R ² = .37
Congregations in a Small Town Setting	
effectively providing ministry with grade school children	.43 .39
the congregation is largely unaffected by the past	.41 .37
Multiple R = .56	Adjusted R ² = .30
Congregations in a Medium Size City Setting	
effectively planning as a congregation for the future	.69 .69
provide alternative worship	.35 .34
Multiple R = .77	Adjusted R ² = .58
Congregations in a Large City Setting	
the congregation is largely unaffected by the past	.67 .67
Multiple R = .67	Adjusted R ² = .42
Congregations in a Large City Suburb Setting	
population: 1980-1990	.80 .74
receive needed support from the ELCA denominational organization	.47 .31
Multiple R = .86	Adjusted R ² = .72

CONCLUSIONS

We clearly demonstrate that congregations within a single denomination vary significantly from one setting to the next. For congregations in each of the settings except those in large city suburbs, the impact of population change on worship attendance is secondary to the characteristics and practices of congregations. However, context *e.g.*, community setting, remains powerful in that different congregational characteristics and practices are critical to understanding change in worship attendance in different settings. At the same time, we point to a distinct pattern across the settings which is that the particular characteristics or practices of a congregation are less significant than a general outlook or orientation toward the wider

community and to the future. As Olson (1993:222) noted in a study of mainline denominations in Indiana, “the critical difference [between churches that do and do not grow] appears to be between churches that have an outward orientation (emphasizing the needs of nonmembers) versus churches with an inward orientation (focusing on members’ needs more than nonmembers.)” If this is true, and we believe that it is, then the question becomes “how and under what institutional and contextual circumstances do congregations develop such an orientation?” We hope that asking the question in this way will push us beyond the narrowly framed contextual-institutional debate and the ensuing tendency toward a conclusion that leans one way or the other. We hypothesize that what we see in growing congregations as a “future/outward” orientation is likely the product of a circular, upward and very interactive, contextual-institutional process. In other words, we believe that it is quite possible that congregations **become** “successful” because they **begin** to grow (which, in turn, reinforces their perception of success and probably produces yet more success *e.g.*, numerical growth). It may well be that only congregations in the midst of such circumstances are likely to develop a future/outward orientation. Survey work cannot adequately “test” this hypothesis. Instead, we need more sophisticated, comparative approaches using ethnographic techniques (including systematic reviews of existing studies) which focus on the development of specific congregational orientations in their wider religious, demographic, historic and cultural context.

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