

# **Worship Attendance in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

## ***Faith Communities Today***

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Despite a wealth of materials on the subject, ordained and lay leaders throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and other faith communities continue to raise the question “How do we increase worship attendance.” This summary formulates a response using data from the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project (CCSP).

### **Background of CCSP**

Over the past several years, researchers from over 45 different faith communities have been working together on a major research and education project on religion in the United States. In the winter of 2000, using a common survey instrument, they collected data from randomly selected congregations in each of the various faith traditions. Now, as the beneficiaries of an extensive and comprehensive data set, the research team will examine the many facets of religious life in the United States. The work was funded by the Lilly Endowment and the project principals are Carl S. Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America fielded 1,000 questionnaires to ELCA congregations and 832 were returned for a response rate of 83 percent. The questionnaire included questions about identity and worship, history, location, and congregational programming. The pastors of the congregations were the “key” informants. Their views of the congregation provide the basis for much of this analysis. Changes in worship attendance, however, are calculated based on the congregation’s annual report.<sup>1</sup>

### **Methodology and Findings**

Congregations were grouped according to change in average worship attendance. Figures from 1994 were compared to figures from 1999. (See Figure 1.) Based on change in average worship attendance, we tested several hypotheses related to church growth.

Our current findings are largely consistent with a report published in 1996 by the Department for Research and Evaluation, ELCA, entitled *Effective Ministry and Membership—The Second Panel Profile on the Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*.<sup>2</sup> This study noted that growing congregations are more likely to:

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<sup>1</sup> *Annual Congregational Reports*, Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth W. Inskeep and Kathryn Sime, *Effective Ministry and Membership Growth*, Department for Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, March 1996. Available upon request. Call 1-800-638-3522, ext. 2990.

- take a deliberate approach to planning,
- remain largely unaffected by the past in determining designs for the future,
- design much of their program around the needs of the people in the local community,
- help members to easily feel fully integrated and active participants,
- allow those with initiatives to influence congregational life, and
- provide alternatives to the committee structure in decision making.

Based on data collected in conjunction with CCSP, we found two factors to be most significant. The most significant is whether a congregation possesses a clear sense of mission and purpose. Almost as significant is a congregation’s ability to welcome innovation and change. The sense that the congregation is vital and spiritually alive, that members are excited about the future of their congregation, the ease with which new members are incorporated into the congregation, and the ability of the congregation to deal openly with conflict are also important factors, but **only** within the context of the congregation having a clear sense of mission and purpose and an openness to innovation and change. These two research projects, while not identical, show that a clear sense of mission and purpose and welcoming innovation and change are the key elements associated with growth in average worship attendance in ELCA congregations.

### Congregations in the ELCA by Percent Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999

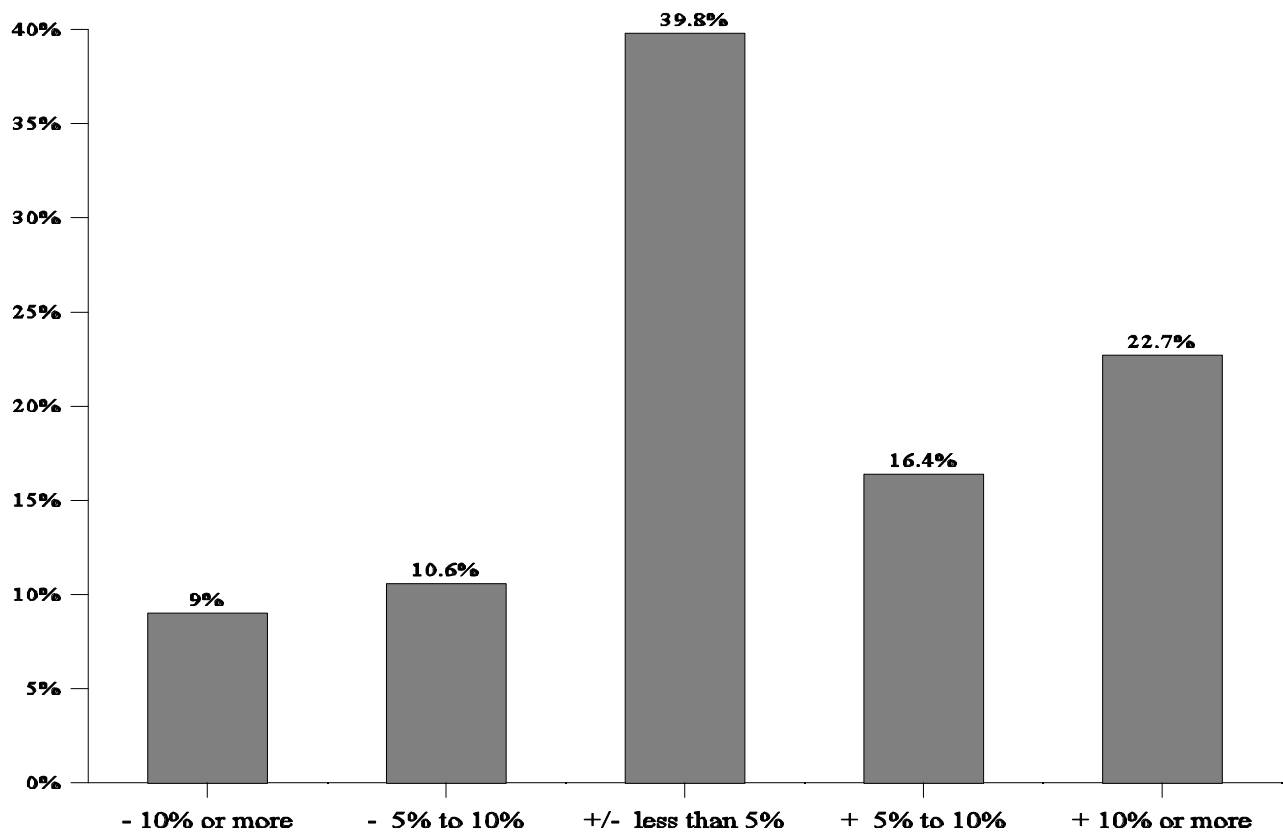


Figure 1

## Purpose

The **single** most important factor associated with a change in average worship attendance is a clear sense of mission and purpose. (See Figure 2.) In the congregations that gained ten percent or more in average worship attendance, 35 percent of our key informants believed that the statement, “Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose” described their congregation “very well” or “quite well.” Among informants in congregations that lost ten percent or more in average worship attendance, 53 percent believed that the statement applied “slightly” or “hardly at all.”

### Key Informants on the Fit of the Statement “Our congregation has a clear sense of purpose and mission,” by Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999

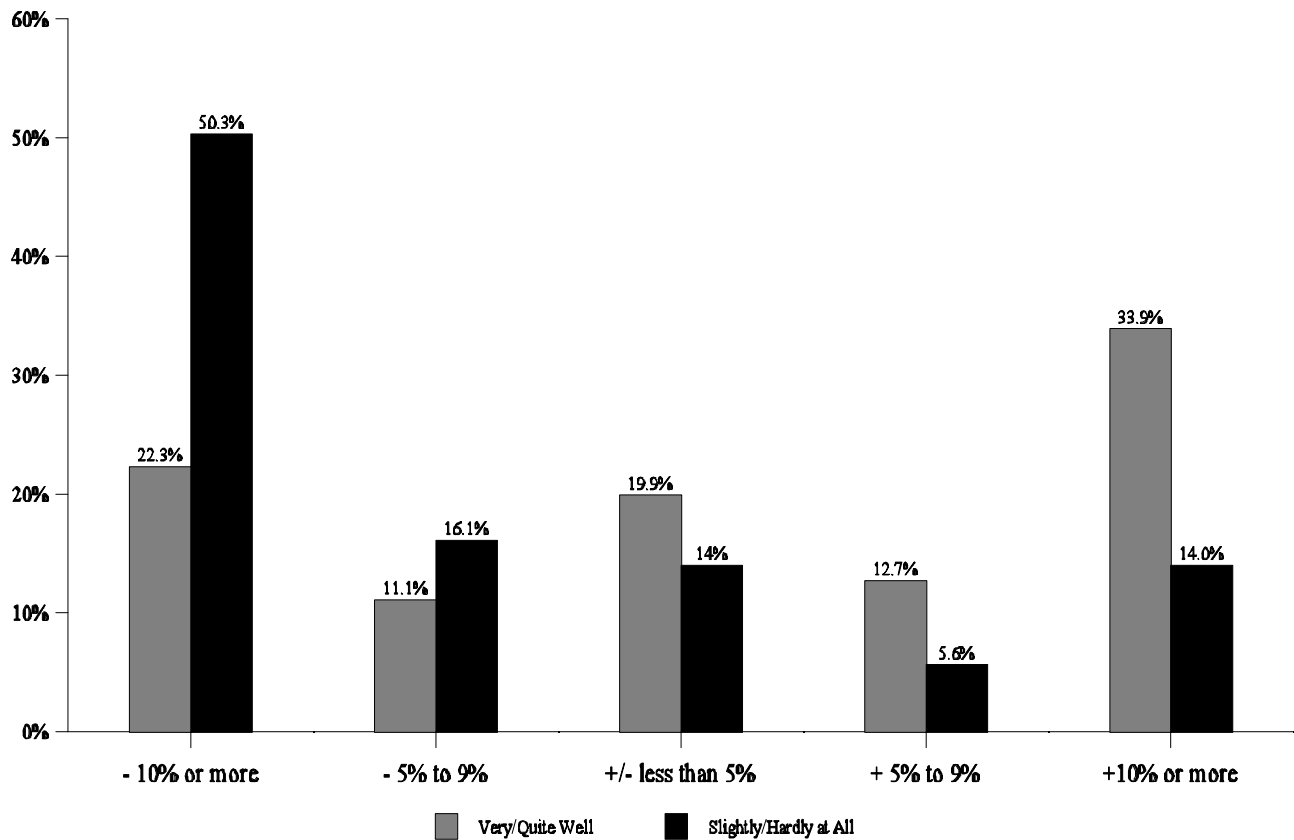


Figure 2

## Welcoming Innovation and Change

The next most important factor associated with a change in average worship attendance is a congregation’s willingness to welcome innovation and change. In response to the question, “Our congregation welcomes innovation and change” 34 percent of the informants in congregations who gained ten percent or more said the statement described their congregation “very well” or “quite well.”

On the other hand, among the informants in congregations that lost ten percent or more in average worship attendance, 50 percent answered “slightly” or “hardly at all.” (See Figure 3.)

**Key Informants Fit of the Statement “Our congregation welcomes innovation and change,” by Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999**

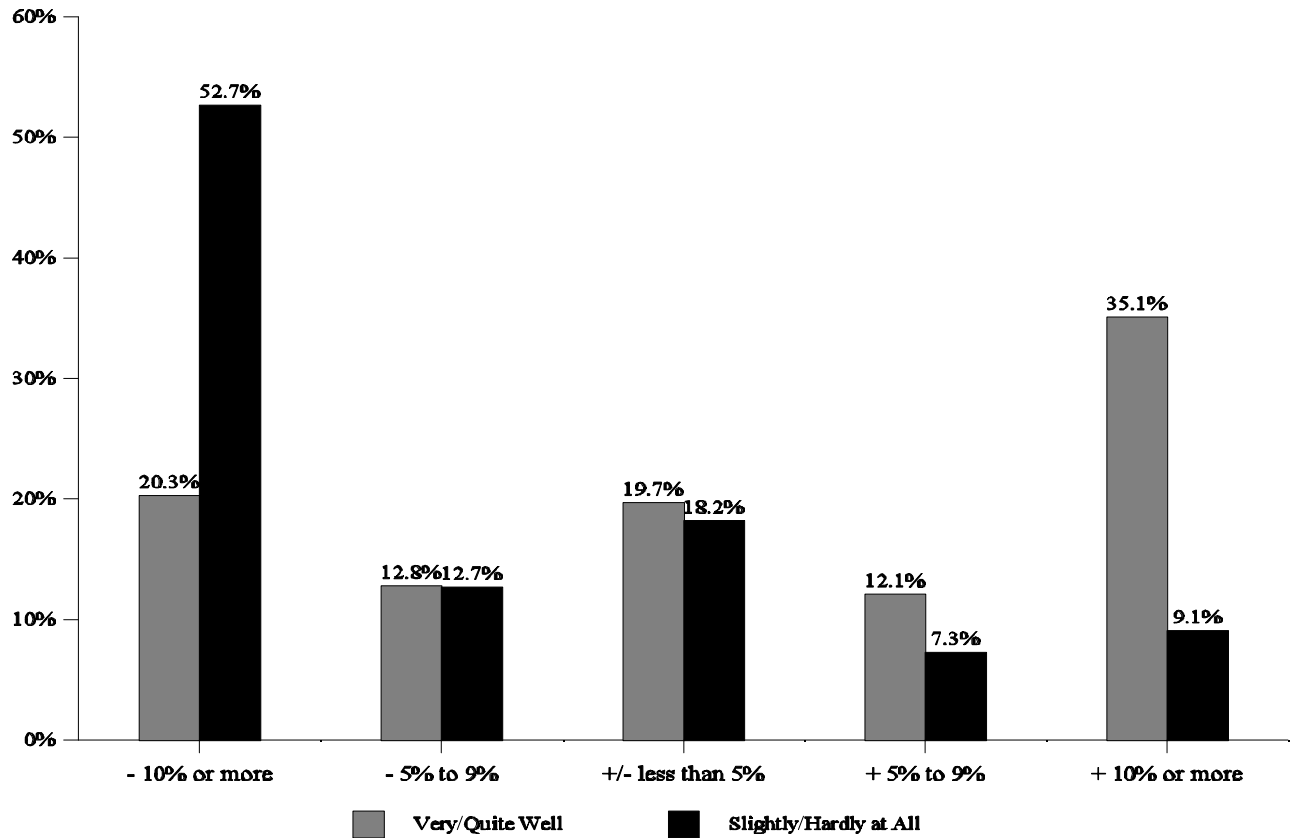


Figure 3

**The Secondary Factors**

Based on the views of our key informants, having a clearly defined sense of mission and purpose and welcoming innovation and change are the two most important predictors of an increase in average worship attendance for ELCA congregations.

Within this framework, there are several other elements that are important, but they are not independent and are not, alone, predictors of growth in average worship attendance. These four factors are:

- the sense that the congregation is spiritually vital and alive,
- the view that the membership is excited about the future of the congregation,
- that it is a place where new members are easily incorporated into the life of the church, and
- that the congregation deals openly with disagreements and conflicts.

The importance of incorporating new people easily into the life of the congregations is also noted in *Effective Ministry and Membership Growth*: “growing congregations are more likely to help members to feel fully integrated and active participants...” (13). These four factors are important, but they are corollaries to a clearly defined sense of mission and purpose and welcoming innovation and change. That is, they are part of the atmosphere of growing congregations, but they alone are not the reason for the growth.

### **The Impact of Evangelistic Campaigns, Worship Style and Advertising**

It is reasonable to believe that evangelism, contemporary worship, and media advertising will have a direct impact on average worship attendance; yet, this is not the case if the congregation is without a clear sense of mission and purpose with the welcoming of innovation and change. **This suggests that an ethos must first be developed wherein the congregation captures a sense of a clear mission and purpose and welcomes innovation and change before evangelism, changes in styles of worship, or establishing a media campaign have an impact.**

To demonstrate this we created a “purpose and change” index based on our key informants’ responses on the extent to which the congregation could be described as having:

- a clearly defined sense of mission and purpose,
- members that welcome innovation and change,
- a sense of spiritual vitality,
- members who are excited about the future of the congregation,
- new members’ feeling they are easily incorporated into the life of the church, and
- the ability to deal openly with disagreements and conflicts.

The highest score possible on the index is 30, while the lowest possible score is five. (See Table 1.)

#### **Percent of Congregations by Their Score on the Purpose and Change Index**

<i>Score</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less than 20 (Low Index)	33.6%
Greater than or equal to 20 but less than or equal to 25	43.3
Greater than 25 (Purpose & Change)	23.1

Table 1

### **Evangelism**

In short, congregations with a clear sense of mission and purpose subsequently impart this to adult members who in turn engender evangelism campaigns that result in increased average worship attendance. Evangelism campaigns in and of themselves are not enough. Thirty-eight percent of congregations that lost 5 percent or more of their members ran evangelism campaigns while 34 percent of those congregations that gained 5 percent or more did not. (See Figure 5.) It is true that

congregations with large gains in average worship attendance are more likely to run evangelism campaigns, but for over a third of the congregations that held a campaign, there was no positive change in average worship attendance. When the focus is placed exclusively on those congregations that run campaigns, the results are clear—for congregations that scored high on the purpose and change index evangelistic campaigns are strongly related to change in average worship attendance. But, for congregations that scored low on the index, evangelistic campaigns show little impact. (See Figure 4.)

**Key Informants with a Positive Response to the Question “Did your congregation have a growth or evangelistic campaign in the last 12 months?” by Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999 and Score on the Purpose and Change Index**

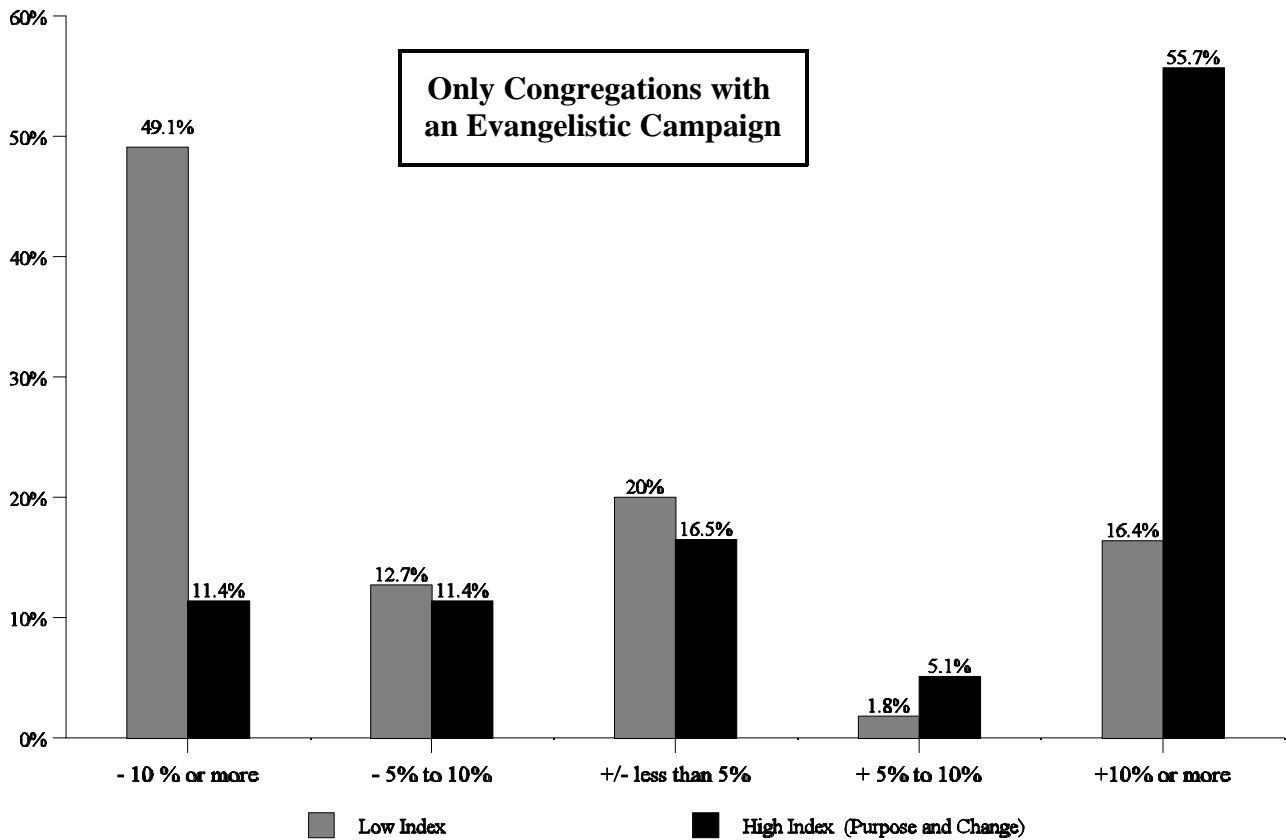


Figure 4

It is not enough to simply engage in an evangelism campaign or other evangelistic activities; that is, it is not the activity itself which is of primary importance, but the context within which the activity—in this case an evangelism campaign—takes place.

### Worship

We tried to gauge the style of a worship by looking for something within a worship service that is atypical of most ELCA congregations—for instance, the use of drums or other percussion instruments. Figure 6 shows that among the congregations that scored high on the purpose and change index the use

of drums or other percussion instruments, an indicator of a more contemporary approach to worship, influences average worship attendance.

**Key Informants on the Question “Did your congregation have a growth or evangelistic campaign/program within the last 12 months?”  
by Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999**

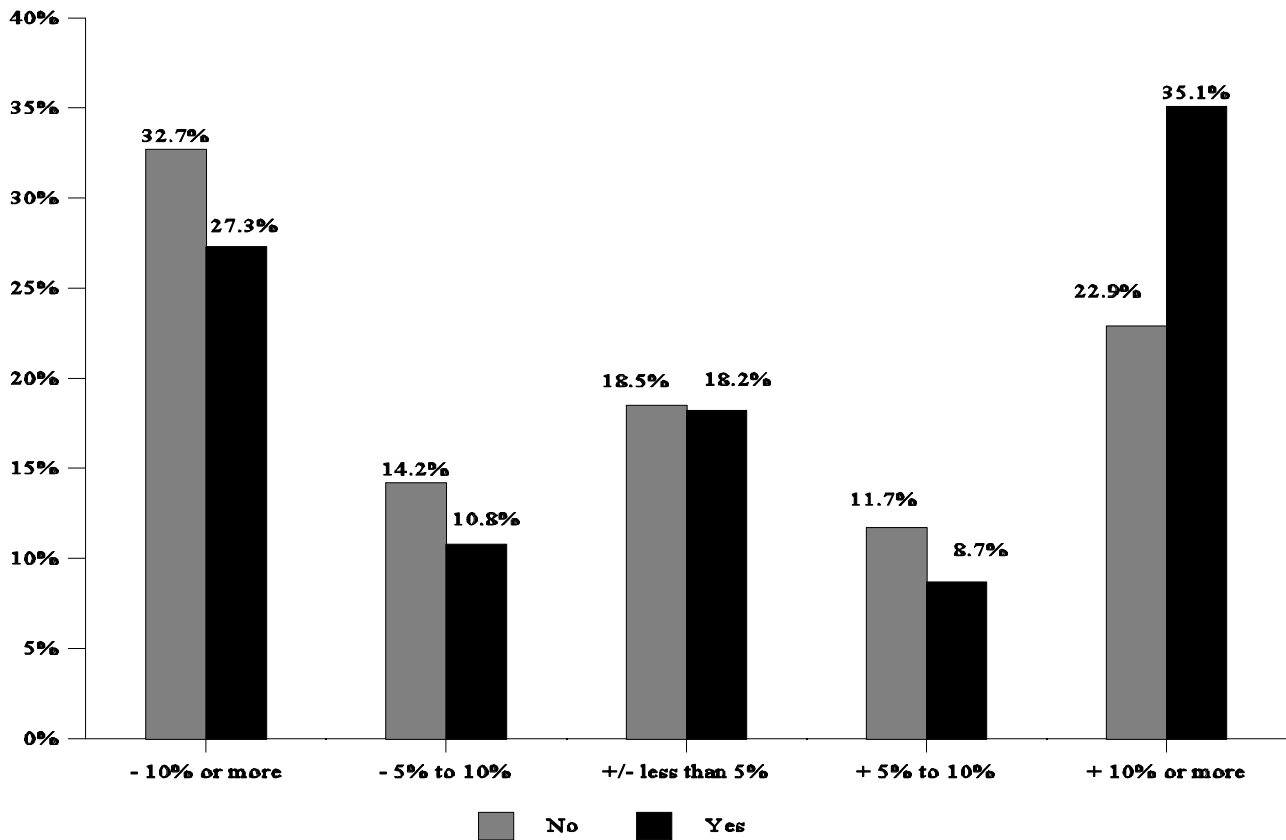


Figure 5

### Media Advertising

The effectiveness of media advertising is called into question based on the findings of the CCSP survey. That is to say, if congregations do not exhibit a sense of purpose and an openness to change, newspaper advertisements, radio or television advertisements, media stories and direct mail promotions generally do not lead to an increase in average worship attendance. While the use of different media might raise the awareness of a congregation and its activities, this does not necessarily mean an increase in average worship attendance. This reflects the report *Effective Ministry and Membership Growth* (1996) that states, “Congregational factors not related to growth include the amount of advertising...” (14). However, when congregations that scored high on the purpose and change index run newspaper advertisements and stories (to cite one example among many), the results are quite different. (See Figure 7.)

**Key Informants on the Use of Drums during their Worship Service  
by Change in Average Worship Attendance between 1994 and 1999  
and Score on the Purpose and Change Index**

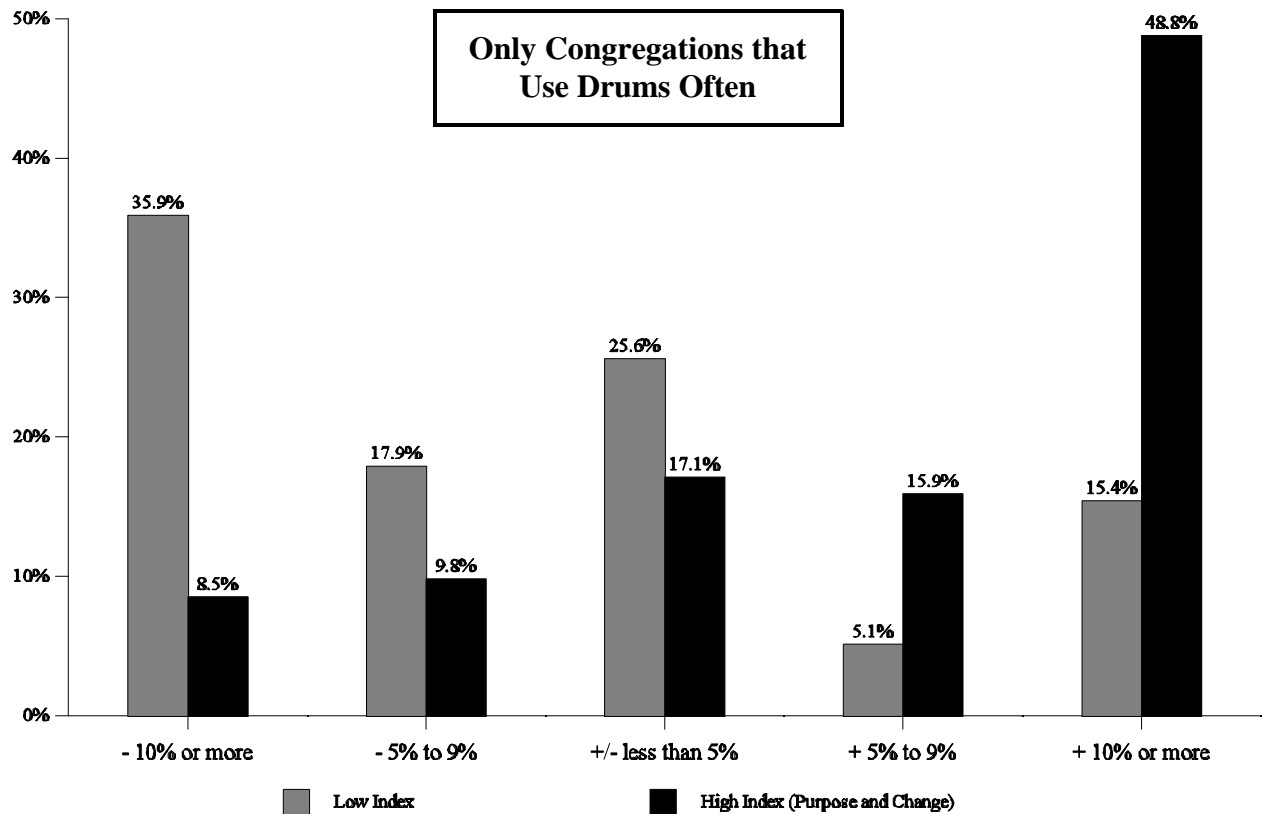


Figure 6

Again, the use of drums in congregational worship is strongly related to change in average worship attendance for congregations that scored high on the purpose and change index, but it is not for those that scored low on the index.

### Population Shifts and Context

#### *Population*

It is also reasonable to assume that congregations are more likely to grow when the population of a community grows, but population change is not strongly associated with change in average worship attendance. Even when the changes in population are defined by racial or ethnic transition, there is no strong relationship to change in average worship attendance—positive or negative. This is consistent with *Effective Ministry and Membership Growth* that states: “...between 1990 and 1994, population change impacted growth much less than congregational practices” (13). It is not enough for a congregation to be in a growing area for it to experience an increase in average worship attendance.

**Key Informants on Newspaper Advertisements or Stories within the Last Year  
by Change in Worship Attendance Between 1994 and 1999  
and Score on the Purpose and Change Index**

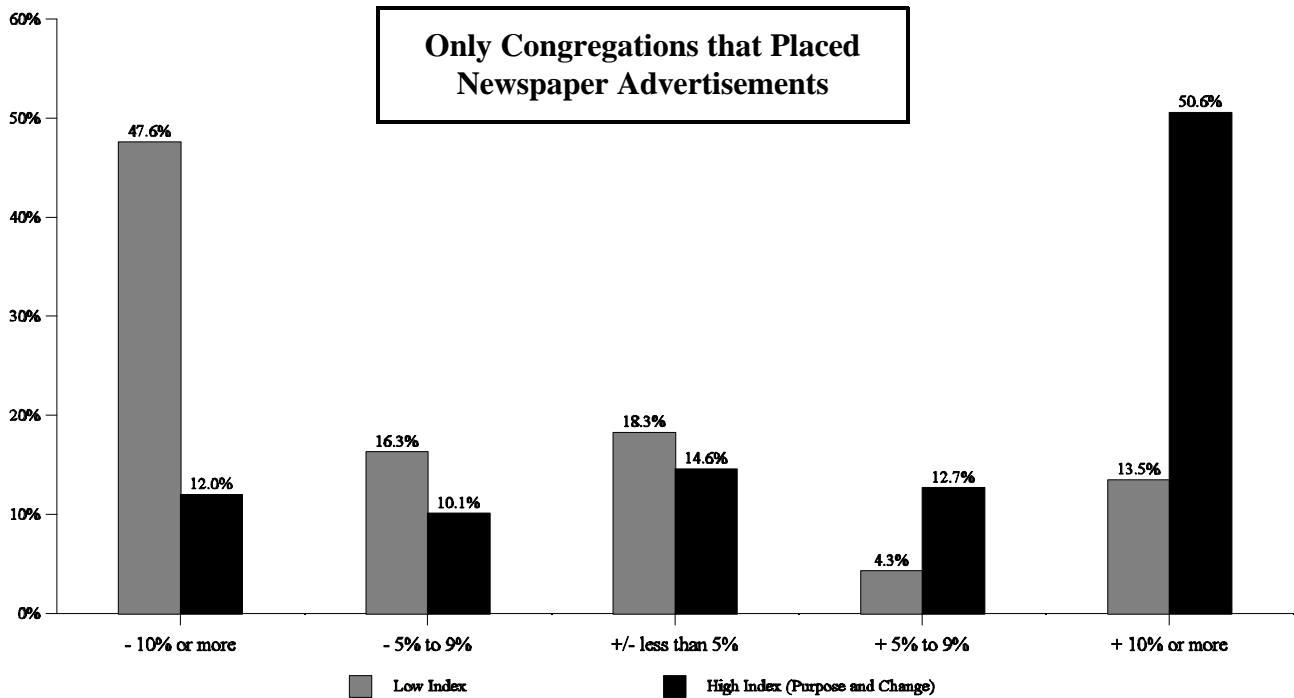


Figure 7

*Context*

Community context is also not a significant factor in determining changes in average worship attendance. Growing congregations exist in rural or open country areas, small towns and villages, and small as well as large cities. Additionally, the location within a city—central or downtown area, older or newer suburb, residential or commercial or industrial area—was not significant in terms of change in worship attendance.

**Final Considerations**

The findings of CCSP do not discredit efforts to reach out to new members by using evangelism, new styles of worship or advertising. On the contrary, the findings suggest that evangelism programs and new ways of sharing the faith are effective but only when associated with a sense of purpose and change in a congregation along with an ability to negotiate change positively. Churchwide programs designed to assist congregations with membership growth should focus in these areas.