Mission Partners in 1997

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Mission Partners is a program of the Division for Outreach of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) that links together established congregations with new and redeveloping congregations to provide mutual support through prayer, encouragement and gifts of financial support. Some of these partnerships are facilitated by the churchwide organization while others are not.[1] In support of Mission Partners a survey was fielded to 835 congregations in January and February of 1998.[2] The congregations were randomly selected from the 2,287 congregations in the ELCA that indicated they contributed money to another congregation in 1996. Of these 835 congregations, 96 indicated that they did not provide support directly to another congregation in 1997 and another 359 congregations did not respond. Three hundred eighty congregations returned completed questionnaires.[3] The questionnaire was designed to gather descriptive information and to test several hypotheses on the factors that influence congregations to give to a mission partner.[4]

WHERE ARE THE CONGREGATIONS GIVING TO A MISSION PARTNER?

By Region

The distribution of congregations giving financial support directly to other congregations in the ELCA generally reflects the distribution of all ELCA congregations. (See Table 1.) The highest number of contributing congregations are in Region 3 (North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota) which is also the region with the most congregations.[5] Based on the overall

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[1] Because of the nature of the Mission Partners program, which is to promote and facilitate gift giving between congregations, any congregations that provide financial support directly to another in 1997 is referred to as a mission partner.

[2] The survey was initiated with the support of the Division for Outreach by the Rev. Lloyd Menke as part of a Doctor of Ministry program at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. Pastor Menke is also the Mission Partner Coordinator for the Southeastern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA.

[3] The response rate is 51 percent based the adjusted sample size of 739 congregations (835 minus the 96 congregations that indicated they did not provide support to another congregation in 1997.)

[4] We asked the pastor to pass on a questionnaire to the lay person in the congregation who knew the most about the congregation's relationship to its mission partner. Completed questionnaires were received from 253 lay persons. The responses analyzed here, however, are primarily those of the pastor. Lay responses are reported for purposes of comparison in several tables.

[5] We are using the regional designation of the ELCA.

distribution of congregations in the ELCA, more congregations give direct support to other congregations than one would expect in Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7. Fewer congregations participate than one would expect in Regions 5, 8, and 9. The difference is the greatest in Region 8 which has 12 percent of all ELCA congregations but only nine percent of the congregation that give directly to another congregation.

Table 1

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF ELCA CONGREGATIONS BY GIVING ACTIVITY

All ELCA Congregations For 1997 (ELCA Regions)	Percent of All ELCA Congregations	Percent of Congregations Giving Financial Support to Another Congregation
One	5.6%	6.1%
Two	6.4%	8.7%
Three	17.5%	18.6%
Four	8.8%	9.3%
Five	17.7%	16.6%
Six	10.8%	11.0%
Seven	12.1%	13.1%
Eight	11.8%	8.6%
Nine	9.3%	8.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

By Setting

About 24 percent of congregations giving directly to other congregations in the ELCA are in settings (based on zip code) where the median household income is low (between $25,000 and $35,000 in 1997) and the population density of the area is very low (less than 210 persons per square mile.) (See Table 2.) This also reflects the distribution of ELCA congregations overall. Forty-two percent of the giving congregations are in areas of very low density and 60 percent of the giving congregations are in areas with moderate ($35,000-$50,000) and high ($50,000 or more) median household incomes.

Table 2

SETTINGS OF CONGREGATIONS PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS BY POPULATION DENSITY

(persons per square mile)

	Population Density				
Median Household Income	High (more than 4,150)	Moderate (1,000 to 4,150)	Low (210 to 1,000)	Very Low (under 210)	Total
High ($50k or more)	2.5%	11.0%	5.9%	1.2%	20.6%
Moderate ($35k-$50k)	4.5%	11.0%	12.5%	11.2%	39.2%
Low ($25k-$35k)	1.8%	2.5%	5.6%	24.3%	34.3%
Very Low (less than $25k)	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%	4.9%	6.0%
Total	9.3%	24.8%	24.2%	41.7%	100%

Size

Smaller congregations (under 500 baptized members) are significantly under represented among those congregations that give financial support to other congregations and larger congregations (over 500 baptized members) are over represented. (See Table 3.) Overall, contributing congregations are considerably larger than typical ELCA congregations. They have baptized membership of just over 700 with total giving of about $250,000 and operating expenses of approximately $180,000. This compares to about 400 baptized members and total giving of $120,000 with operating expenses of approximately $100,000 for those congregations that did not provide financial support directly to another congregation in 1997.

Table 3

SIZE DISTRIBUTION OF CONGREGATIONS GIVING FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS

All ELCA Congregations in 1997 (Baptized Membership)	Percent of All ELCA Congregations	Percent of Congregations Giving Financial Support to Another Congregation
1 - 175	29.9%	12.5%
176 - 350	28.7%	22.8%
351 - 500	14.8%	14.8%
501 - 700	11.2%	15.7%
701 - 950	6.6%	13.0%
951 - 1,500	5.7%	12.5%
1,501 or more	3.0%	8.7%
Total	100%	100%

HOW MUCH IS GIVEN?[6]

ELCA congregations contributed over $5.7 million directly to other congregations in 1997. These contributions were made by 2,371 congregations and ranged from a few dollars to $93,000. The vast majority of these contributions were small. The average was about $2,400 and the median contribution was $1000. In terms of all giving in the ELCA, less than one-half of one percent of total giving is given directly from one congregation to another.[7]

[6] The first part of this analysis is based on data reported for all congregations as part of the Congregational Annual Reports of the ELCA for 1996 and 1997.

[7] It is difficult to get a completely accurate picture of the amount of money given directly from one congregation to another. According to the 1997 Congregational Annual Reports, $5.7 million was given by ELCA congregations to other ELCA congregations but only $4.3 million is reported received by congregations. Over 2,600 congregations report giving monies and 540 report receiving monies, but only 2,371 congregations report the actual dollar amounts given.

CONGREGATIONS THAT GIVE TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS AND DISCRETIONARY INCOME

The most obvious and common characteristics of congregations that give directly to other ELCA congregations is that they have higher levels of discretionary income. Congregations that gave one percent or more of their total giving directly to another congregation clearly have the highest amount of discretionary income. (See Table 4.)

Table 4

INCOME AND EXPENSES PER CONFIRMED AND COMMUNING MEMBER BY AMOUNT GIVEN

All ELCA Congregations For 1997	Gave Financial Support to Another Congregation - Less than One Percent of Total Giving (N=1546)	Gave Financial Support To Another Congregation - More than One Percent of Total Giving (N=825)	Did Not Give Financial Support to Another ELCA Congregation (N=8209)
Income per Confirmed and Communing (CC) Member	$706	$716	$644
Operating Expenses per CC Member	$455	$462	$457
Discretionary Income per CC	$188	$207	$140
Giving per CC Member as a Percent of the Median Household Income in the Zip Code Areas Served	1.4%	1.4%	1.4%

Why Is There More Discretionary Income?

Determining why there is discretionary income is complex. It is not because these congregations have lower expenses per member. All ELCA congregations spend about $460 per confirmed and communing member for operating expenses but those that gave to other congregations have about $700 per confirmed and communing member in income compared to $650 for those that do not give. (See Table 5.)

For most of these congregations, this extra income is not the result of persons giving more, at least as a percent of household income. Congregations that give one percent or more of their income to another congregations in 1997 received $598 in giving per confirmed and communing member in 1997 compared to $553 for congregations that did not give to another congregation, but this difference is a direct reflection of median household income. When standardized for the area served by the congregation, the rate of giving is 1.4 percent of household income for all congregations.[8] Also, congregations that give one percent or more get less of their income from giving. (See Table 5.) In other words, congregations that give the most have sources of income other than giving that they are more likely to treat as discretionary income.

[8] This figure is based on an average of up to three zip code areas specified by the congregation. The first zip code areas is attributed 60 percent of the members, the second 30 percent and the third 10 percent.

Table 5

SOURCES OF INCOME FOR CONGREGATIONS BY AMOUNT GIVEN

All ELCA Congregations For 1997	Gave Financial Support to Another Congregation - Less than One Percent of Total Giving (N=1546)	Gave Financial Support To Another Congregation - More than One Percent of Total Giving (N=825)	Did Not Give Financial Support to Another ELCA Congregation (N=8209)
Regular Giving (Not Designated)	74.6%	72.6%	73.4%
Special Giving (Designated)	14.3%	10.9%	12.5%
Earned Income (Unrestricted)	2.3%	4.1%	3.4%
Earned Income (Restricted)	2.0%	2.8%	2.2%
Grant Income	0.4%	0.9%	0.9%
Other Income (e.g., Principal, from Endowment Assets)	6.4%	8.7%	7.6%
Giving Income as a Percent of Total Income	88.9%	83.5%	85.9%
Percent Change in Giving per CC Member, 1994-1997	10.9%	7.6%	6.5%
Percent Change in Baptized Membership, 1994-1997	3.5%	2.2%	-1.6%

The situation is somewhat different for those congregations that give less than one percent of their total giving directly to another congregation. These congregations are more dependent upon member giving (89 percent of their income comes from giving) and they have the higher levels of debt expense (consuming 11 percent of their income). (See Table 5.) They also have the highest membership growth rates at 3.5 percent and highest increases in giving between 1994 and 1997 at 10.9 percent. This suggests that the ministry of these congregations is expanding and perhaps that the decision to give is consistent with a larger commitment to outreach (no matter how small the size of the actual gift).

SURVEY RESULTS

Are the Congregations that Returned Questionnaires Representative?

The characteristics of the 380 congregations completing questionnaires closely resemble the characteristics of the 2,379 congregations in the ELCA that indicated on the Annual Congregational Reports that they gave financial support to another congregation in 1997. This is true in every critical area from baptized membership, to average worship attendance, to total giving, to operating expenses, to mission support, to mission partner giving and giving per confirmed and communing member. (See Table 6.)

Table 6

CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULATION AND SAMPLE CONGREGATIONS

All Congregations Compared to Surveyed Congregations For 1997	Gave Financial Support to Another Congregation (All ELCA Congregations, N=2374)	Gave Financial Support to Another Congregation (Sample Congregations, N=380)	Did Not Give Financial Support to Another ELCA Congregation (N=8209)
Baptized Membership	701	718	404
Average Worship	218	230	122
Confirmed and Communing (CC)	386	405	218
Total Giving	$238,318	$254,744	$120,412
Operating Expenses	$176,172	$184,437	$101,136
Mission Support	$18,763	$21,458	$8,938
Mission Partners (Direct Support to Another Congregation)	$2,179	$2,398	$0
Expenses as Percent of Income	91.6%	92.9%	94.4%
Mission Support as a Percent of Giving	7.9%	8.4%	7.4%
Mission Partners as Percent of Giving	0.9%	0.9%	0.0%
Giving per CC Member	$617.40	$629.00	$552.36
Mission Partners per CC Member	$5.65	$5.92	$0.00

What is the Source of Financial Support for Other Congregations?

Table 7 shows the primary sources of support for other congregations by category for those responding congregations that gave less than one percent of their total giving to another congregation and those that gave one percent or more. The majority of congregations that give larger amounts do not take those monies from those budgeted for regular operating expenses. Instead, they are much more likely to use endowment funds, special offerings and other sources of income which are over and above or separate from the regular operating budget. This is less true for congregations that give less than one percent of their total giving.

It is also important to highlight the very significant role of special offerings and special events in providing the monies for the mission partners gift. These special undertakings are a very important and ready source of mission partnership funds. No doubt, these special offerings and special events provide source of income that is understood as more discretionary.

Table 7
SOURCES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT BY AMOUNT GIVEN

Surveyed Congregations For 1997	Gave Financial Support to Another Congregation - Less than One Percent of Total Giving (N=243)	Gave Financial Support To Another Congregation - More than One Percent of Total Giving (N=101)
General Budget	59.3%	42.6%
Endowment Funds	5.8%	11.9%
Special Offerings	24.7%	33.7%
Special Events	4.1%	3.0%
Other	6.2%	8.9%

What Other Factors Contributing to Giving?

Persons

The surveyed congregations were asked to indicate the importance of a variety of persons (using a five point scale from 1 - "very high" importance to 5 - "very low" importance) in the congregation's decision to provide financial support directly to another congregation. (See Table 8.) Seventy-six percent of the clergy respondents reported that they personally were very important (1 or 2 on the scale) in the decision, followed by the pastor or member of the receiving congregation (53 percent) and than a lay member of the giving congregation (50 percent). Lay persons (45 percent) were significantly less likely to attribute high importance to the role of the pastor, but this is largely due to the number of "don't know" responses which are included in the base for the calculation. Both groups of respondents rated the activity of any person outside the congregation such as the synod's mission director, the synod's bishop or staff, or a Mission Partners coordinator, as much less important.

There were no significant differences between congregations giving less than one percent of their total giving directly to another congregation and those giving one percent or more on the assessment of the importance of persons in making the decision to give.

Table 8

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONS IN GIVING DECISIONS BY TYPE OF RESPONDENT

The Importance of. . .	Clergy Responses Percent Indicating High Importance (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)	Lay Responses Percent Indicating High Importance (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)
The Pastor of the Giving Congregation	76%	45%
The Pastor/Member of a Mission Congregation	53%	52%
A Member of the Giving Congregation	50%	46%
Being Asked to Become a Mission Partner	45%	47%
A Connection to the Pastor of the Mission Congregation	37%	40%
A Connection to a Member of the Mission Congregation	28%	28%
The Synod's Bishop or Staff	26%	18%
The Synod's Mission Director	16%	13%
A Mission Partners Coordinator	15%	15%

Confidence

It is often assumed that giving is impacted by the confidence of the giver that there is a legitimate need for the gift, that it will be used wisely and/or that those receive the gift share the basic values of the giver. But in the case of providing financial support for other ELCA congregations, levels of confidence are not directly at issue because there is shared, across the board, confidence. (See Table 9.) Eighty-three percent of clergy and 79 percent of the lay respondents

Table 9

LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE BY TYPE OF RESPONDENT

Confidence that. . .	Clergy Responses Percent Indicating High Confidence (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)	Lay Responses Percent Indicating High Confidence (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)
The Receiving Congregation Shares Our Basic Values and Beliefs in Mission and Ministry	83%	79%
The Receiving Congregation Uses Its Financial Contributions Wisely and Prudently	82%	73%
The Receiving Congregation Urgently Needed Assistance	78%	77%
The Receiving Congregation Is Very Effective in Carrying Out Its Mission and Ministry	70%	61%

indicated that their level of confidence was high (1 or 2 on a 5 point scale) that the congregations receiving the gift shared the giving congregation's basic values and beliefs in mission and ministry. Eighty-two percent of the clergy and 73 percent of the lay persons indicated that their level of confidence was high that the congregation that received the gift used its financial contribution wisely and prudently. Seventy-eight percent of the clergy and 77 percent of the lay respondents had a high level of confidence that the receiving congregation urgently needed assistance and 70 percent of the clergy and 61 percent of the lay respondents had a high level of confidence that the receiving congregation is very effective in carrying out its mission and ministry.

The influence of confidence on making the decision to give, however, was more important for lay respondents than for the clergy. (See Appendix I, Question 12, Items h. and i.) Lay persons were significantly more likely to report that having confidence that the financial support given would be used wisely and that the receiving congregation shares the same values and beliefs in mission and ministry is very important in influencing the decision to give.[9]

Giving more is also related to the level of confidence. The clergy of congregations that made higher contributions (one percent or more of total giving) express significantly higher levels of confidence that the receiving congregation shared the giving congregation's basic values and beliefs in mission and ministry.

Congregational Image

Congregations often understand themselves in distinctive ways (often unarticulated) related to the congregation's "culture" that develops over time. The respondents were asked the level of importance of several possible shared understandings of the congregation in influencing their decision to give to another congregation. Most important were the congregation's need to respond to blessings from God (79 percent of the clergy and 77 percent of the lay persons rated it very important), a strong commitment to spreading the Gospel (72 percent for clergy, 65 percent for lay persons) and the need to show trust in God (68 percent of the clergy and 70 percent of the lay persons.) (See Table 10.) Congregations that gave more (one percent or more of total giving) attributed significantly higher levels of importance to a strong commitment to spreading the Gospel.

Characteristics of Lay Leaders

The pastors and lay respondents were asked to indicate if a series of descriptive statements were true about the congregation's lay leaders. The characteristics described in these statements are often thought to be related to the decision to give to another congregation but, for the most part, both the pastors and the lay respondents were reluctant to describe their lay leaders in these ways. (See Tables 10 and 11.) Sixty-two percent of the clergy and a significantly higher 76 percent of the lay respondents said that the congregation's lay leaders believe that accepting Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation (1 or 2 with 1 representing "very true" on a 5 point scale) and 50 percent or the clergy and 57 percent of the lay respondents said that the congregation's lay leaders have worked hard to develop a widely shared vision of God's mission

[9] Overall, it is remarkable how closely clergy and lay persons who returned questionnaires mirrored each other in their responses.

Table 10

IMPORTANCE OF BELIEFS AND CONGREGATIONAL IMAGES BY RESPONDENT TYPE

The Importance of. . .	Clergy Responses Percent Indicating High Importance (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)	Lay Responses Percent Indicating High Importance (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)
The Need to Respond to the Blessings God Has Given	79%	77%
A Strong Commitment to Spreading the Gospel	72%	65%
The Need to Give as a Way of Showing Trust in God	68%	70%
A Widely Shared Congregational Understanding of What it Means to be Connected to One Another as the Body of Christ	61%	64%
The Fact That Being a Mission Partner is Part of Our Tradition and Identity as a Congregation	40%	32%

for the congregation.[10] But, less than a majority (46 percent of the clergy respondents and 39 percent of the lay respondents) indicated that the congregation's lay leaders set an example through generous giving and only 16 percent of the clergy and 14 percent of the lay respondents said the congregation's lay leaders are comfortable about talking about their own personal giving.

Perhaps most interesting is the disagreement over who is primarily responsible for the promoting and making other congregation members aware of the congregation receiving the gift and ensuring that the receiving congregation is included in the congregation's annual financial plan. Forty-six percent of the clergy attribute primary responsibility for ensuring that the congregation is included in the congregation's annual financial plan to the lay leaders of the congregation while 60 percent of the lay respondents attribute primary responsibility to the lay leaders. There is also a 20 percentage point difference between pastor and lay respondents over who is primarily responsible for making other congregational members aware of the mission partner. In any case, none of these characteristics of lay leaders are strongly related to the amount of money that is given to another congregation and it is unlikely, given these findings, that these characteristics of lay leaders are critical to the decision to give money directly to another congregation.

[10] The statement "accepting Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation" always causes some respondents difficulty. We know that this "decisional" way of understanding salvation is not very "Lutheran," but we wanted to give those who are most influenced by conservative evangelical thought a way of identifying themselves especially since believing that a person's eternal salvation is based on a "personal decision for Christ" could significantly impact giving behavior.

Table 11

PERCEPTIONS OF BELIEFS AND ACTIVITIES OF PASTORS AND LAY LEADERS BY RESPONDENT TYPE

	Clergy Responses Percent Indicating "True" (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)		Lay Responses Percent Indicating "True" (1 or 2 on the 5 Point Scale)	
Lay Leaders or the Pastor. . .	**About Lay Leaders**	**About Themselves**	**About Lay Themselves**	**About the Pastor**
Believe(s) That Accepting Jesus Christ Is the Only Way of Salvation	62%	75%	76%	86%
Have/Has Worked to Develop a Widely Shared Vision of God's Mission for the Congregation	50%	88%	57%	86%
Set(s) an Example Through Generous Giving	46%	95%	39%	72%
Take(s) Primary Responsibility for Ensuring That the Congregation Includes the Mission Partner in the Annual Financial Plan	46%	83%	60%	78%
Are/Is Strongly Committed to Evangelism	40%	91%	46%	83%
Place(s) a High Priority on Teaching That Our Congregation Is Part of the Larger Church	36%	91%	42%	82%
Believe(s) There Is an Urgency to This Time in History and They Want to Make a Difference	33%	82%	36%	66%
Take(s) Primary Responsibility for Promoting and Making Other Members Aware of Our Mission Partner	17%	44%	37%	49%
Are/Is Comfortable Talking about Their Own Personal Giving	16%	87%	14%	70%
Is Well Prepared to Teach Stewardship	-	66%	-	-
Have Attended Training Sessions on Stewardship	-	58%	-	-

Characteristics of Pastors

The pastors were also asked to tell us about themselves and we asked the lay respondents about the pastor. Pastors perceive themselves as generous givers (95 percent marked 1 or 2 with 1 representing "very true" on a 5 point scale) and they believe that they are strongly committed to evangelism (91 percent). (See Tables 10 and 11.) They also place a high priority on teaching that their congregation is part of the larger church. The lay respondents were less likely to see their pastors as generous givers (72 percent) but the percent that do is still very high. The lay respondents were also less likely to see their pastor as strongly committed to evangelism (83 percent). They were less likely to believe that their pastors place a high priority on teaching that the congregation is part of the larger church (82 percent), but once again the percent is still very high. Despite more doubt on the part of the lay respondents, there is every reason to believe that these pastors are telling the truth about themselves–that they are generous givers and that they are

strongly committed to evangelism and that they place a high priority on teaching that their congregation is part of the wider church. The vast majority of these congregations are growing in membership and their mission support as a percent of total giving is higher than the average percentage for ELCA congregations. (See Table 4.) These congregations are also giving money directly to other ELCA congregations and they are strong participants in the wider life of the church. Eight-two percent of the clergy said that a lay member of their congregation served on a synod committee or participated in a workshop, a seminar and/or a training event sponsored by the synod in 1997 and 96 percent indicated that a lay member of their congregation attended the synods assembly. Eight-six percent of the respondents said that they served on a synod committee or participated in a workshop, a seminar and/or a training event sponsored by the synod in 1997. While these factors are all likely to be important to the decision to give money directly to another congregation, none of the factors strongly impacts the amount of money given except one. In terms of the amount of money given, pastors that regularly raise up the mission partner congregation in congregational newsletters, bulletins, etc., are the pastors of congregations that give more. In short, the decision to be involved in a mission partnership and to devote financial resources to that partnership is directly related to one important characteristic of the pastor–the extent to which the pastor is committed to the mission partnership and to expressing that commitment by regularly raising up the mission partner before the congregation.

Other Factors

Finally, two other factors are of interest. Pastors and lay were asked approximately how many congregations members are aware of and, "at some level, promote the mission partner to the other members of the congregation." Sixty-two percent of the clergy and 67 percent of the lay persons indicated that six or more persons promoted the mission partnership. Also, the amount of money given is positively related to the number of persons who promote the partnership.

On the other hand, the opportunity to directly choose the mission partner did not impact the amount of money given nor did the distance from the receiving congregation.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

The reasons congregations contribute financially to other congregations are numerous and their interaction is complex. Congregations have their own significant needs and a host of choices when it comes to giving. This study of 350 ELCA congregations that contributed financial support to other ELCA congregations was designed to measure as many factors as possible and yet its results are limited when it comes to fully understanding what causes one congregation to decide to give to another.

Three factors make a difference, even though the statistical impact of the factors in predicting the amount of money given is relatively weak. This simply means that a host of factors are in play, none of which is dominate, deciding or determining. It means that persons interested in increasing the number of congregations giving directly to other congregations should try to create an environment within which all of these factors can take hold and bear fruit.

The first factor is discretionary income. Congregations that give the most to other congregations do so because they believe they have discretionary income. They often receive this income from sources other than giving or they raise the money outside of the regular financial operating budget of the congregation. They also do this without substantially impacting their level of mission support, so one of the keys may be to provide congregations with ideas and other techniques for generating money outside of the regular financial operating budget of the congregation.

The second factor is the confidence of lay persons that the money that is given will further their beliefs and values.

The third factor is the extent to which the pastor and key lay persons hold up and celebrate the mission partnership. This is often directly tied to the way a congregation expresses its concern for reaching out.

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