

# Unlocking Church Growth

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## Data Insights from the National Congregations Study

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## **Introduction**

“Over the past two decades American churches have seen a decline in regular attendance and participation” (Jones, 2024). And since the 2019 Covid pandemic, many churches have not recovered to their pre-covid attendance levels. By using probabilistic prediction models, we can explore existing church features to gauge their impact on changing congregational size. This analysis helps to identify targeted strategies to improve congregational engagement and increase church attendance.

## **Data Context**

The National Congregations Study, Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, and 2018-2019) provides a comprehensive view of congregations across the U.S. and includes a wide range of religious denominations. It includes data from 5,333 samples and 1,083 features, collected over four periods, with some congregations resampled in subsequent interviews. The data was gathered by trained and qualified interviewers conducting either in-person or computer-assisted personal interviews, typically with a clergyperson and staff from each congregation (Chaves, 2021).

## Key Takeaways

These takeaways can help to increase a congregation's odds of attracting new membership.

- Supporting **Home School** groups can be low cost and high rewards.
- Keeping your facilities refreshed and up to date through a **Remodel** can attract new audiences.
- **Guitars** and **Drums** are undervalued and can increase your audience.
- Offering a few **Worship Services** allows you to diversify your style and offer more flexibility for attendees with complex personal schedules.
- Passing the **Offering Plate** can increase your bottom line and membership.
- **Service Durations** of 66-minutes or 85-minutes in length can meet the demands of your current members while increasing your odds of attracting new members.
- **Social Time** is critical! Offering 23-minutes cumulative (per service) of mingle time has the highest likelihood for congregational increase in this analysis.
- Avoid **Sermon Durations** 18-, 24-, or 36-minutes in length to maximize attraction.
- Providing **Marriage Enrichment** programs is a widely missed opportunity to increase your congregation size.
- Providing **Young Adult Religious Education** programs can increase your chances for new members.
- **Teens** (ages 11 to 18) are a key demographic to appeal to.
- **Staff** to support your goals and programs that drive increases.

## About The Data



U.S. Region		Denominational Affiliation		Features	
South Atlantic, East South Central, or West South Central	41%	Roman Catholic	24%	Facilities	28
East North Central or West North Central	25%	Baptist	20%	Music	18
Mountain or Pacific	19%	Other Christian, not elsewhere classified	12%	Worship Service	364
New England or Mid-Atlantic	15%	Methodist	10%	Programs	108
		Pentecostal	7%	Staff	278
		Other conservative, evangelical, or sectarian Protestants	7%	Other	287
		Lutheran	6%		
		Presbyterian or Reformed	6%		
		Non-Christian	4%		
		Episcopal Church	2%		
		Other mainline or liberal Protestants	2%		

[illegible]

### Top 16 Denominations

Denomination	Percentage
Catholic	25%
No Official Denomination	22%
SBC	18%
UMC	16%
ELCA	10%
PCUSA	8%
Episcopal Church	7%
Other Christian	7%
Assemblies of God	6%
Lutheran, Missouri Synod	6%
Other Baptist	6%
UCC	6%
Other Pentecostal	6%
Mormon	6%
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc	5%
American Baptist Churches, USA	9%

Top 16 make up 80%  
Catholic makes up 25%

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## Part 1: Facilities

Every organization needs a place to meet whether it is online, in a building, or outside in nature. 95% of the congregations surveyed meet routinely in a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque. These buildings play an important part of congregational life and represent the second largest asset most congregations have, next to their people of course. Their facilities are also, likely, their second greatest cost in an annual budget, and therefore should be given special consideration and contemplation when determining their use and the impact they play on a congregation's goals or objectives. The facility's use can also impact a congregation's probability to increase its size.

### Feature Descriptions

Facility features included in this analysis are:

- **Building Used by Others** indicates if there have been groups, programs or events that have no connection to the congregation that have used or rented space in the building(s).
- **Primary & Secondary Education** indicates the congregation has an elementary, middle and/or high school (K-12).
- **Artwork/Architecture** indicates if visitors ever come to view the building or worship space to look at its architecture, artwork, stained glass, or statues.
- **Remodel** indicates if the congregation has completed a recent, major remodel or construction project.
- **Home School** indicates if the congregation provides materials, programs, activities, or facility use to home schooling groups.

Figure 02

30% of congregations allow their facilities to be used by other groups, while only 4% of them support home schooling groups.

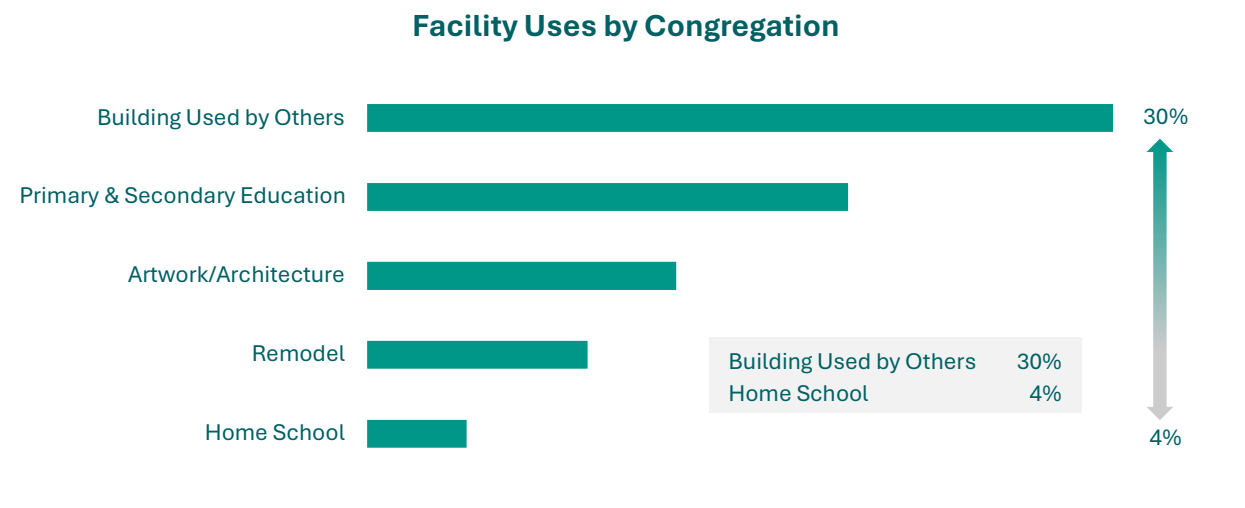
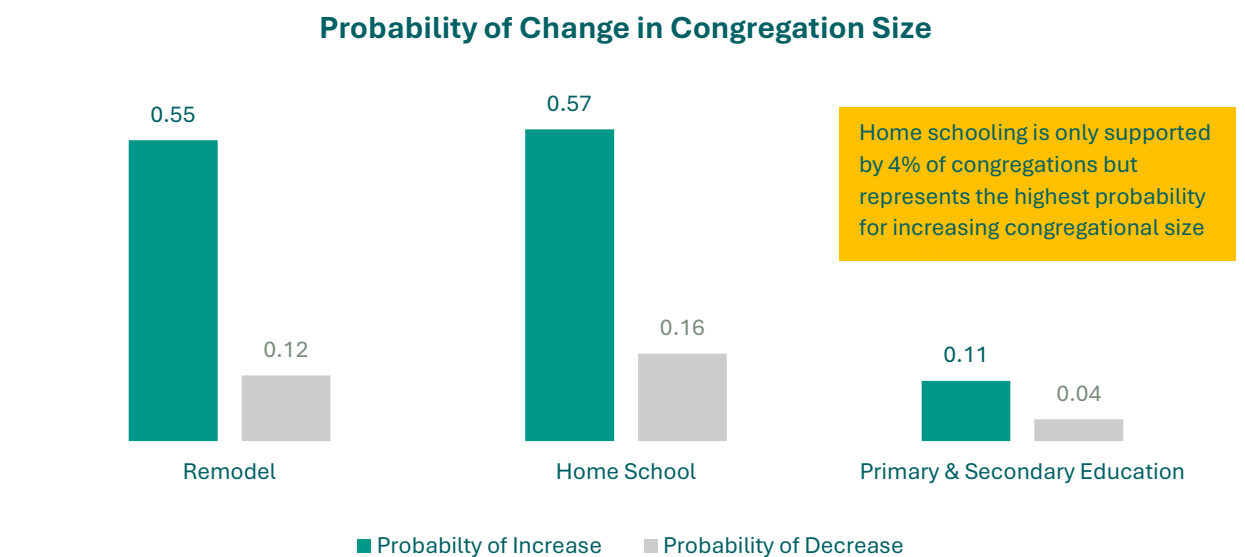


Figure 03

**Remodeling** and supporting **Home School** groups offer the greatest probability of increasing congregational size through facility use. **Building Used by Others** and **Artwork/Architecture** do not have a significant impact on increasing congregational size.





## Part 2: Music

Almost every church includes singing by the congregation during the worship service.

Music and worship are practically synonymous. But less than half of the churches surveyed included commonly available musical instruments such as a piano, guitar, electric guitar, or drums. While singing can sustain a congregation, including the use of musical instruments can lead to an increase in worship attendance and congregational size.

### Feature Descriptions

Musical features included in this analysis are:

- **Singing** by the congregation was included during the worship service.
- **Choir** participation was included during the worship service.
- An **Organ** was used in the worship service.
- **Drums** were included during the worship service.
- An acoustic **Guitar** was used in the worship service.
- A **Piano** was used in the worship service.
- An **Electric Guitar** was used in the worship service.

Figure 04

38% of congregations include drums in their worship service and 35% include an acoustic guitar.

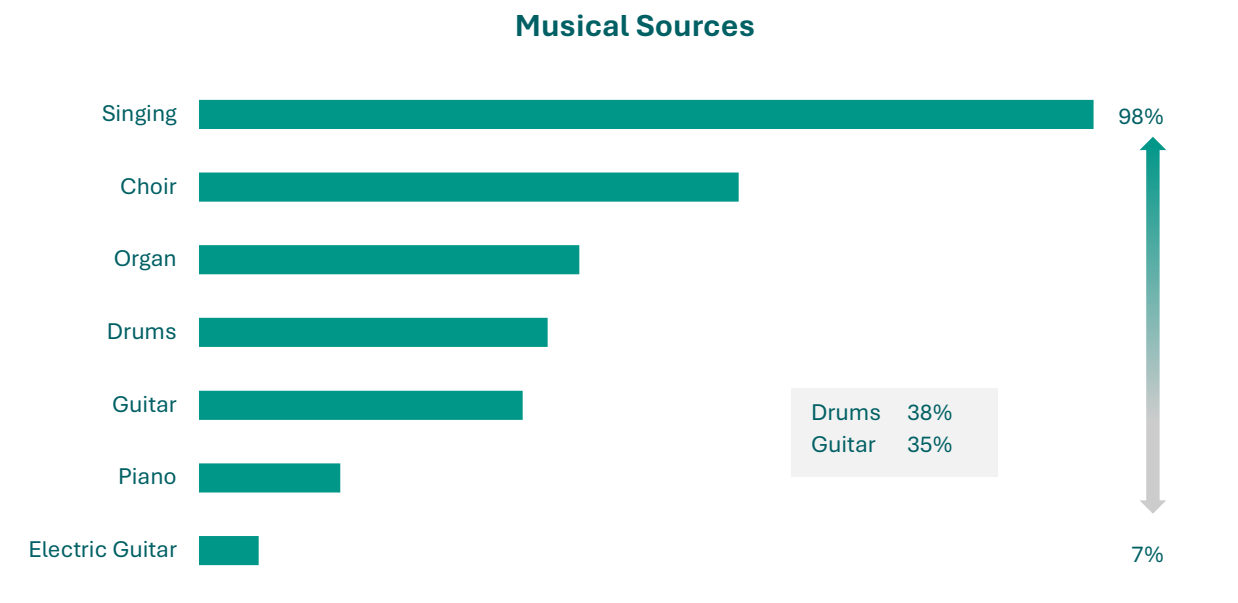
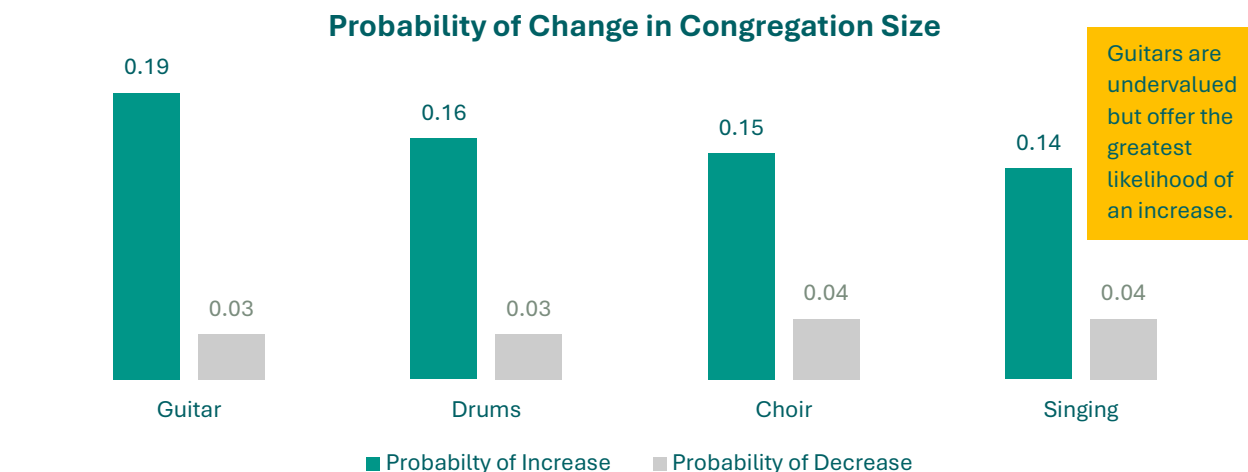


Figure 05

The **Piano**, **Organ** and **Electric Guitar** have no significant impact on increasing a church's attendance, but instead they may help to sustain the current congregation. Almost all congregations include **Singing** and 60% include the use of a **Choir**, both of which offer chances for a membership increase. The best chance for an increase is by including **Drums** and a **Guitar**.



## Part 3: Worship Service

The worship service is the focal point for most churches' weekly activities. While for most denominations, there is no requirement for congregation members to attend the weekly worship service, it is kind of an unspoken rule. The execution of the weekly service(s) is a monumental undertaking that required dedicated resources, both in staff, facilities, and accessories, as well as the coordination of numerous volunteers and participants. Therefore, a lot of time and money is invested into each service making worship a key attraction for gaining new membership. This part of the analysis is broken down into two sub-parts: *features* and *numerical*.

### Part 3.1: Features

#### *Feature Descriptions*

Worship features included in this analysis are:

- **Sermon** from the pastor related to scripture.
- **Greeting Time** or the mingling time the congregation members have with each other before and after a service.
- **Bulletin**, program or any written document distributed to guide the audience through the service.
- **Applause** by the congregation during the service.
- **Robe** worn by clergy or appropriate speakers.
- **Overhead Projection**, media screen, TV, or any digital display used during the service.
- **Congregational Reading** where everyone reads or recites together.

- **Offering** such as passing around a plate or taking donations during the service.
- **Off Podium**, chancel, pulpit, or stage by the preacher while preaching.
- **Laughing** during the worship service by the congregation.
- **Kids Time** during the worship service.
- **Teen Part** during the worship service.
- **Smart Phone** use by the congregation during the service to enhance participation.
- **Streamed** live on the internet or broadcast (TV or radio) the worship service. Note this has likely increased since the 2019 Covid Pandemic.

Figure 06

While almost all services include a sermon, not all include features you would typically associate to a service. Such as passing the offering plate, a preacher wearing a robe, or even attendees laughing out loud.

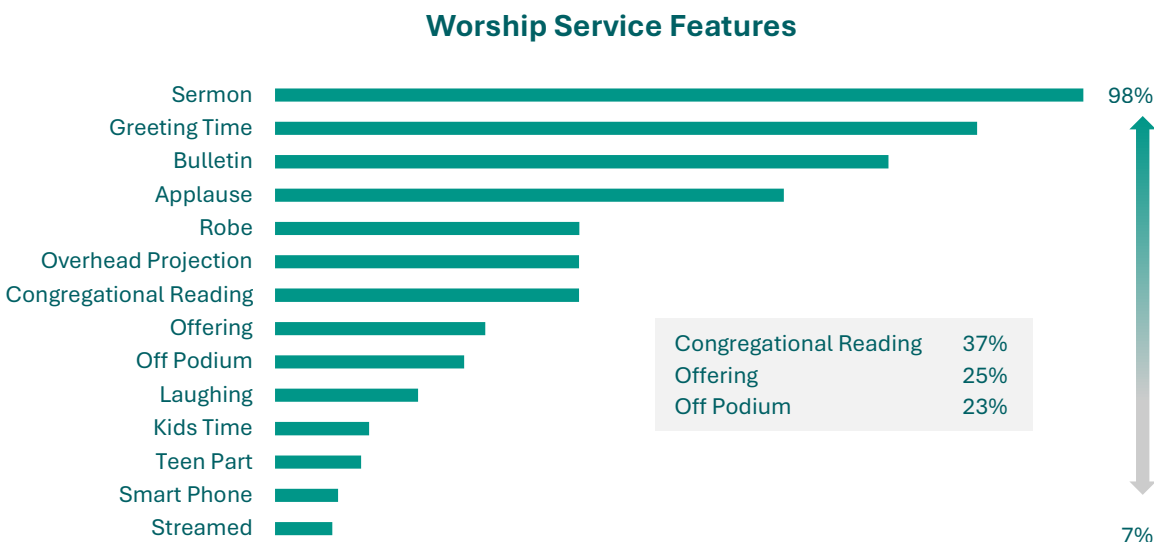
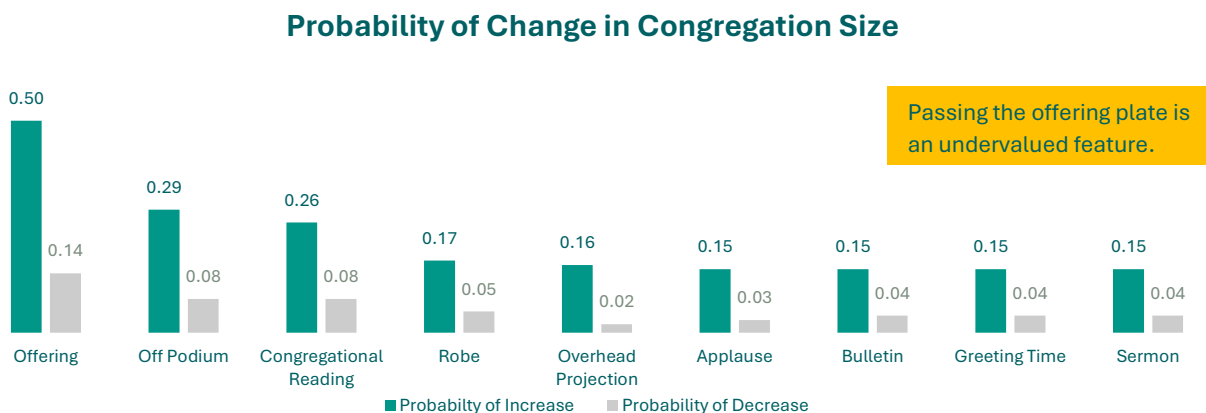


Figure 07

**Streamed, Smart Phone, Laughing, Teen Part, and Kids Time** have no impact on change. Less than 1/3 of churches include the remaining features in worship and are missing out on modest opportunities for an increase.



If you combine the no impact features with **Off Podium, Congregational Reading, Greeting Time, Applause**, and use of an **Overhead Projection**, then you can see a theme of congregational participation appear which is an underlying factor for increasing membership size through the worship service.

Part 3.2: Numerical

Numerical Feature Descriptions

Numerical features include quantities and timing:

- Services per Week
- Service Duration (minutes)
- Sermon Duration (minutes)
- Social Time (minutes)

Figure 08

The vast majority of churches have 1 to 3 services per week.

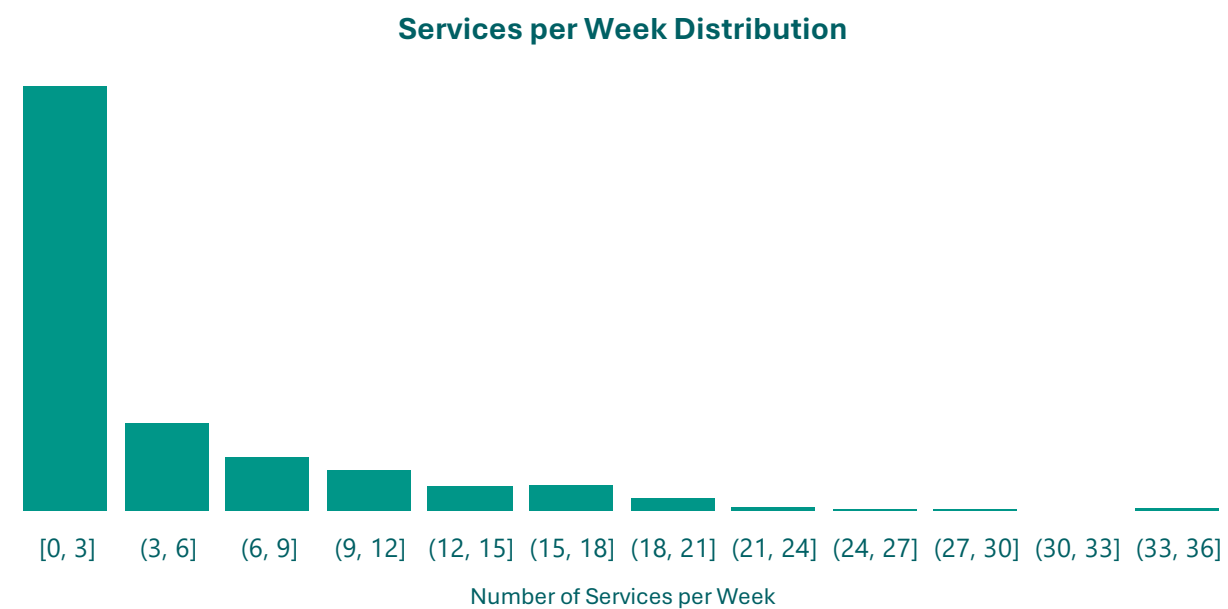


Figure 09

The median number of services is 3, and the average is 6. Keep in mind this average is likely skewed high due to comparing the Catholic denomination to others. We can examine probabilities within the interquartile range of 2 to 7 services.

### Services per Week Distribution

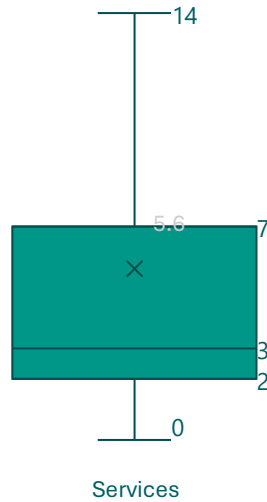
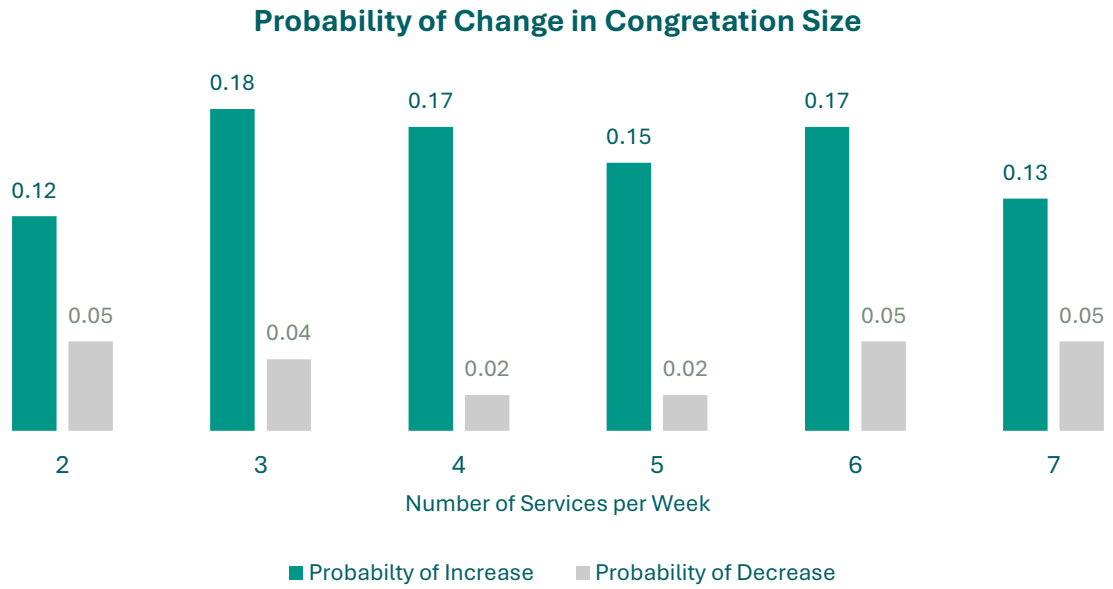


Figure 10

The probability of an increase is about the same so long as you stay within the range of 2 to 7 services per week.





**Figure 11**  
Most churches appear to strive for 1-to-1.5-hour services, in the 42-to-84-minute range.

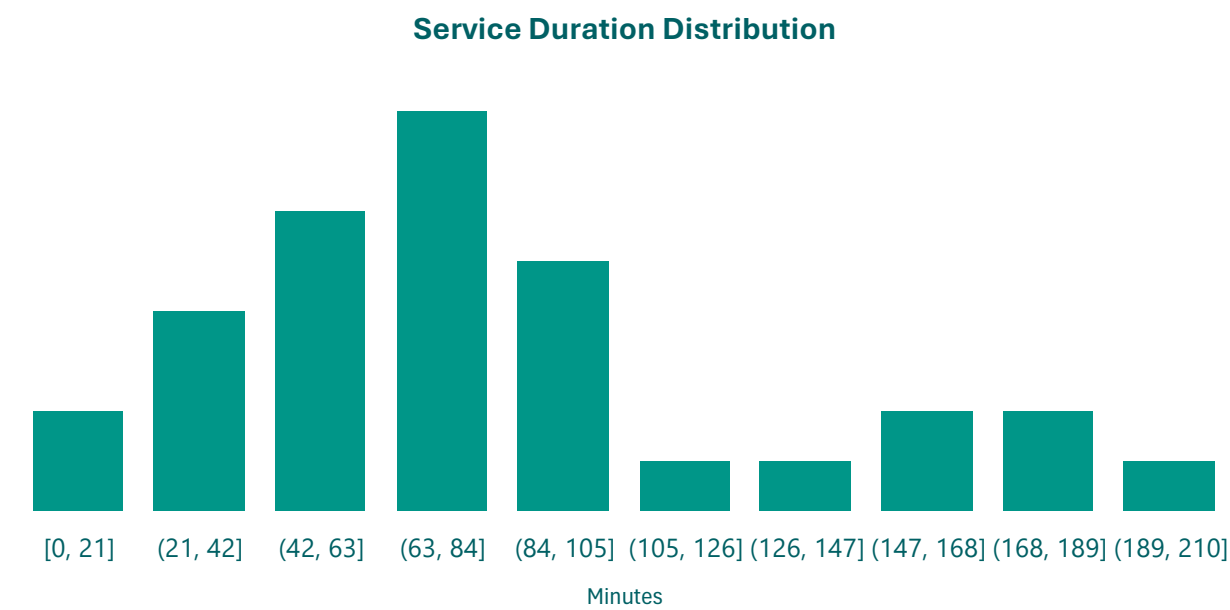


Figure 12

The median service length is 70-minutes, and the average is 81-minutes. We can examine probabilities within the interquartile range from 60 to 90 minutes.

### Service Duration Distribution

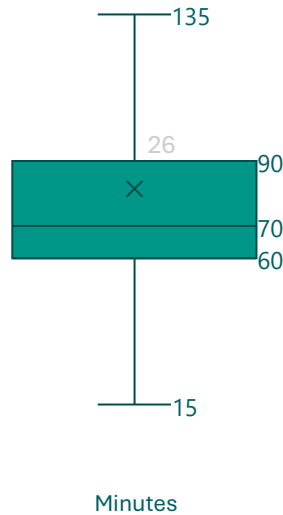


Figure 13

Churches who plan for 60-minute services should consider 66-minutes. While churches who plan for 90-minute services should consider 85-minutes. This will improve the odds of a congregation increasing.

### Probability of Change in Congregation Size

66-minute or 85-minute services should be a timing goal.

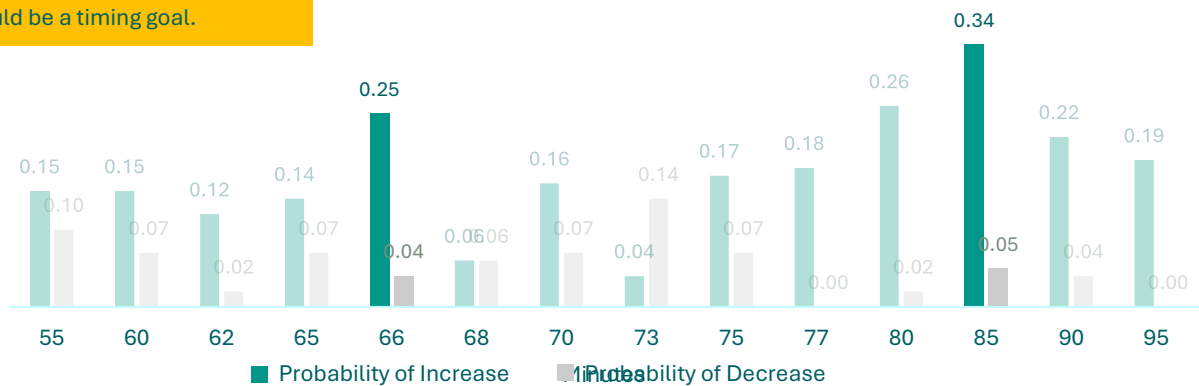


Figure 14

Most sermons fall between zero and 28 minutes long.

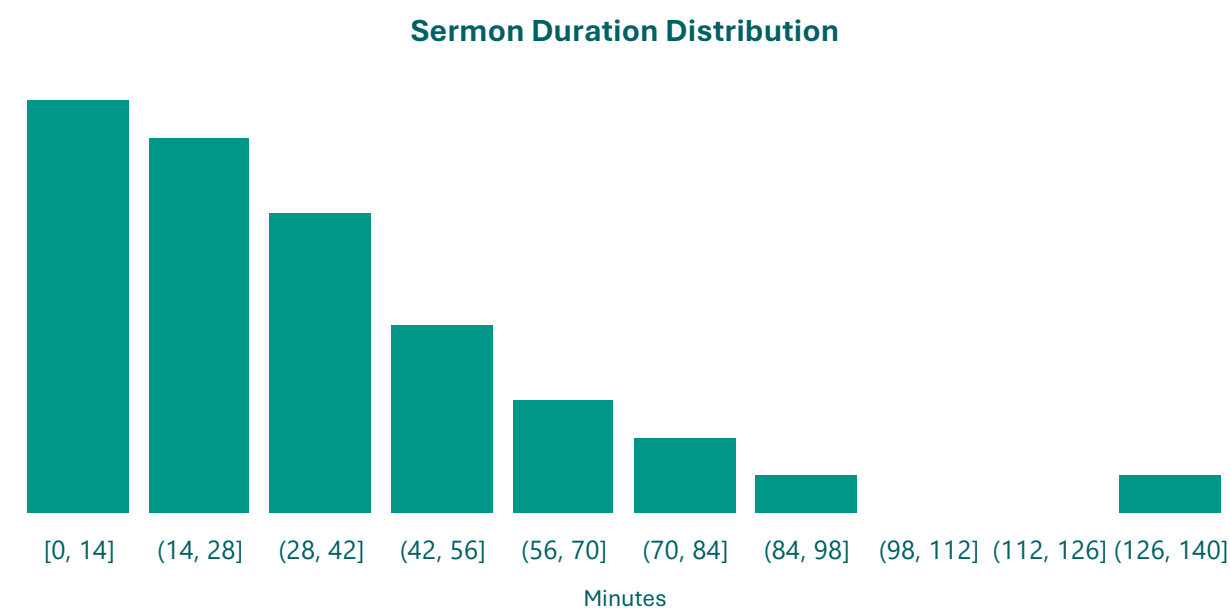


Figure 15

The median length is 20-minutes, and the average is 26-minutes. We can examine the probabilities within the interquartile range from 15 to 35 minutes.

### Sermon Duration Distribution

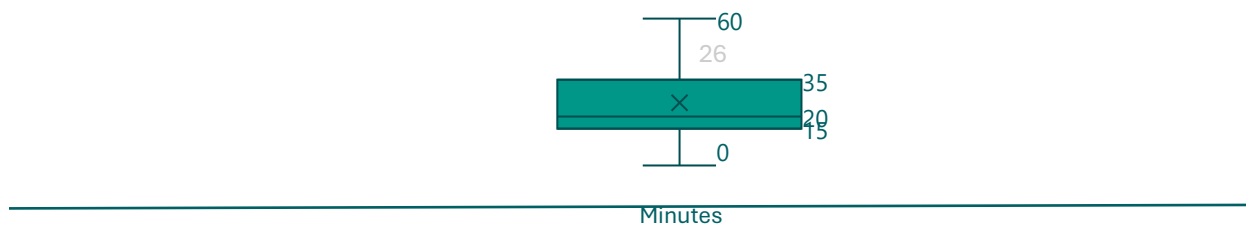


Figure 16

There is quite a range of minutes and varying degrees of difference in these probabilities. It is more notable here to focus on which time lengths to **avoid**, specifically 18-, 24-, and 36-minute-long sermons.

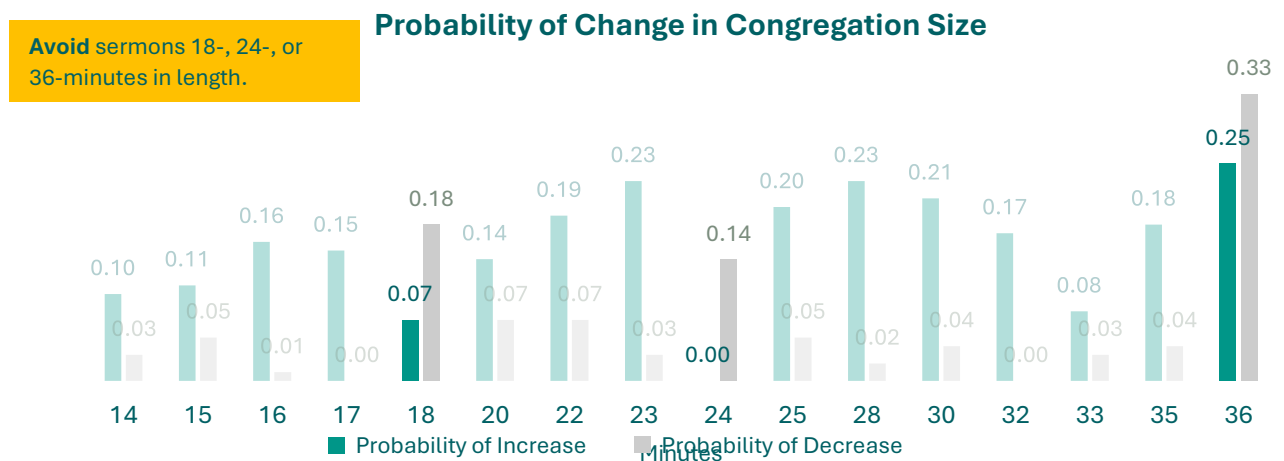


Figure 17

The social time measured occurs before and after the worship service. Most churches appear to attract up to 20 minutes of this cumulative time.

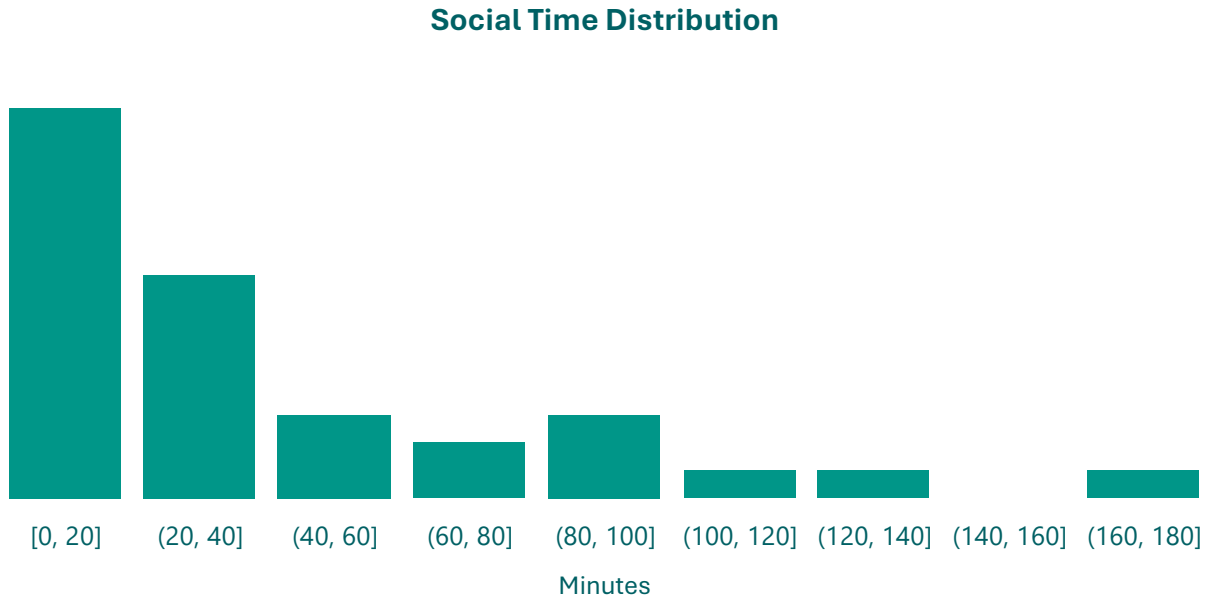


Figure 18

The median is 30-minutes, and the average is 33-minutes. We can examine probabilities with the interquartile range of 15 to 40 minutes.

### Social Time Distribution

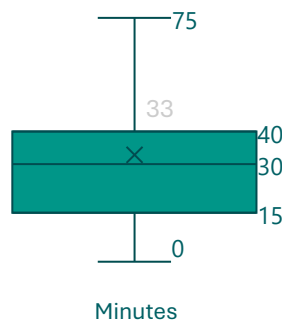
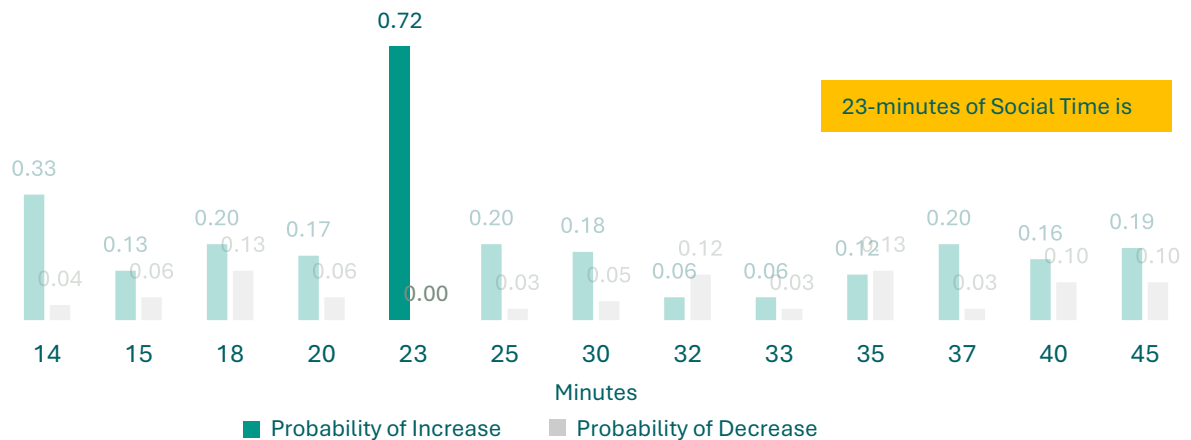


Figure 19

There is one obvious time that stands out above all others. 23-minutes of cumulative social time is key and is the highest probability for increasing a congregation's size in this analysis. The cumulative time is per service and can be split, such as 10 minutes before and 13 minutes afterwards.

### Probability of Change in Congregation Size



Part 4: Programs

Church programs play a significant role in fostering community, spiritual growth, and social outreach. They provide the foundation for a supportive and thriving congregation. There are over 100 different programs, and aspects of programs, included in the survey data, so not all were included in this analysis. This report includes the most popular and interesting programs [to the author] to explore. While a few programs are likely offered weekly, many only had to be offered once a year to be included in a survey response.

Feature Descriptions

Programs included in this analysis are listed below. These programs include groups/meetings/classes/events specifically focused on the program topic and offered at least annually.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community Assessment</li><li>• Religious Education Training</li><li>• New Members</li><li>• Other Religions</li><li>• Parenting</li><li>• Book Class (Not Bible), excluding the Bible</li><li>• Adult Religious</li><li>• Teen Youth Group</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teen Camps</li><li>• Teen Volunteers</li><li>• Voter Registration</li><li>• Marriage Enrichment</li><li>• Political Discussions</li><li>• Teen Choir</li><li>• College/Young Adult Religious Education</li><li>• Congregation Finances</li><li>• Personal Finances</li><li>• Bible Class</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exercise</li><li>• Women’s Group</li><li>• Men’s Group</li><li>• Race &amp; Race Relations</li><li>• Volunteer Group</li><li>• Environmental</li><li>• LGBTQ</li><li>• Work Problems</li><li>• Science &amp; Religion</li></ul>
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Figure 20

This table displays a list of programs that have no measurable impact on changing the congregation's size. **DO NOT** interpret this as a list of programs to drop or avoid as they might be helping to sustain your congregation's current size.

<b>No Significant Impact</b>	Congregation Finances	31%
	Personal Finances	31%
	Bible Class	24%
	Exercise	22%
	Women's Group	21%
	Men's Group	19%
	Race & Race Relations	14%
	Volunteer Group	13%
	Environmental	9%
	LGBTQ	6%
	Work Problems	6%
	Science & Religion	6%

Figure 21

This is a list of programs that have an impact on changing the congregation's size. Note the distribution here. From Parenting down, these programs are offered by less than 1/3 of churches.



## Programs Distribution

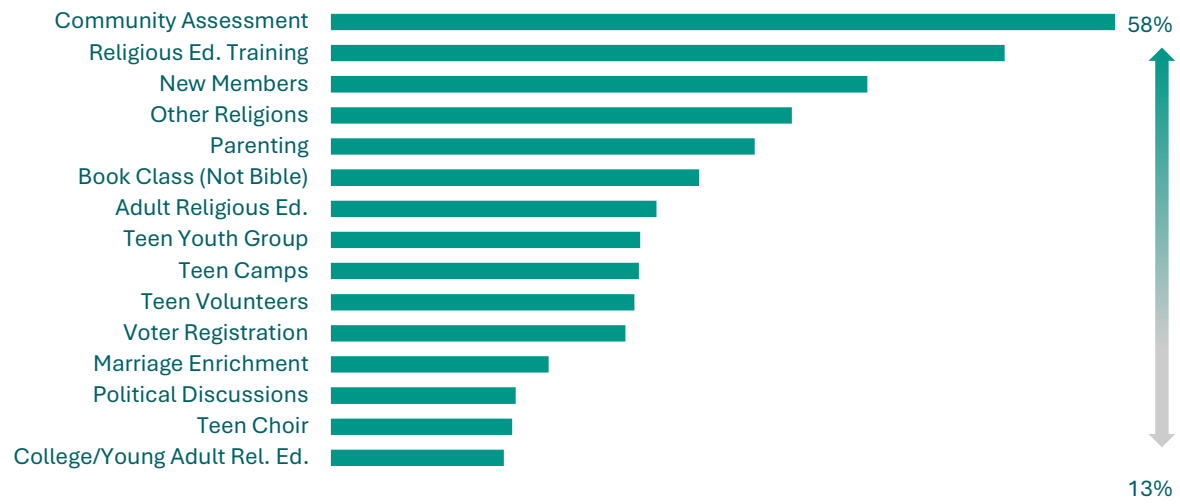


Figure 22

Comparing the probability of an increase, sorted descending, to the distribution sorted the same, you'll notice the two graphs are listed almost perfectly in reverse. The programs offered the least actually have the greatest potential to increase a congregation's size.

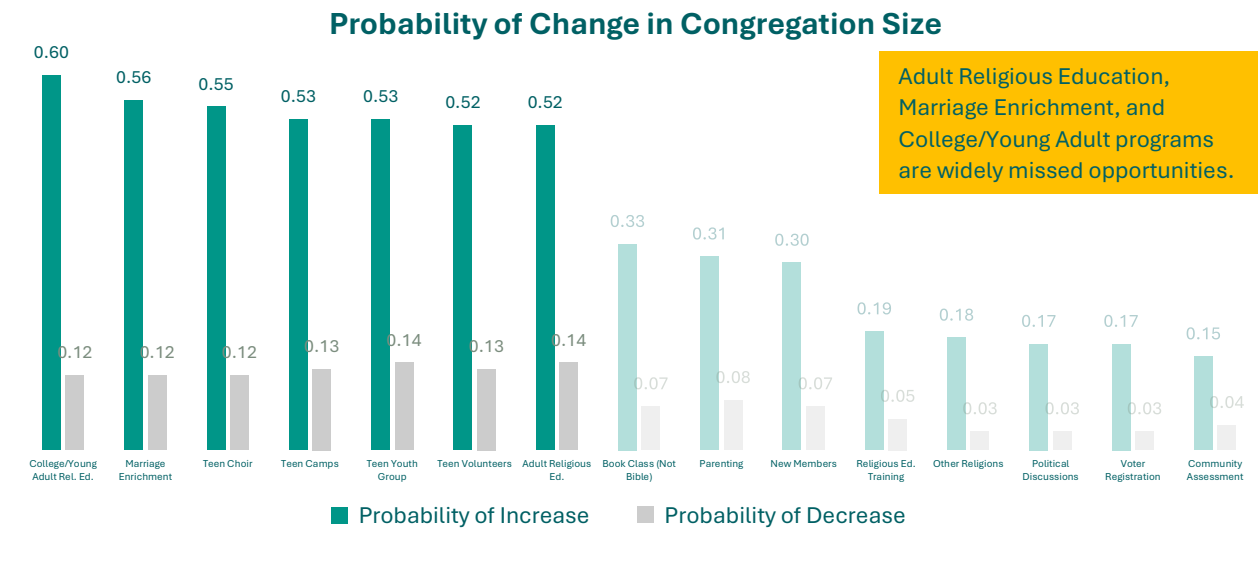
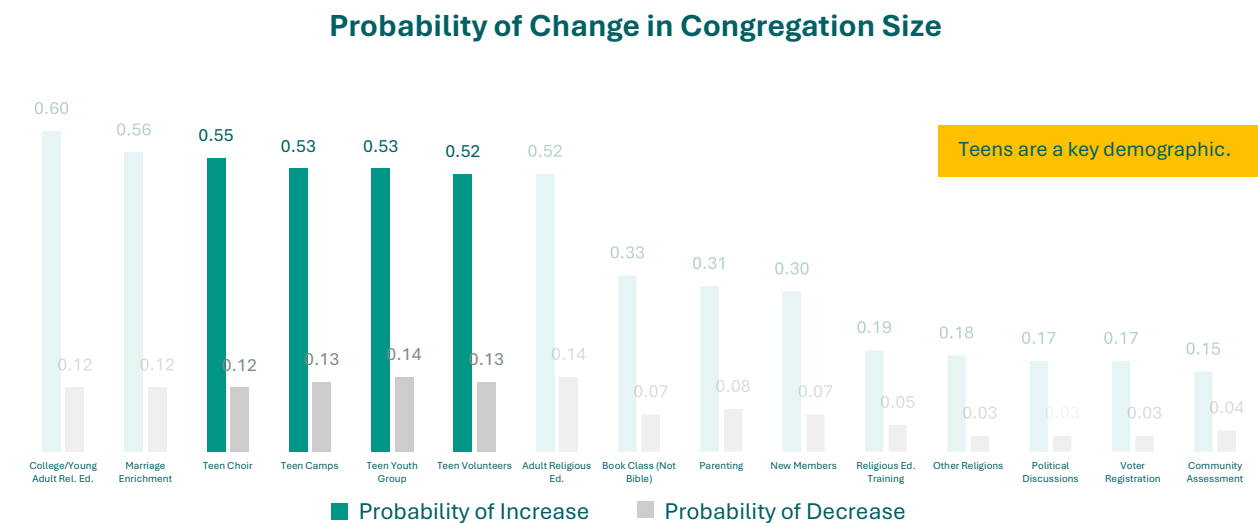


Figure 23

Teens, including pre-teens, are a key demographic for increasing congregational size. They bring a network of parents, siblings, extended family, and friends.

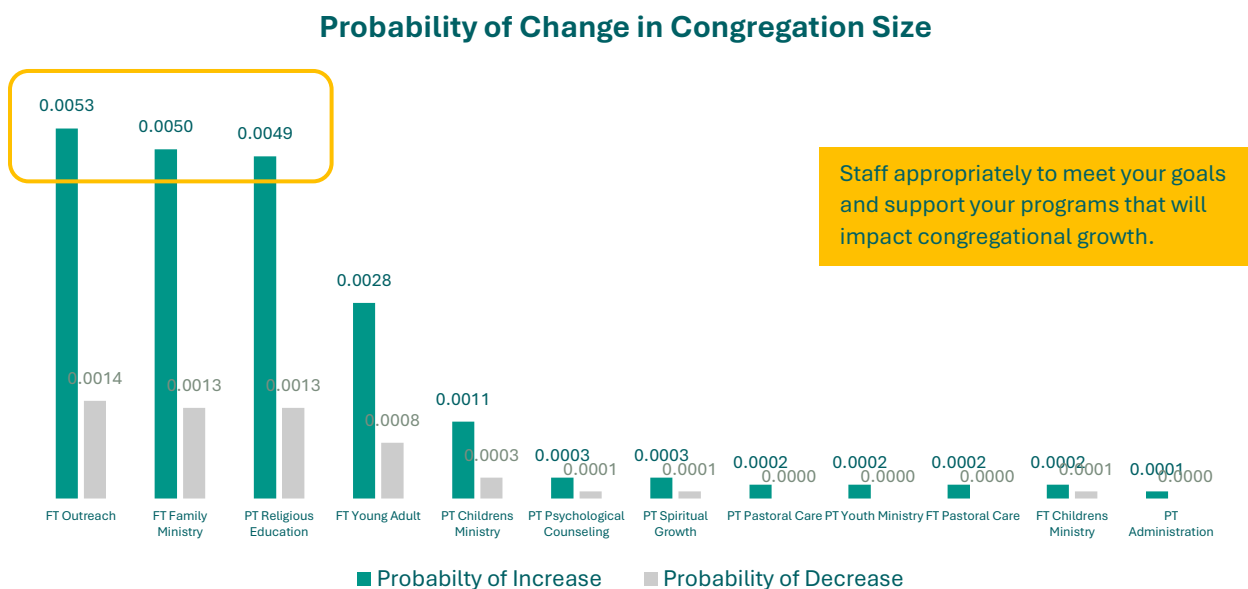


## Part 5: Staffing

Like with any organization, staffing is crucial to ensure the church can effectively fulfill its mission and serve its congregation and community. The staff is also likely the highest expense a church has, so effective staffing should be strategic to meet the church's goals and support the features and programs that will maintain or increase a congregation's size.

Figure 24

Staffing in general (the job positions) have little to no impact on increasing a congregation's size. The key takeaway here is that you should staff appropriately to meet your goals and support your programs, within the constraint of your budget.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

This analysis shows that there are quite a few different ways to increase a congregation's chances for growth without making a lot of changes. Here are some specific recommendations related to each category covered in the report.

### For Facility Use



Supporting home school groups have low impact on facility use and relatively inexpensive. These small groups bring networks of people and potential new congregation members.



Keeping your facilities refreshed and up to date can attract new audiences, but constantly remodeling can be expensive. When you are planning to spend some capital dollars, consider spreading it out over many years in small projects to keep the remodeling going for a while. Remodeling over time can give the appearance of long-term growth and subsequently help to attract new members.

### Music in Worship





Guitars and drums do not necessarily mean a “rock show”. Stick with the type of music your congregation is accustomed to and enjoys, and then find some creative ways to include these two instruments which can potentially increase your audience.


### The Worship Service




Offering a few worship services can allow you to tailor the style to different audiences. Also, the time of day can attract different audiences as well.

 Passing the offering plate can not only impact your bottom line, but it is also a comforting part of a worship service that has come to be expected by most congregation members. And it gives members an opportunity to participate in the service.

 The length of worship service is fairly consistent among congregations of the same denomination. If your service plans for an hour, bump it up 6 minutes to increase your chances of attracting new members. If your service plans for an hour and a half, then dial it back 5 minutes to increase your odds as well.

 Social time is the most important metric in this analysis as at 72%, it has the highest probability to increase a congregation's size. Strive for a cumulative 23 minutes of mingling time. You'll likely have to experiment to figure out what works best for your congregation, and strategies might need to vary service-to-service. Perhaps a 5-minute activity before the service and 18 minutes of refreshments and chit-chat afterwards.

 Since the Sermon is often the focal point of a worship service, and sermon topics vary week-to-week, it really makes sense that the length of the sermon can be an important factor. For this point, the analysis takes a different approach and recommends **avoiding** sermons 18, 24, or 36 minutes in length. This likely has something to do with attention spans, since focus can come and go depending on each attendee's interest in the topic being preached on, but that assumption goes beyond this analysis.

## Programs Offered



Consider adding a Marriage Enrichment Program if you don't have one already. Only 16% of surveyed congregations do, so this is a widely missed opportunity to increase your congregation size while also providing a helpful personal and family service to your membership and community.



Consider adding a Young Adult Religious Education Program if you don't already have one. This might prove challenging since young adult participation is typically low and this demographic is at an age where most people are going through a significant life change in finding a career, building a family, and more.



Teens are a key demographic, and you should offer as many programs focused on teen inclusion as you can. With interested teens often come friends, siblings, parents, and other family members. Find ways to attract this extended network through the teen, such as featuring teens in worship services and various congregation-sponsored events.

## Staffing



Staffing should be structured to support your goals, objectives, and programs, within the constraint of your annual budget. This is the best way to utilize your resources to up-your-odds of increasing your congregation's size.

## References

- Chaves, M. (2021, January 25). National Congregations Study, Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, and 2018-2019). The Association of Religion Data Archives. doi:10.17605/OSF.IO/V5ZKB
- Jones, J. M. (2024, March 25). *Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups*. Retrieved June 28, 2024, from GALLUP: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>