

Against the odds, some small churches thrive

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [February 3, 2016](#) issue

A recent report detailing the spiritual, demographic, and financial challenges faced by small congregations meant little to Robin Bartlett, pastor of First Church in Sterling, Massachusetts.

“This does not look like a dying and sad church; it looks like a vibrant and active church on a Sunday morning,” said Bartlett of her congregation. She usually sees 130 people on Sundays in a sanctuary built for days when more than 300 came to worship.

In the past year, 30 new members have joined, including young adults such as Ann Taft, 28, who delighted in the warm welcome at First Church.

“Everyone was just so excited that I was there,” she said.

More people in the pews, more energy for programs, more funds to maintain the roof—these are all keys to survival for such small congregations, according to the latest Faith Communities Today report, released in January by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Of the congregations surveyed, those with fewer than 100 in weekend attendance rose to 58 percent in 2015, up from 49 percent five years ago.

David Roozen, author of the report *American Congregations 2015: Thriving and Surviving*, wanted to highlight signs of hope in the research by asking about innovation, growth, and positive change, particularly in those very small churches.

He analyzed data from clergy and senior church leaders at 4,436 U.S. congregations. Ninety percent of those were Protestant (22 percent mainline and 68 percent white evangelical or historically black congregations) and 6.5 percent were Catholic. Although congregations serving Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other religions were represented, they were too few for analysis.

Survival is relatively easy to measure.

When Jonathan Iguina arrived three years ago at Iglesia Cantico Nuevo (New Song Church), a Pentecostal congregation in a commercial plaza in Longwood, Florida, it was on the verge of shutting its doors. The last 19 people in the congregation welcomed the new pastor the first Sunday—and never came back.

Iguina dug in. He cold-called former members. He found musicians to play the instruments left behind. He cut “unfruitful” programs such as “a visiting ministry that wasn’t visiting anyone” and boosted outreach to families with children.

As he has concentrated on “nurturing the people I found, setting a focus on drawing closer to God,” Iguina said, attendance has inched up to 90 on Sunday mornings, and the church’s debt has been replaced by a surplus.

Cantico Nuevo is an exception, according to the study’s grim overall findings for congregations under 100 in weekend worship: only about 18 percent say they’re thriving, and 29 percent declare themselves OK.

Meanwhile, two mainline churches in northern Virginia are selling their grounds to nonprofit groups that will build affordable housing. And in the Southern Baptist Convention, a report showed an average of 1,000 churches a year disappear from the denomination’s database.

Roozen found that congregations willing to “change to meet new challenges” fell to 62 percent in 2015, down from 74 percent a decade ago.

“It comes down to being all you can be in a religious setting,” he said. “These congregations feel they are energetically living out their understanding of their call.”

Hope thrives where change is welcome, Roozen said. “Thriving congregations are nearly ten times more likely to have changed themselves than are struggling congregations.”

Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology of religion at Boston University, observes that those aging congregations slipping toward insolvency “can take a long time to die because a handful of really determined folks will keep [them] going.”

A church can continue “if they are willing to revolutionize themselves,” she said. “People haven’t lost the urge to congregate together spiritually. But how they do it is being expressed differently, and the churches that do well are reshaping constantly.”

Jon Brown left a denominational headquarters job to lead a congregation of 45 participants at Old Bergen Church in Jersey City, New Jersey. Five years later, Old Bergen, a multiethnic, multiracial congregation, averages 100 people in the pews on Sundays—and tries new things constantly.

“If we are only concerned with the numbers, that becomes discouraging and a trap,” he said. “It could be that we have just a small faithful group of people continue to be the membership, but there is a ministry to the community that is a powerful witness of God’s love and grace.”

Even as they streamlined the programs inside the congregation, members ventured outside, with simple, low-cost activities such as making empanadas to hand out at Pentecost or taking an occasional prayer walk through the city, asking strangers, “How can we pray for you today?”

Old Bergen Church has two advantages over many small, old, urban churches. It has an endowment to support the facilities, and its downtown location is proving to be a blessing. Six new housing towers, designed for urban professionals commuting to Manhattan, are being built within four blocks of the church.

These advantages “take the anxiety and pressure off me as a pastor,” said Brown. “We aren’t absolutely living on the edge. It’s very possible that our best days are still ahead of us.”

In Roozen’s study, the percentage of congregations that reported more than 2 percent growth in worship attendance was at 45 percent, down from 57 percent in 2005.

Congregations that beat the 2 percent growth rate were located in new suburbs (59 percent); offered “very innovative worship” (53 percent); and served fewer than a third seniors (47 percent).

While attracting young adults and families is a challenge in any location at a time when “church shoppers” move amid congregations, fewer churches were making this age group a priority, Roozen said.

Doug Davis, who grew up attending First Church in Sterling and who at age 50 is the youngest deacon, said church elders looked around and saw few young adults in the pews. Davis said, “We realized we were falling behind in energy and that was no

way to be vibrant.”

Bartlett, the 39-year-old pastor of First Church and a married mother of three, started a “pub theology” night aimed at millennials. It was such a hit that older congregants complained, “We like beer! We want this, too!” So she’s added a second night, open to all ages.

Ann Taft is part of the young adult group and looks forward to discussion nights, dubbed “Eat, Pray, Learn.” Her husband, Andrew, once a “militant atheist,” is now on the operations committee. She serves on a task force investigating how the church can be more open to gays and lesbians.

Taft recalls when they were new in town and shopping for a church. She soon found “there’s no time to search out and explore every theology,” and ultimately she took Bartlett’s advice: “Choose one and go with it, and let that be the way God is revealed to you.” —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on January 20, 2016.*