



Pastoral Perceptions About Growth and Vitality

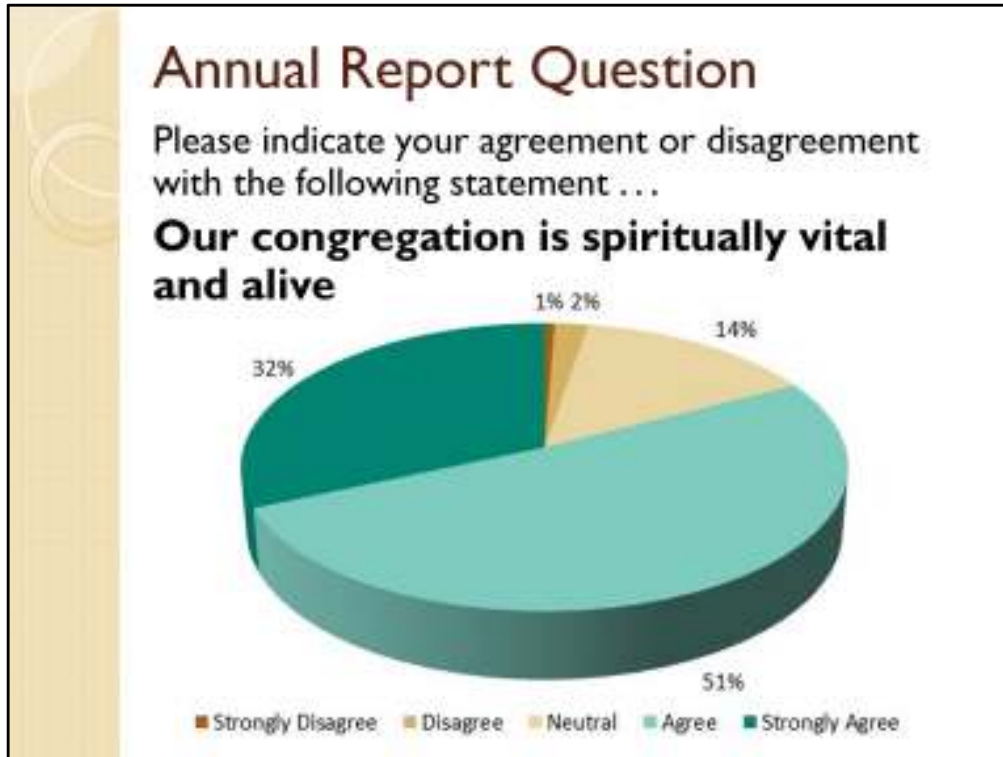
Church of the Nazarene

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Data Source

- Church of the Nazarene in the USA and Canada
- Annual Pastor's Reports (APR) from 5,060 active churches in 2015
- APR completed online
- Usually completed by the pastor



On its annual report forms, the Church of the Nazarene asks this question of each church in the United States and Canada: Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive.” Respondents, usually but not always pastors, can choose Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. In 2015, we received reports from 5,060 active Churches of the Nazarene. (Under our polity, we continue to list inactive churches until they are officially disorganized, but such churches were excluded from this study.)

The desired answer, both by the denomination and probably for pastors or other respondents, is some level of agreement. In fact, half (51%) of the respondents chose “Agree,” and another 32% “Strongly Agree.” Still, about one in six (16%) chose the neutral response or some level of disagreement.

Outside observers would have their own measurements of vitality, and those standards could be far more objective than the perceptions of the pastors on our annual reports. But it is possible to correlate many quantifiable measurements against the perceptions of our pastors. In doing so, we may be able to determine what our pastors consider signs of congregational vitality.

To correlational analyses, the responses were each given a numeric value: Strongly agree, 2; Agree, 1; Neutral, 0; Disagree, -1; and Strongly disagree, -2.

Quantifiable Measures

- Receiving new Nazarenes into membership
- Increase in members or worship or discipleship
- Size of the church
- Involvement in specific ministries
- Presence of children and youth
- Financial obligations
- Pastor's bi-vocational status
- How long the congregation has been in existence
- Community type

Within our tradition, stress is placed on the importance of bringing new people into the life of the church. This can be measured by the number of people actually joining the local church, especially as new Nazarenes rather than by transfer, or by a net increase in membership, worship attendance, or discipleship participation.

Perhaps the current size of the congregation would affect perceptions of vitality. As with virtually all Protestant groups within the United States, the majority of our churches average less than 100 in worship each week. Most of our churches also raise less than \$100,000 annually. Obviously small size cannot mean lack of perceived vitality, but it still might be tied to less strong agreement.

Our churches are asked to identify involvement with any of 38 specific ministries. Perhaps some of these ministries are correlated to the perception of vitality. And the presence of children and youth in the congregation could affect that perception.

Financial measurements are also possible. Beyond the relative income size, an increase in finances during the year might affect the vitality responses. Churches are strongly encouraged to fund cooperative ministries, such as the missions program or regional universities. If these goals are not met, this could be a factor in the pastor's perception of the church. Of our current pastors, 39% identify as bi-vocational. We can check to see if those pastors have significantly different perceptions from those without a second career.

We also have information on the age and geographic location of each church. These factors could conceivably have an effect on the perceived vitality levels of the congregations.

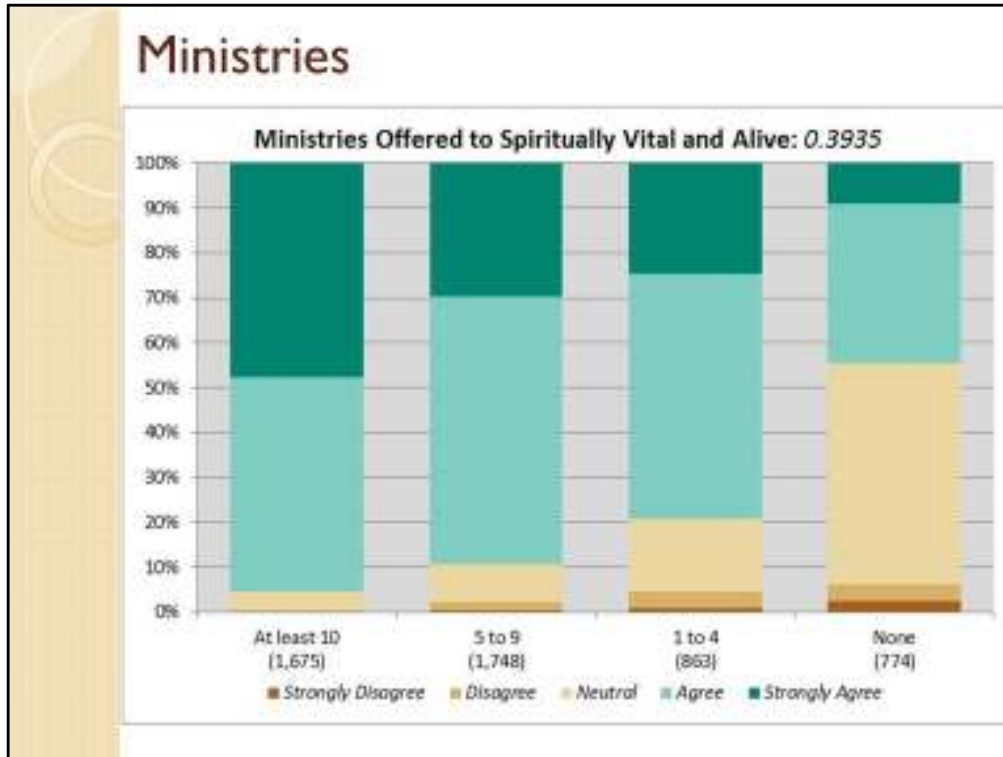
Correlations

Factor	Measurement	Correlation
Ministries	Number of Ministries Offered	0.393506
	Number of Non-compassionate Ministries Offered	0.383423
	Number of Compassionate Ministries Offered	0.309157
	% of Children and Youth	0.225860
	% of Children	0.180949
	% of Youth	0.172182
Size	Income Size	0.339531
	Worship Size	0.298790
Growth	Percentage Change in Worship	0.292725
	Percentage Change in Membership	0.238313
	Percentage Change in Discipleship	0.185263
	Membership Change	-0.072484
	Change in Discipleship Attendance	0.071501
	Change in Average Worship	-0.066735
New Nazarenes	New Nazarenes Received	0.234055
	New Nazarenes as a Percent of Worship	0.142104
Finances	Denominational Support Paid	0.162070
	Change in Income	-0.004902
Age	Congregational Age	0.065907
Community	Community Type	0.041092
Bi-vocational	Bi-vocational Status	-0.000926

We ran correlations against 21 measurements that theoretically could impact vitality within a local congregation. The strongest was the number of ministries offered by the church during the past year. Although the vitality question actually preceded the checklist of ministries, it was on the same page of the on-line form. It is easy to imagine that anyone checking off a dozen or more ministries might have decided to increase the agreement level to the earlier statement. And of course it is easy to believe that any church with a large number of ministries would be considered “vital and alive.”


The measurements are listed in descending correlative strength within each factor. The factors are arranged by correlation of the strongest measurement within the group. Thus, the strongest factor is “Ministries,” and the Number of Ministries Offered” has the strongest correlation. The other measurements within the ministries factor are arranged by descending correlation.

For easier distinction, those correlations with a an absolute value of at least 0.2 are highlighted in yellow; those with less than a 0.1 are highlighted in brown.



As noted, number of ministries offered has the strongest correlation to “vital and alive” agreement among our respondents. The number of ministries offered varied from 0 to 32 (of 38 possible). Every ministry offered has a positive correlation with the agreement level (with 1 offering the ministry and 0 not offering the ministry). Having no ministries (1 is no ministries, 0 is offering at least one) has a correlation of -0.3165.

Sixteen of the listed ministries are usually considered “Compassionate Ministries” in denominational reports. The remaining twenty-two were classified as “Non-compassionate Ministries.” Counts of each of these categories were used to determine correlations with the vitality statement. Non-compassionate ministry counts ranged from 0 to 19 (out of 22 possible) and had a correlation of 0.3834 with “vital and alive.” Compassionate ministry counts ranged from 0 to 16 (out of 16 possible) and had a correlation of 0.3092.



Individual Ministries

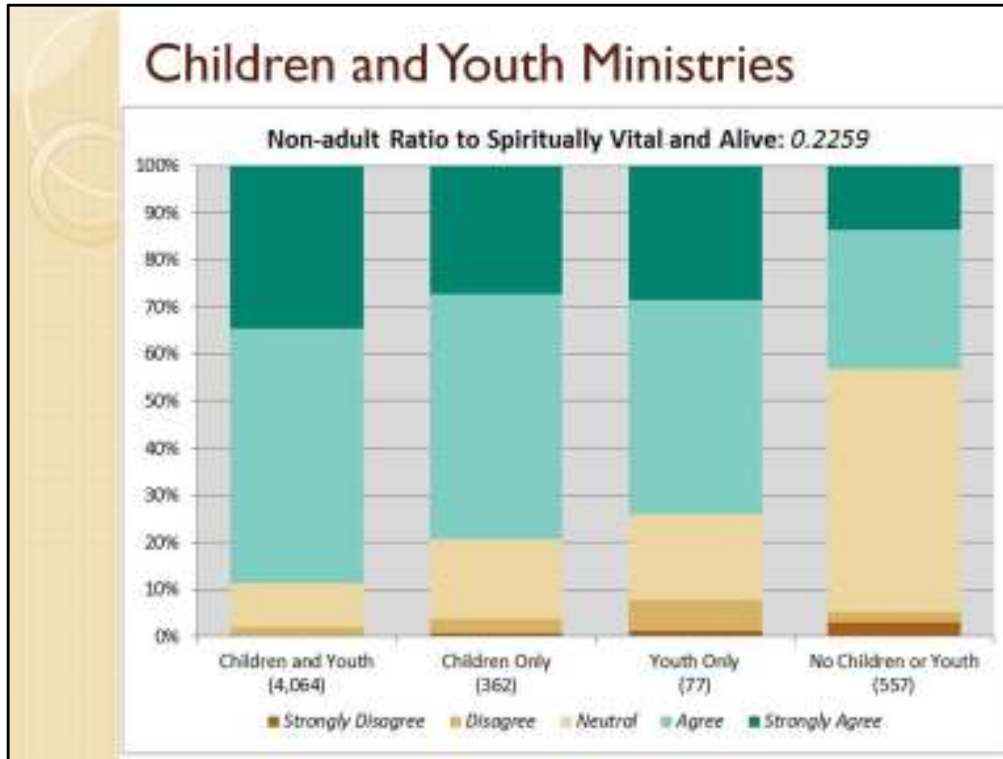
PRAYER	0.302342
WOMENS	0.299276
CHILDRENS CHURCH	0.286391
MENS	0.282390
NEW BELIEVERS	0.269995
COUNSELING	0.245669
YOUNG ADULT	0.243445
EVANGELISM TRAINING	0.228636
FAMILY SUPPORT	0.212235
VBS	0.211596
MARRIAGE	0.209624
FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE	0.205403

Twelve of the listed ministries had a correlation greater than 0.2:

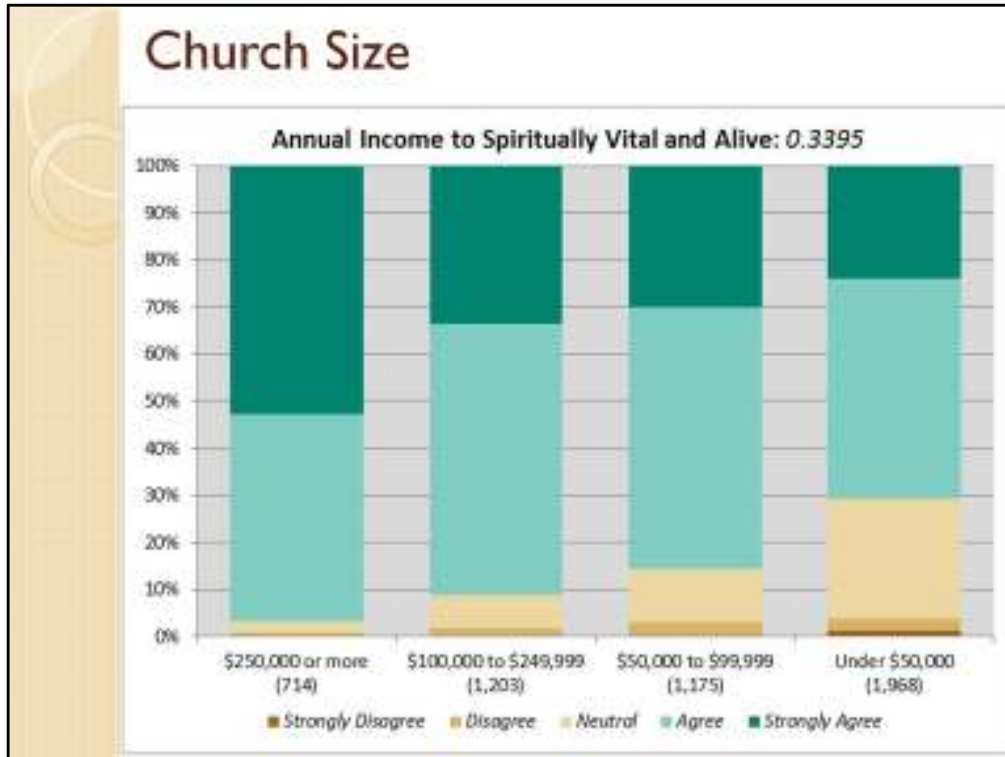
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<i>VBS</i>	0.211596
<i>MARRIAGE</i>	0.209624
<i>FINANCIAL ASST</i>	0.205403

Of these, only counseling and financial assistance are normally included in the list of compassionate ministries.

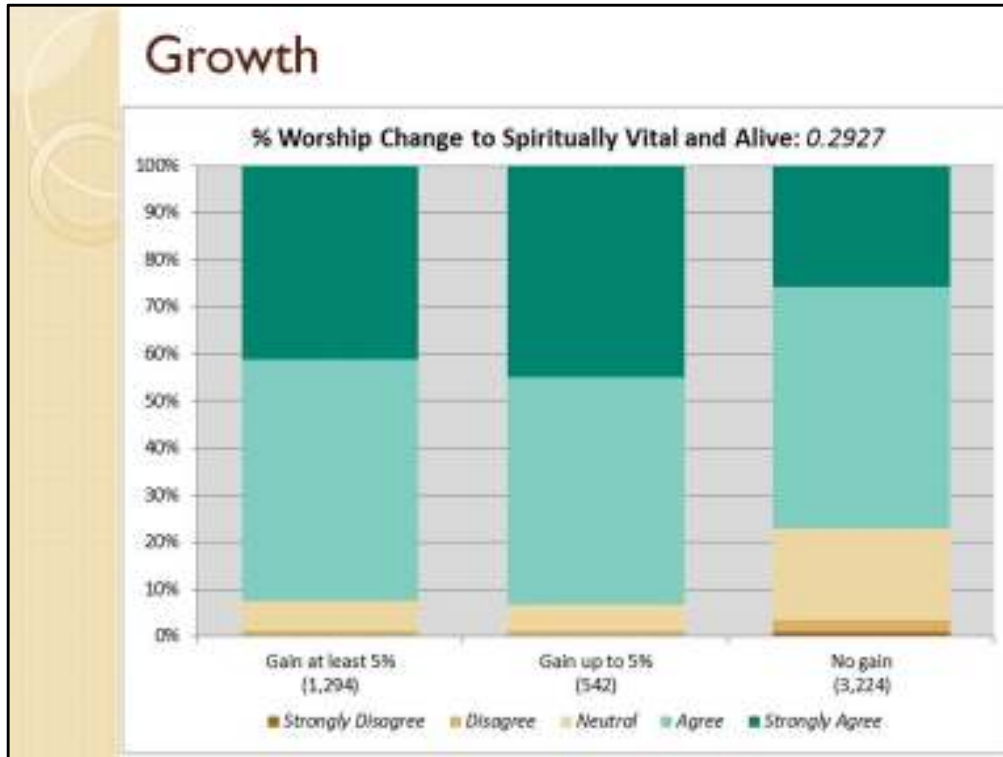
Thirteen of the listed ministries had a correlation of less than 0.1.



The ratio of children and youth attendees in the discipleship programs of the church was positively correlated to the agreement level on the vitality statement at 0.2259. The ratio of children alone was positively correlated at 0.1809. For youth alone, the correlation was 0.1722.

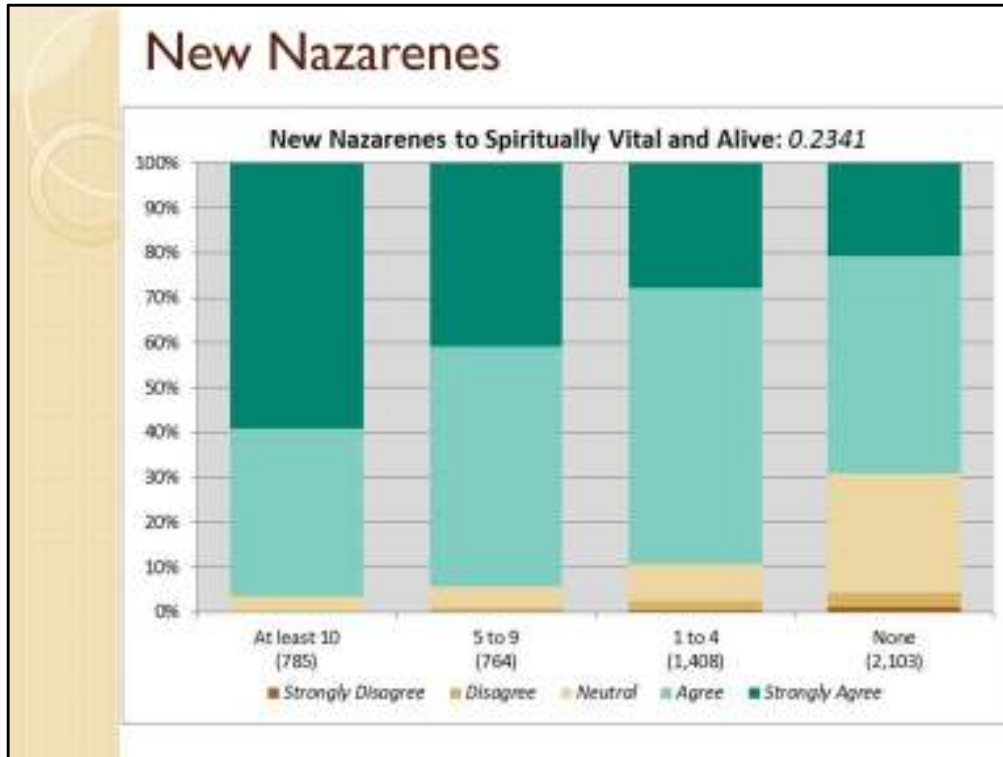


Financial strength of the church, measured by its annual income, was the measurement with the strongest correlation to the vitality response at 0.3395. Worship size, strongly correlated to financial strength, had a correlation of 0.2988.



The growth measure with the strongest correlation to the “vital and alive” response was the percentage growth in worship from the previous year, at 0.2927. Percentage change in membership also had a correlation above 0.2, at 0.2383. Percentage change in discipleship attendance was less correlated at 0.1853, with the actual numerical change correlates all less than 0.1.

While the percentage of increase was the factor correlated with the “vital and alive” response, the above chart shows that any increase results in 90% agreement.



In contrast to the growth measures, the actual number of new Nazarenes had a stronger correlation to vitality (0.2341) than did the ratio of new Nazarenes to the church's size (0.1421).

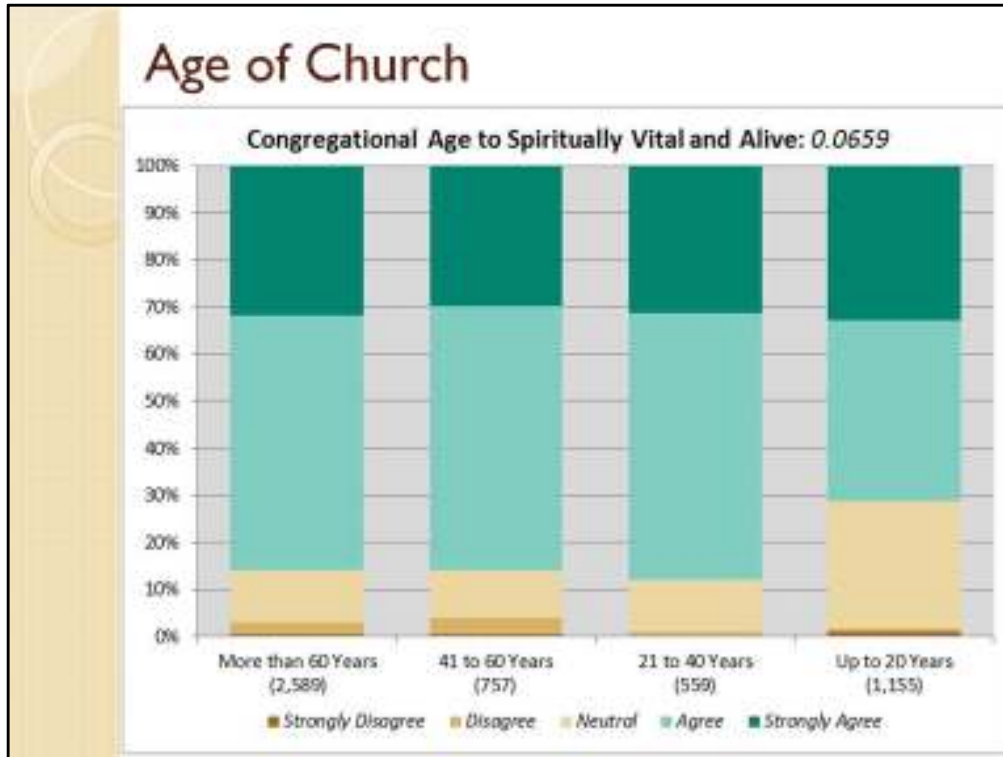
When measuring overall growth, there may be a sense that the growth should be proportionate to size. This would normally indicate that smaller churches have as great a chance of feeling "vital and alive" as larger congregations. The effect of new Nazarenes is tied more to the number of these new members rather than the ratio of the congregation that they represent. However, as shown in the chart, the major difference is in how many "strongly agree," with the combined "agree and strongly agree" about the same—except in those churches where no new Nazarenes were reported. There, the lack of new Nazarenes is clearly correlated to the lack of agreement about vitality.

Finances

- Denominational Support Payments 0.1621
- Change in Income -0.0049

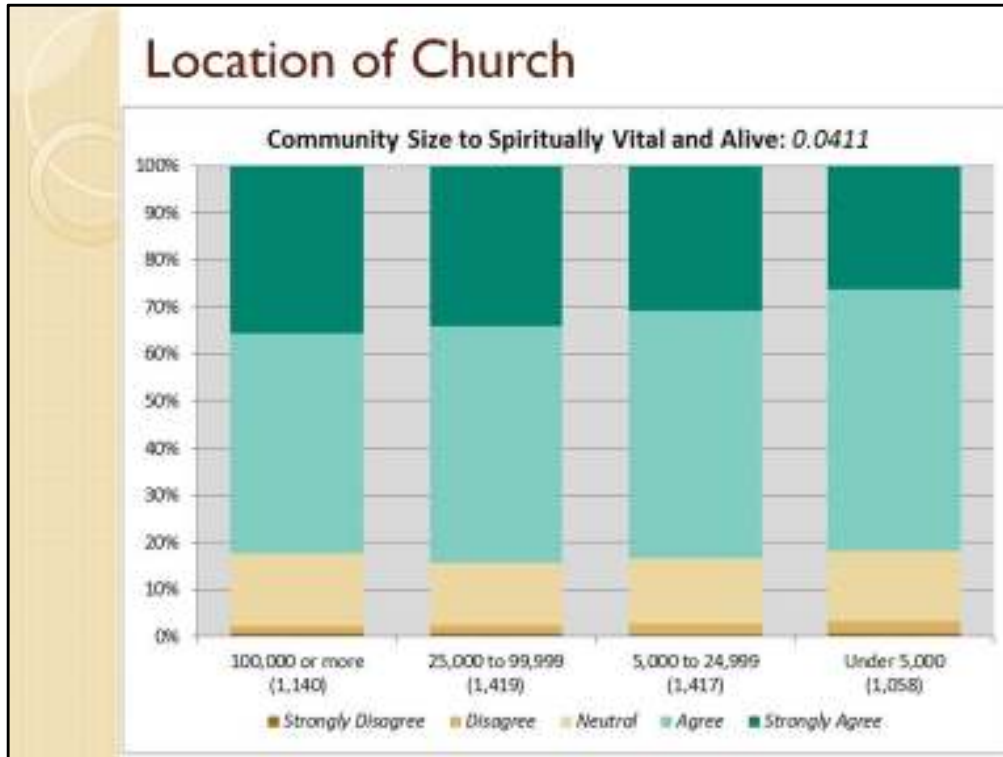
Other than overall financial strength of the church, a strong correlate of size, financial pressures did not correlate much with the pastor's perception of church vitality. At 0.1621, payment to denominational entities (such as the mission program or educational institutions) was more highly correlated than an increase in church income. At -0.0049, this was the second smallest correlation of any of the measurements, and the only one to be negative.

A question about how many bills are in arrears could indicate another type of financial pressure. Our pastors and churches are not asked this question, however.



The age of each church is measured from the assembly year it first reported as a Church of the Nazarene. The large majority of our churches are started as part of the denomination, with very few established congregations uniting with us. Age data for such churches would be skewed downward, but this is not a major factor for our denomination in these two countries. The relationship between congregational age and the pastor's perception of vitality is very weak at 0.0659.

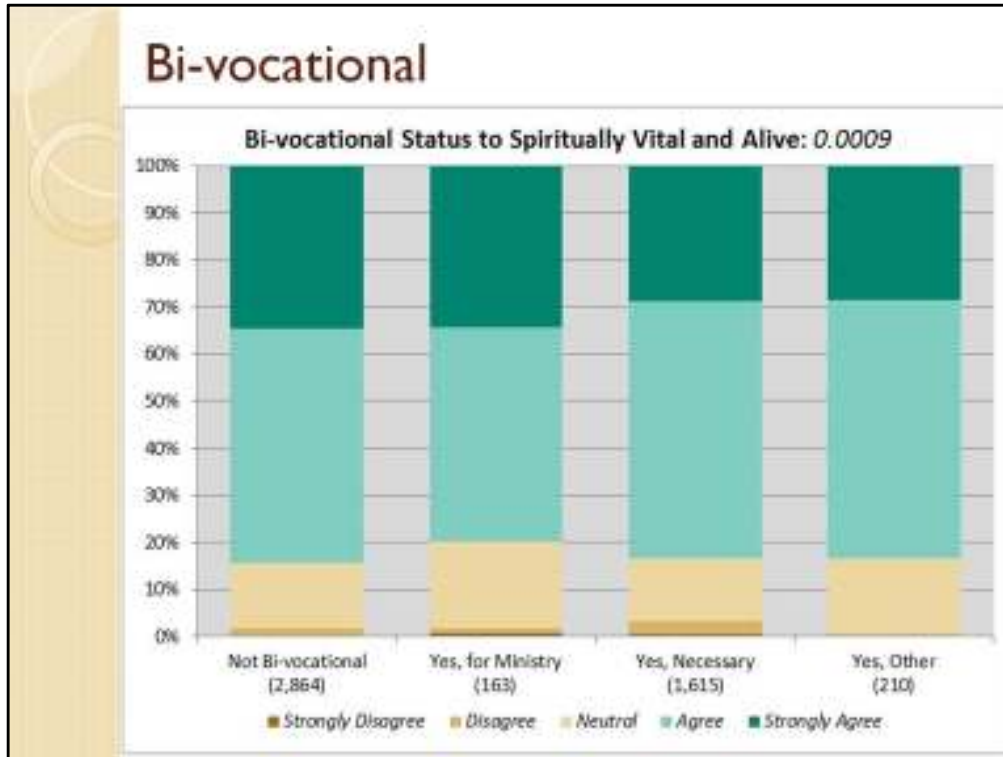
However, the chart above does indicate that it is less likely for the very newest churches, those under 20 years of age, to agree with the spiritually vital and alive statement; but the differences in response rates for older churches do not change positively with further age.



Because nearly all of our churches are geo-coded, we have been able to determine the population around each congregation with one-, three-, and five-mile radii. Based on these figures, we have classified each of 5,034 churches (the balance had no usable address and were excluded from the study) into eleven community types, coded as shown:

Code	Minimum population within each radius:		
	1 mile	3 miles	5 miles
11	15,000	100,000	250,000
10	10,000	25,000	100,000
9	0	10,000	100,000
8	5,000	25,000	50,000
7	0	10,000	50,000
6	5,000	10,000	25,000
5	0	2,000	25,000
4	2,500	2,000	5,000
3	0	5,000	5,000
2	0	0	5,000
1	0	0	0

This yielded a mere 0.0411 correlation with vitality. There is concern about forcing our coding into a numeric system; however, the same methodology showed expected moderate negative correlation (0.276552) between age of church and community type and an expected moderate positive correlation between worship size and community type (0.170720).



Another aspect of finances might be the bi-vocational status of the pastor. About two-fifths (38.8%) of our pastors say that they are bi-vocational for various reasons. We coded the four possible responses to the question, “Does the pastor of this church consider himself/herself to be bi-vocational?” in this way:

- 1 No
- 4 Yes, it is necessary to supplement their family income
- 2 Yes, the extra income is not necessary, but their second career makes their ministry more effective
- 3 Yes, other

We excluded from this correlation analysis those churches that said this did not apply, since they were currently without a pastor, leaving 4,852 churches. (It is possible that the respondent in a church without a pastor chose one of the other options based on her or his understanding of the normal pastoral situation; we did not double-check the responses against known pastoral assignments.)

This was in fact the weakest correlation of any that was studied, at 0.0009. Part of this may be the essential dichotomy, since more than five of six pastors chose either “No” (56.0%) or “Yes, it is necessary” (31.6%). Even so, the dichotomy of the denominational support measurement yielded a much larger correlation.

Summary

Things that seem important for vitality:

- The number of ministries
- The presence of children and youth
- Church size
- An increase in worship
- Taking new Nazarenes into membership

Things that don't seem important:

- The age of the congregation
- The location of the congregation
- Being a bi-vocational pastor