The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

SURVEY SAYS!

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This resource is made possible by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Visit www.studyingcongregations.org for further research and resources.

STUDYINGCONGREGATIONS
Explore. Engage. Understand.

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About *Studying Congregations*

StudyingCongregations.org is the premier resource for understanding religious congregations in the United States. A collaborative project of leading scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, history, and practical theology, the strategies, resources and tools you will discover at StudyingCongregations.org have been designed specifically for theological educators, future religious leaders, and anyone else who wants to go beyond the received wisdom to discover what is happening in religious gatherings today.

This resource is offered to you as a gift of the Congregational Studies Team, an informal research group that has led the way in researching US congregations. Their work is generously funded by The Lilly Endowment.

Using a questionnaire is a good way to better understand your congregation or specific subgroups of your religious community. By asking general demographic information, such as age, race, gender, and length of time attending, you can get a big-picture view. You can also use a survey to better understand things like preferences for worship times or habits of participation. Surveys are good for summarizing things that can easily be reported as a yes or no, as one of a few clear options, or as a simple fill-in-the-blank. Where your questions are more subjective or difficult to answer concisely, save them for an interview or focus group. "How old are you?" is a good candidate for a survey question. "How do you feel about the younger generation?" is not so good.

CREATE IT.

Who to ask. When deciding to do a survey, one of the first questions you should ask is "who should receive the questionnaire?" If you're interested in youth and young adult perceptions of the worship service, you may not need to distribute a survey to the whole community. Match the research question with the people for whom it is most appropriate. If you're interested in understanding all of the members' views, it might be important to send the surveys out to everyone on the mailing (or e-mail) list. If you are most interested in the people who regularly participate, then distribution at routine events may work well.

Using an online interface like Google Forms or SurveyMonkey can also be an efficient way to make a visually appealing and systematic emailed survey. These mediums will often also tabulate results, saving time in the long run.

However you distribute your survey, be sure that it includes questions that will allow you to see whether all the relevant subgroups have responded or whether one type of person is over-represented. If you know that age or gender or ethnicity are important ways that people sub-divide, be sure those questions are asked. Then if you need to make special efforts to reach particular subgroups that haven't responded, you can.

Developing questions. Good survey questions are an art form, and there are a number of guides for learning the art. Some are produced by academic groups, and some by online survey companies. Take the time to look at these guides, and then go back to review once you've written some draft questions.

One of the best strategies is to use questions from pre-existing and pre-tested surveys. ***Here's some examples*** (Needs a link) that you may consider using in your own study. Also check out Hartford Institute's Congregational Survey Question Bank for examples of questions from a variety of survey sources. But just because you find a cool question, that doesn't mean it belongs on your survey – ask only the questions that will specifically help you understand the aspects of your organization you are studying.

DISTRIBUTE IT.

1. The questionnaire should be eye-appealing and look clean and uncluttered, with plenty of white space.

2. Use a clear readable font. Use font size, italics, and bold sparingly to guide the eye through the questionnaire.

3. Briefly introduce the survey form with a short statement about who is sponsoring the survey, why it is being done, whether the information will be confidential or not, what will be done with the final results, and any special instructions about how to fill out the form. Include this statement even if a cover letter will be attached to the form.

4. Use topic headings and perhaps a short descriptive sentence to introduce a new section of the survey.

5. Use the same format to define the marking space for all your questions. Generally it is best to ask the respondent to make an X, rather than a check mark, in the space defined by a box or bracket [ ] or by parentheses ( ). For certain questions a blank line can be used to define where they are to answer. Never just allow an open space to define where persons are to respond, unless you are asking an extended open ended question. Remind people to mark only one answer.

* These guidelines on administering the survey were adapted from the *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Abingdon Press, 1986)

ANALYZE IT.

You will have a pile of surveys (either paper or electronic), so what can you do with them? If you have used an on-line service, answers will be tabulated for you, but be sure to obtain a full download of the data so you can do your own more detailed analysis. If you have gathered paper surveys, the first step will be getting someone to enter the responses in a spreadsheet or data analysis program.

The analysis you do will depend on the questions you are asking and the statistical expertise you are able to call on. In addition to simple "frequencies" (how many people gave each kind of answer), you will very likely want to know how the answers differed across different subgroups. You may want a table or bar graph comparing men's and women's answers about highest program priorities, for instance. And if you have a savvy statistics friend to call on, she may even want to tease out whether those differences between men and women are the strongest predictors or just artifacts of some other social factor. Survey data can be the basis for quite sophisticated analysis, but it can also just give you some broad contours of the ideas, habits, and differences in the group.

Reporting what you found should include both prose and numbers. Write summaries of what you think the results tell you, but illustrate that with graphics for a few key findings.