

# **2009 US Congregational Life Survey: Discussion of Results Sunshine Cathedral Metropolitan Community Church Fort Lauderdale, Florida**

**By Rev. Elder Don Eastman; September 23, 2009**

## **Introduction**

The US Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) offers participating congregations three reports based upon results of the completed survey. The *Questions & Answers Report* shows every survey question and how congregants responded. The *Connections Report* is an 8-page document showing how congregant's responses compared with the national average. The *Strengths Report* is a 10-page document showing a congregation's scores on 10 strengths identified/designed by USCLS.

I would suggest caution to a local congregation when comparing its results with the overall national averages for congregations. The national average in the USCLS includes all churches and synagogues of all denominations and all sizes. It is well known that churches can differ profoundly on the basis of size, ideology/theology, philosophy of ministry, denominational system and other variables that influence the culture of a local congregation. I find the *Strengths Report* to be particularly problematic in this regard. In my view, these variables substantially reduce the validity of comparing a given congregation with the national average to determine a local church's strengths.

I have two other concerns with the *Strengths Report*. First, in some cases it uses activities over results to gauge strength and some of the categories/questions are not, in my view, indicative of strength in the defined area. Also, it defines strength in a church as being above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in comparison with the national average. In addition to the comparison problem cited above, the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile seems to me to be an arbitrary number; a church above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile would be stronger than most other churches.

Consequently the focus in this discussion will be only on the results of the *Questions & Answers Report*. The survey was conducted in the worship services at the Sunshine Cathedral on Sunday, March 1, 2009.

Within the discussion I will from time to time make reference to results from other types of surveys and studies that have been done in congregations, both within Metropolitan Community Churches and by other organizations or authors. Some of these are surveys that I and others have used in our church development work with MCC congregations over the past 15 years.

**Discussion of Results** (note: reference the *Questions & Answers Report* for content and data on each question)

1. This question deals with frequency of worship attendance. Our MCC *Congregational Snapshot Survey* asks a similar question. The results here are generally similar to other large MCC

congregations. The results are also very close to the online *2006 Sunshine Cathedral Annual Congregational Survey*.

2. A key result that interests me is the percentage of congregants who have been attending worship here less than one year, which in this case is 16%. This number can reveal the “flow-through” rate; if average worship attendance has been relatively stable over the past two or more years, this number of new attendees has replaced others who have left or decreased frequency of attendance.

3. This percentage, approximately half who are members of the congregation, is predictable. It is consistently similar in *Congregational Snapshot Surveys* of other large MCC congregations. It should be noted that, from the perspectives of respondents, a church may both formal and informal members. For instance in many MCC congregations there are individuals who attend faithfully and participate fully in the life of the church, but are not formally members. Yet, they consider this congregation their church home and will list themselves as members when responding to such a survey.

4, 5, and 6: The responses to these questions indicate a very low level of congregational participation in ministries, groups, and activities outside of the worship services. This is a definite area of potential growth for the Sunshine Cathedral.

7, 8, 9 and 12: are related to personal growth and spiritual practices. Questions 7 and 12 deal with the helpfulness of church participation to meeting one’s spiritual needs. The strong positive results of this survey correlate very closely with the results of the online *2006 Sunshine Cathedral Annual Congregational Survey*, which asked the question, “To what extent has the Sunshine Cathedral been helpful to you in finding spiritual strength and personal growth?”

What is missing in the USCLS is a specific question on the role of music in the church as a spiritual practice and source of growth. In our 2006 online survey, the ministry of music was one of the greatest sources of support for the spiritual growth of congregants.

10. The results to this question reflect the diversity found typically in MCC congregations with most congregants holding a progressive rather than fundamentalist theological perspective. This is consistent with results of the online *Survey on Beliefs and Values* that I have used with several MCC congregations. This applies also to questions 11, 51, 58, 59 and 60

13. Again, the results to this question reveal a progressive rather than fundamentalist congregation. This reflects what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christians”

15 and 17: Although the percentages of congregants in the Sunshine Cathedral participating in social service or justice advocacy may seem low, by comparison with national averages they are high. More insight at the national level for churches in this area can be found in the work of sociologist Mark Chaves in his *1998 National Congregations Study*. He says in his book, *Congregations in America*, “The historical reality is that at no time in the twentieth century were there more than a tiny minority of congregations involved in social services.”

16. These results are very important. The fact that 92% of congregants are willing to invite someone else to visit worship services and nearly two-thirds of congregants have done so in the past year is one of the most powerful indicators of growth potential in a church.

18, 43, 44, 45 and 46: The results of these questions reflect essentially an all-adult congregation. Could this be a strategic area for possible outreach and growth?

19: Connections within this church are influential for most congregants as part of their personal social networks. This may provide some explanation and insight on the difficulty of creating small groups in this congregation. Many people have already found their own.

20, 52, 53, 54 and 55: Results of these questions indicate there is a clear sense of vision and new direction about which congregants are excited. There low levels of conflict and a willingness to accept the change of trying something new.

21. The results of responses to this question are highly indicative of the typical levels of participation by individual congregants on decisions about direction, policy and governance in larger churches. A very small percentage of congregants will participate in such activities. This same pattern is true of most large churches in the USA.

22. Most congregants have a strong sense of belonging and/or are happy with their level of sense of belonging.

23. The results on this question are difficult to interpret. Although traditional hymns were the most popular, no distinctions were made among traditions. The results raise the question, “which traditions?” Moreover, no option was given for “blended styles” of music, which is the approach in Sunshine Cathedral, the norm for many MCC congregations and for some other congregations nationally.

24, 56 and 57: These questions deal with the leadership of the Senior Pastor. 91% of congregants agree that there is a “good match between our congregation and the pastor.” 77% feel that the pastor “takes into account the ideas of those who worship here.” And, 61% feel that the pastor has a leadership style “that inspires people to take action.”

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey defined four styles:

- Leadership that tends to take charge
- Leadership that inspires people to take action
- Leadership that acts on goals people have been involved in setting
- Leadership where the people start most things

Leadership style data in first USCLS was studied further by Jackson Carroll of the Duke Divinity School’s project on excellence in pastoral leadership. A significant finding of this study is that there are strong positive correlations between congregational performance measures and the second style of leadership in which laity believe that the pastor encourages them and inspires them to take action. For more information see Carroll’s book, *God’s Potters*.

25: What congregants value the most about Sunshine Cathedral is its social diversity (51%). That is followed by sermons and communion (45% each, while 33% value community care and social justice).

32% value the traditional style of worship or music and 19% value the contemporary style of worship or music. Because our style of worship and music is blended, including both traditional and contemporary elements, I believe if the question had simply been the “style of worship and music” the response would be among the highest chosen by congregants.

26 and 27: While the results of this question generally reflect what is seen in MCC congregations – congregants come from many different backgrounds, mostly Christian, and most congregants were not participating in another congregation when they started to attend MCC – the way in which the questions were framed leads to results slightly different from our *Congregational Snapshot Survey*. We ask a respondent for “my religious background before attending MCC.” Then we ask the question, “Were you actively attending the activities/worship of another church or religious organization when you started to attend MCC? Our range of responses to that question is almost always between 65% and 75%.

The composition of previous religious backgrounds sometimes differs between MCC congregations depending on the internal style of the specific congregation and the religious demographics of the larger community in which a church is located. But in the aggregate I estimate that the overall mix of previous backgrounds in the MCC movement mirrors the religious demographics of Christianity nationally.

28: The age demographics of the Sunshine Cathedral show a congregation disproportionately older than the larger population of Broward County. Here are the comparisons:

Age	SC 2009	Broward 2007
15-24	1.0%	12.1%
25-44	17.0%	27.9%
45-64	54.0%	26.1%
65 and above	29.0%	14.2%

29: Gender ratio is also highly disproportionate: 12% Female, 88% Male

30. There is a disproportionately high percentage of retirees compared with the larger population based upon age; less than 20% of the Broward population is over the age of 60. Even with early retirees I would think that 35% of the congregation as retirees is a larger percentage than the general population.

The unemployment rate in the Fort Lauderdale/Miami area for March 2009 at the time of this survey was 8.6%, compared to 5% within the congregation.

31. The average educational level in the congregation is much higher than the general population of Broward County. 55% of the congregants have a Bachelors degree or higher; in the general

population for the 2000 census the percentage was 24.5%. This is fairly typical among other MCC congregations participating in the *Congregational Snapshot Survey*.

32. The results of this question are difficult to interpret because its categories were not framed with consideration/understanding of same-sex relationships. Some choices are confusing; a person could have “never married” yet be “living in a committed relationship.”

34. The racial/ethnic demographics of the Sunshine Cathedral are also highly disproportionate in comparison with the larger population of Broward County. 87% of congregants are White or Caucasian compared with 47.3% of non-Hispanic Whites in Broward County’s estimated 2008 population. 4% of the congregants are Black or African American compared to 25.5% in Broward County. 7 % of congregants are Hispanic/Latino compared with 22.7% in Broward County.

Note: Hispanic is considered an ethnicity – language and culture – distinct from race by the US Census. Because of the categories in this question we do not know how many White/Caucasian respondents in this survey may also be Hispanic.

35. 10% of congregants were born outside of the USA, compared with 25.3% in Broward County in the 2000 census.

39. 38% of congregants live alone; that compares with 30.1% for Broward County in the *2006 American Community Survey*.

40 and 47: Most congregants live relatively close to the church, 62% in 10 zip codes in north/east/central Broward County. The average trip time to travel to church is less than 20 minutes for 72% and only 4% of congregants traveled more than 30 minutes to attend worship. The average trip time for people driving to work in Broward County is 27 minutes according to the *2006 American Community Survey*.

41. 12% of congregants indicated that they give 10% or more of their net income to this church. This is consistent with the online *2006 Annual Congregational Survey* where 15.6% indicated they were giving at least 10% or would like to pledge to grow toward doing so. In a 2007 study by the Barna Research Group 5% of respondents indicated that they give at least 10% of their income to a church. The other giving patterns in this survey of the Sunshine Cathedral are also consistent with the actual recorded donations to the church for 2006 and 2008 as seen in the *Giving Level Profile*.

42. The 2009 median household income for congregants of the Sunshine Cathedral is \$53,407 which compares to a 2007 median household income in Broward County of \$52,204.

48 and 49: The results to question 48 are dependent on a respondent’s definition of “activities”. If this includes attendance at worship, then the results correlate with responses earlier questions on participation which indicated low levels in activities beyond worship. Similarly with question 49, congregants may feel they have been encouraged to use their gifts and skills but most have not done so based upon responses to earlier questions.