A Theological Imperative: 
Explaining Congregational Community Engagement

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Date: December 7, 2018
Word Count: 7,499

Abstract: Places of worship are often vital community institutions. Yet, there is much we don’t know about why certain congregations are more engaged in the community than others. Our research here uses quantitative clergy survey data and qualitative clergy interview data ($n=65$) to provide an in-depth, multi-method look at community engagement. One of the most influential factors to emerge from the analysis is theology. When spiritual and material concerns are linked, congregations are significantly more likely to be engaged in the community. These results challenge distinctions in the literature and point to the potential theological importance of community engagement.

Keywords: religion, congregations, community-engagement, clergy, theology

Funding Statement: The Little Rock Congregations Study is conducted with the support of an Alma Ostrom and Leah Hopkins Awan Civic Education research grant, administered by the American Political Science Association’s Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs, as well as faculty research grants from the College of Social Science and Communication and the Presidential Studies Program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Disclosure Statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data Availability Statement: Given the small number of congregations in the study ($n=65$), the qualitative interview and quantitative survey data are protected by confidentiality and cannot be shared.

Acknowledgements: The authors wish to thank Warigia Bowman, Zachary Hale, Zartashia Javid, Marsha Scullark, Shalondra Martin, and Kirk Leach, as well as the many graduate and undergraduate students at the Clinton School of Public Service and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, for invaluable work and advice on this project. The authors especially wish to thank the congregations of Little Rock, whose generosity of time and insights made this research possible.
Religious organizations are often at the heart of communities and are engaged in solving community problems. More than half of congregations provide some health or human services (Clerkin and Gronbjerg, 2007) and many play longstanding roles in community systems (Chaves and Wineburg, 2010). They provide communities with food pantries, drug rehabilitation services, educational support, prison ministries, and so on (e.g., M. Greenberg, Greenberg, & Mazza, 2010; Kerley, Bartkowski, Matthews, & Emond, 2010; Ley, 2008; Unruh and Sider, 2005). They partner with social workers (Staral 2000) and nonprofits to provide services (Lewis, 2003). These services have measurably positive impacts on their communities. For instance, church-based health promotion interventions can lead to better health outcomes (Campbell et al., 2007) and faith-based community substance abuse prevention programs can lead to lower drug use among adolescents (Marcus et al., 2004).

Yet, even with half of all congregations engaged in providing services to the broader community, that still leaves about half of all congregations not engaging. Why are some congregations more engaged in the community than others? With their primary goal the spiritual nourishment of their members, it is not a given that places of worship will engage in the community. Yet many do. Here, we focus on a particular type of congregational activity—community engagement.¹ This type of activity goes beyond the congregation itself, provides some service, and is not overtly partisan. What drives a congregation to engage in such behavior?

We employ a multimethod approach to understand those factors that encourage congregational community engagement. We collect quantitative data in the form of clergy surveys and qualitative data in the form of clergy interviews ($n=65$) through the [study name redacted]. Additionally, we introduce an innovative qualitative community engagement score for each of the 65

¹ Recent research by Glazier (2018) demonstrates the value of differentiating among types of clergy political engagement. The same principle applies here for congregational engagement.
congregations, based on clergy interview responses, site visits, and publicly-available information. This score distills a wealth of qualitative information about the nature and extent of congregation community outreach into a single number, used as the most important outcome variable in the statistical analyses that follow.

By taking an in-depth, multi-method look at these congregations, we are able to better understand what drives their community engagement. In particular, we find that engaged churches see their engagement as spiritually-motivated. They see no difference between fulfilling the material and the spiritual needs of those they serve and, thus, they are engaged for theological purposes. This finding makes intuitive sense, but adds a more nuanced option to a literature that tends to view religious motivations as either worldly or otherworldly, either spiritually- or materially-focused. Our results indicate that those who would work with or study congregations should pay close attention to how congregations connect religious beliefs and community engagement.

**Congregational Community Engagement**

What leads congregations to be involved in the community? Such involvement can be risky. Clergy may alienate their congregants, lose legitimacy, or even see a drop in offerings if they are seen as inappropriately political (Calfano, 2010; Calfano, Oldmixon, & Gray, 2014; L. R. Olson, 2009; Williams, 2016). What might motivate congregations to deviate from a focus solely on spiritual well-being to provide social services to those outside their membership? We organize the influences on congregational community engagement into three main categories: resources, politics, and theology.

**Resources**

Perhaps the most obvious facilitator of, or constraint on, congregational community engagement is resources. Engaging in social service provision and other forms of community participation takes both human and material resources (Cavendish, 2000). Places of worship with only a couple dozen
members, or with a lay ministry, may find themselves unable to provide social services to the broader community.

Church attendance plays a key role in determining a congregation’s level of involvement in the greater community (L. M. Olson, Reis, Murphy, & Gehm, 1988). Additionally, churches with higher weekly attendance numbers also demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement (Todd and Houston, 2013). Larger churches tend to not only provide more social services, but also to provide more specialized social services (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).

Although membership numbers are certainly a valuable resource, they do not exist in a vacuum. Due in part to the “fiscal advantages of size” (Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000, p. 79), congregations with more people typically have more resources, including larger budgets and a larger staff (Chaves, 2004). Although more people usually means more money, research by Ammerman (2005) indicates that “it is the people more than the money that makes the difference” (p. 148).

More, and more committed, members are also more likely to give (Scheitle and Finke, 2008). Beyerlein and Hipp (2006) find that involvement in the congregation beyond attendance—through leadership, singing in the choir, serving on committees, etc.—can lead to greater involvement in organizations that provide social services in the community. As congregation size grows, church budgets grow larger than the needs of their congregants, with the surplus available to fund community programs (Stonebraker, 1993). Both size and resources also may influence the mission orientation of the congregation. A smaller congregant base providing the resources congregations need to function may lead the congregations to focus more on evangelism than social service provision (Unruh and Sider, 2005).

Additionally, effective community engagement requires organizational capacity, including “well-developed internal social institutions and organizations that provide […] effective
communication networks, experienced leadership, and social resources” (Brown, 2006, p. 1582). Larger congregations are more likely to have these resources, making participation in community activities easier. Larger attendance numbers not only provide congregations with more volunteers to help with social service provision, but also enable them to attract more qualified and experienced leaders (Eng and Hatch, 1991). Brown (2006) emphasizes clergy leadership and civic ties as important resources that can lead to greater political activism. Clergy are often seen as trustworthy and reliable sources of guidance (Djupe and Calfano, 2009), and those who have been with their congregations longer may have both the experience necessary to lead major community-engagement efforts and also the trust of their congregation. Leadership can be a critical factor in community engagement (Todd and Houston, 2013).

In terms of resources, we expect that:

H1a: larger congregations will be more engaged in the community.  
H1b: wealthier congregations will be more engaged in the community.  
H1c: clergy who have been with their congregations longer will lead congregations that are more engaged in the community.

Politics

Most of what we know about congregational community engagement focuses on how the political leanings of a congregation (liberal vs. conservative) influence the extent and the type of their community engagement. Generally speaking, liberal-leaning congregations are more engaged in the community.²

² The definition of community engagement used here, which excludes political engagement, may inherently disadvantage some conservative congregations, which tend to be more involved in political activism, as opposed to social activism (Guth 2008, p.19) and social movements (Tygart, 1985). But on the other hand, recent research shows that, between 1998-2012, the political participation rates of conservative congregations decreased at the same time that political participation rates of liberal congregations increased (Fulton, 2016).
Several studies have shown how politically liberal congregation leaders demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement within their communities (Wallis, 2008). According to Guth, “social action… is still largely the product of liberal theology, agenda issue choices, and is most evident among seminary-educated clergy not strongly attached to the party system, but active in ‘Christian Left’ organizations” (Guth, 2008, p. 19).

Beyond partisan leanings, some places of worship have civic cultures that promote political discussion and participation (Brown and Brown, 2003). We expect that this kind of political engagement may have spill-over effects into community engagement. Indeed, many of the social service activities in which congregations may participate could be seen as having a political component, even if they are not explicitly political or seen as political by the congregants (A. Greenberg, 2000). At the same time, there are places of worship where social service provision is explicitly divorced from politics and members of the congregation even distain politics (A. Greenberg, 2000). Churches may also see a tradeoff between political and community engagement and decide to specialize in one over the other (Glazier, 2018).

In terms of political variables, we expect that:

- H2a: congregations led by liberal clergy will be more active in the community.
- H2b: more politically active congregations will be more engaged in the community.

**Theology**

Religion’s impact on community involvement can be difficult to measure both because theology can be nebulous and also because politics and theology can be closely connected. Conservative political ideology has become closely tied to evangelical groups and believers tend to self-select into religious communities that reflect their political ideologies (Patrikios, 2008, p. 318). Political issues such as gay marriage and abortion are often defended or argued against through the use of theology (Brint and Abrutyn, 2010).
Theologically conservative churches are often Evangelical and have a firm belief in the infallibility of scripture (Mock, 1992). Theologically conservative churches are also less likely to be involved in the community than theologically liberal churches (Uslaner, 2002), who are more likely to be involved in liberal-leaning community causes like social justice (Todd and Houston, 2013), although the relationship is not linear (Mock, 1992). Fulton (2016) finds that Evangelical Protestant congregations “are the least likely to participate in service-related activities, while theologically liberal congregations were the most likely to participate” (p.2). In a study of civil rights activism, Tygart (1977) finds that theology significantly predicts participation, but that it often influences activism indirectly, through ideology.

Another way to talk about the theological focus of a congregation is mission orientation—or what the congregation views as its most important goals. Ammerman (2001) identifies three such orientations: 1. Member-oriented, with a focus on fellowship activities for members and fostering spiritual growth, 2. Evangelistic, with a focus on sharing the faith and preparing for the world to come, and 3. Activist, with a focus on social change and serving the poor and needy. Guth, Green, Smidt, & Kellstedt (1997) find that theological role orientations are powerful predictors of political and social justice activism among clergy.

Looking only at Presbyterian churches, Hoge, Perry, & Klever (1978) use survey data to show that the top mission-orientation priority for the vast majority of these churches are “congregational nurture goals” like preaching, fellowship, and religious education. Disagreements are more likely to arise at the second-level priorities, with congregations generally split between evangelism and social involvement.

Historically, the religion literature has divided religious institutions into two binary categories, based on the extent of their engagement with the broader community: worldly or otherworldly (Troeltsch, 1931/1992; Weber, 1922/1993). Worldly churches are oriented towards
earthly matters whereas otherworldly churches are more concerned with the spiritual well-being of their members in the world to come. Thus, one explanation for why theologically conservative churches, which are often evangelical, are less community-engaged is that they are typically more inwardly-focused (Iannaccone, 1988), with an emphasis more on “saving souls and less on secular participation” (Schwadel, 2005). Congregants of evangelical churches are more likely to be involved in activities within the church, rather than activities outside of the church (Uslaner, 2002) and their focus on spiritual salvation inhibits social activism (Hoge, et al., 1978).

The theological prioritization of social issues has translated into real life differences in social involvement, with liberal, ‘this-worldly’ modernists displaying much greater activity in their communities than ‘other-worldly’ traditionalists. (Guth et al., 2003; Hadden, 1969; Quinley, 1974). Because of the emphasis on salvation, theologically-conservative congregations may hesitate to participate in community programs without a strong spiritual basis (McRoberts, 2003, p. 417), worrying “that concentrating on material needs would divert important energy from the more critical task of evangelism” (Ammerman, 2005, p. 116).

In her foundational work on American congregations, Ammerman (2005) argues that the vast majority of congregations choose to focus their external efforts on either evangelism and a gospel of personal transformation or on offering immediate aid and comfort (p. 131). Only 17% of congregations in her study had both evangelism and community service as primary goals (Ammerman, 2005).

Drawing distinctions illustrates the different ways that places of worship see and engage with the world, and the effects that follow (e.g., Hunt and Hunt, 1977). But more recent research indicates that a sharp division into mutually exclusive categories, like the worldly/otherworldly dichotomy, or the evangelism/service divide, does not fit the lived experience of many worshipers
and religious institutions (McRoberts, 2003). It is this idea that we build upon in presenting our theory here.

We argue that the most engaged places of worship will be those who see social involvement as related to, and even indistinguishable from, the top-priority spiritual goals of the congregation. Just as the worldly/otherworldly dichotomy is limited in its application, so too are strict delineations between mission orientation categories. We propose that some congregations’ theological worldview may see helping the poor as a means of fostering spiritual growth, and outreach to the needy as essential for preparing for the world to come.

We argue that not only do community-engaged congregations see “no contradiction” between faith and community engagement (McRoberts, 2003, p. 412), but that they are actually motivated by their faith to engage in the community. Just as Harris (1994) identified religion as a resource for political mobilization, we argue that religion can be a motivator for congregational-level community engagement. Thus, worldly and otherworldly are not mutually exclusive. Otherworldly goals can motivate worldly engagement.

When we think of theology, we should not do so just in the context of how it can be useful to categorize religious traditions or specific denominations. By looking closely at theology, we can both qualitatively and quantitatively measure the impact of different belief systems—systems that transcend religious tradition—on community engagement. There are congregations who do not see strict tradeoffs and thereby engage socially in order to improve spirituality. These congregations may emphasize the “whole person” in their community engagement (McRoberts 2003, 417), and hold a preference for church-based programs that promote social betterment in addition to the propagation of religious moral values. We argue, in line with McRoberts (2003) that “theology is not a rigid predictor variable but, rather, a cultural resource that believers can use to justify both activism and
retreatism” (p. 415; see also Mock, 1992; Wood, 1999). In short, there is an ambivalence to sacred things (Appleby, 2000).

In terms of theology, we expect that:

H3a: congregations led by theologically liberal clergy will be more engaged in the community.
H3b: clergy who see religion and community engagement as connected will lead congregations that are more engaged in the community.

Theology has always been a part of the academic conversation about the motives driving clergy engagement, but social scientists sometimes find it difficult to measure religious concepts like theological orientation; doing so on the scale of a congregation is particularly challenging. The qualitative data we use on a large scale here make possible a deeper understanding of the role that theology plays in community engagement.

In general, we expect community-engaged congregations to be significantly different from those that are not engaged in the community. Using the quantitative and qualitative data described in the next section, we look for potential differences in all three categories of variables: resources, politics, and theology.

Methods

The data used in the following analyses were collected through the [study name redacted] in August-December, 2016. This multi-method research design involved first contacting the congregation leader of every place of worship within the city limits of [city name redacted] (n=392). Clergy were contacted through mail, email, phone, and social media and were encouraged to complete the survey that was mailed to them. The response rate was 21.4% with a total of 84 returned surveys.

All 84 of the responding clergy were contacted to request an interview. A team of 38 graduate students was ultimately able to conduct 65 semi-structured interviews with clergy members, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes (a 77.3% response rate). The interview protocol followed by
each of the interviewers included fourteen questions, grouped into three general categories: congregational life, theological beliefs, and community and political involvement. Appendix 1 contains the interview protocol questions in outline format.

Each of the 14 interview questions was coded according to a codebook that assigned codes at two levels: one primary code for each question response and up to five secondary codes for each question response. A sample of the interview codebook is available in Appendix 2 with the full codebook available from the authors upon request. Reliability for a single coder was ensured through re-coding a random sample of 10% of the interviews (agreement=88.56%, kappa=0.875).

Using these interview data, together with congregation reports written by students attending the place of worship, personal conversations, materials distributed at services, and congregation websites and other online presences, a qualitative community engagement score was calculated for each congregation. The purpose behind creating the qualitative community engagement score was to distill a wealth of qualitative data into a single number representing the community engagement of the congregation; it serves as the dependent variable in the following analyses.

The qualitative community engagement score ranges from 1 to 5 and measures the extent to which the congregation displayed meaningful efforts to reach out beyond their congregation and provide service to the broader community. Thus, purely social events were given less weight on the scale, compared to events intended to provide services like legal assistance, medical care, or food aid. Similarly, efforts to provide services to congregation members, but not the broader community, were also given less weight.

The mean qualitative community engagement score for our sample of 3.29, with a standard deviation of 0.13. A congregation that receives a score of 1 on the qualitative community engagement scale would be among the least-engaged congregations in the sample. These types of congregations are often inwardly-focused, with the spiritual well-being of members the foremost
concern. Events sponsored by the congregation are limited to members and the congregation does not make efforts to reach out to the community beyond their membership.

A congregation with a score of 2 is more involved in the community, but typically through annual social events such as festivals or gatherings to celebrate religious holidays. Community Easter Egg hunts or fish fry fundraisers are examples of events that places of worship with a qualitative community engagement score of 2 might engage in.

A congregation that receives a score of 3 would be about average in terms of community engagement in our sample. These congregations have some community engagement that goes beyond socializing, for instance, through a backpack drive to provide school supplies to needy kids before the start of the new school year. These efforts sometimes reach beyond their own congregation, but often the main target of the service is their own membership.

Congregations receiving a qualitative community engagement score of 4 have multiple efforts to reach beyond their own membership and provide service to the broader community. These congregations are differentiated from those receiving a score of 5 mostly by the number and diversity of services provided. The highest qualitative community engagement score of 5 was assigned to congregations that are very outward-focused. These congregations typically have a wide variety of programs, services, support, and advocacy efforts that they provide for the community. Whereas in congregations with lower scores, the services were targeted within the congregation, those with a score of 5 usually had congregation members volunteering to help provide services for the community beyond the congregation.

Each congregation was independently scored by each of the coauthors and discussed. Scores were assigned based on the 1 to 5 rubric outlined above. Each congregation was also evaluated relative to the scores of other congregations, to validate that a congregation we qualitatively evaluated as more community engaged than another did indeed receive a higher score.
In parts of the analysis that follows, the qualitative community engagement score is divided into 3 categories at natural cut points for analysis: congregations scoring between 1 and 2.5 are categorized as low community engagement (n=22), those between 2.6 and 3.9 are moderate community engagement (n=20), and those at 4 or above are categorized as high community engagement (n=23).

The total sample is made up of 65 congregations with clergy members who completed both the survey and the interview. It is important to note that the data used here are not nationally representative. The [study name redacted] instead provides a close-up view of community engagement in a single, Southern city with a particular religious-political history. This sample is large enough to make some statistical comparisons possible, while also providing a rich source for qualitative data analysis. Indeed, this is the goal of a multi-method approach to understanding congregational community engagement: the statistical data can point us in the direction of those factors that have the greatest influence on engagement and then in-depth interview data can help us better understand the nature and circumstances of that influence. In the following section, the results of difference of means tests to compare the most and least community-engaged congregations are first presented, followed by a regression model, and then a discussion that draws on qualitative data from the interviews.

T-tests are conducted for a number of variables, grouped into three categories, according to the hypotheses above: resources, politics, and theology. A list of these variables, together with question wording and descriptive statistics, is presented in Table 1 and each variable tested is described below.

[Table 1 about here.]

We evaluate the influence of resources on the community engagement of congregations through three clergy survey variables: the size of the congregation, measured through weekly
attendance (H1a); the socio-economic class of the congregation (H1b); and the number of years the clergy member has been with the congregation, presumably building social capital and connections (H1c).

We evaluate four political variables in the analyses below. To test H2a, that conservative clergy will lead less community-engaged congregations, we use a clergy survey question about ideology. To test H2b, that more politically-engaged congregations will also be more community-engaged, we use three clergy survey variables: personal political interest, the extent to which political topics are discussed in sermons and small groups in the congregation, and the engagement of the congregation in the 2016 election.

We utilize both clergy survey responses and coded interview data to measure theology. We evaluate H3a, which hypothesizes that theologically conservative congregations will be less engaged in the community, through two clergy survey questions: one about belief in scriptural literalism, and a measure of belief in providence (that people can know and help carry out God’s will) (Glazier, 2017).

The statistical comparisons below include variables for three religious traditions: Black Protestant (n=11), Evangelical Protestant (n=25), and Mainline Protestant (n=20). The literature indicates that Black Protestant churches may be more active, due to race, religious tradition, history of political engagement, or all of the above (Ammerman, 2005; Cavendish, 2000). For instance, research demonstrates that Black churches do more for mental health, even when controlling for congregation size and budget (Blank, Mahmood, Fox, & Guterbock, 2002). Race matters for both the amount and the type of services congregations provide (Brown, 2008; Littlefield, 2010). For this sample of Southern religious organizations, race is almost entirely divided between Black and white, with very few congregations of other races, limiting analyses of additional racial groups. Evangelical churches tend to be more theologically conservative and less socially active (A. Greenberg, 2000),
while Mainline congregations tend to be more theologically liberal and socially active, although assuming this trend holds for all churches is certainly problematic (Mock, 1992).

To ascertain the extent to which a clergy member sees religion and community engagement as connected (H3b), we turn to five variables from the clergy interviews. First, clergy were asked to place their congregation on a spectrum ranging from a total focus on spiritual matters (1) to a total focus on physical/material matters (5). Three is the mid-point of this scale and the mean response is 2.8, indicating that most congregations see themselves as focusing on both spiritual and physical.

However, the qualitative analysis of the clergy interviews reveals that a significant minority of clergy (n=11) responded to the spectrum question by volunteering that the two—spiritual and material—could not be separated. These clergy members were coded 1 and all others were coded zero, which became our second measure of theological connection between religion and community engagement.

Third, clergy were asked in the interviews, “Does community engagement matter to God?” Those who provided a spiritual reason for community engagement in response to this question were coded 1 and all others were coded zero. For instance, one clergy response that was coded 1 on this variable was: “God would have us to be involved in community…especially like reaching out to people around us like the homeless of [city name redacted]. The people who are hurting and stuff like that.”

Clergy were also asked about what their congregation is known for and two variables were generated from the responses. Our fourth community-engaged theology measure is a dummy variable for those who responded to this question by naming a spiritual program or ministry. For instance, one congregation leader responded by saying “Our focus is on bringing souls to Christ…It’s a more spiritual focus” and another remarked “the kinds of works we do are mainly focused around developing Bible studies.” Both of these congregations received a code for a
spiritual program as what they are known for. Those who responded with a community-engaged program or ministry received a different dummy variable to indicate a community focus. For instance, one clergy member brought up their reputation for “having one of the best children’s schools in West [city name redacted]” and another said that when people in the community think of their congregation, they think “they’re that church that gives our kids backpacks and school supplies!”

Results

How are community-engaged congregations different from those that are not engaged in the community? We look at three categories of explanations here: resource-based, political, and theological. We first turn to t-tests to compare the characteristics of the highest ⅓ of religious organizations to the lowest ⅓, in terms of their qualitative community engagement score. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here.]

The quantitative data indicate that congregations with high levels of engagement are not drastically different from those with low levels of engagement. One of the biggest differences we do see is in the effect of resources; the size of the congregation makes a significant difference for community engagement. This finding is supportive of H1a and is likely a result of the greater resources to which larger faith communities often have access. Community-engagement can be a resource-intensive process and churches must consider whether or not they have the time, money, and people it will require to successfully start or contribute to a community program. Because larger churches are more likely to have this capacity, it is easier for them to engage in these types of activities. The resources of a long-standing pastor and a higher socio-economic class, on the other hand, were not significant. The data do indicate a trend towards more community involvement for
wealthier congregations, but most clergy rated their congregation as middle class, leaving a small n of wealthier congregations (only 1 clergy member categorized their congregation as upper middle class).

The political variables we measured also do not differ much between highly-engaged and less-engaged congregations. For example, for these two groups, there are no significant differences based on political activity in church, election-related political activity, or caring about who wins the 2016 election. The only political variable that is significantly different is clergy ideology. We find that conservative clergy are less likely to lead community-engaged congregations, which supports H2a.

We find mixed results when it comes to the clergy interview variables and H3b. Highly-engaged and less-engaged congregations are equally likely to mention a spiritual motivation behind their community engagement, although we do see some statistically significant differences in whether the congregation is known for spiritual or community-centered programs. Engaged congregations have clergy who are more likely to cite the latter and less likely to cite the former, indicating that there may be a spiritual/community trade-off at work here. The finding that engaged congregations are more likely to say they are known for community-engaged programs makes intuitive sense, since places of worship that take the time to be very engaged in the community are likely to say that this is something that they are known for.

What is less intuitive is the trade-off. All twenty-six of the most engaged congregations scored zero on the “spiritual known” variable, which measures whether or not a congregation reports being known for something spiritual, like evangelizing or Bible Study. This indicates that, when it comes to what clergy report their congregation is “known for,” community engagement rises to the top for community-engaged congregations.

But does this mean that community-engaged congregations are not concerned about spiritual matters? Perhaps not. Highly-engaged congregations are not significantly more likely to place an
emphasis on material needs over spiritual needs in terms of their placement on that spectrum. Additionally, the clergy of engaged congregations are significantly more likely to say that one can’t separate the spiritual and the physical. Thus, for community-engaged congregations, they may be known for their community programs instead of their spiritual programs, but they see those community programs as deeply connected to spiritual matters.

In the next step of the analysis, we ran a regression model with the qualitative community engagement variable as the dependent variable. The comparatively small number of congregations in this study (n=65) limits the statistical power of the model, so only those variables with significant differences in Table 2 are included in the model: ideology, weekly attendance, being known for something spiritual, being known for something in the community, and seeing no separation between the spiritual and material. The results of the regression are presented in Table 3 and make it possible to see the variables that influence congregational community engagement when all of the significant variables from Table 2 are taken into account.

[Table 3 about here.]

There are three independent variables in the model that achieve standard levels of statistical significance: weekly attendance, the clergy member saying that the congregation is known for something spiritual, and the clergy member seeing no separation between the spiritual and material. The attendance variable is categorical in this analysis. Moving up one attendance category (for instance, from less than 100 to 101-250 weekly attenders) results in a corresponding increase of .19 in terms of the qualitative community engagement score (which ranges from 1 to 5).

Both of the other two significant variables are dichotomous and are significant in opposite directions. The coefficients are quite similar, indicating that being known for something spiritual
decreases the qualitative community engagement score about as much as seeing no difference between spiritual and material factors increases it.

Interestingly enough, being known for something in the community is not a significant predictor of engagement. Those with a spiritual focus are less engaged, but those with a community focus are not more engaged, when all of the variables in the regression model are considered together. Instead, it is seeing physical and spiritual needs as inseparable that leads to greater community engagement. When the most important variables are considered together in a regression model, the results indicate that a theological view of spiritual and material connection is the most powerful influence on community engagement. Spirituality appears to be central to the community engagement of these congregations.

In the next stage of the analysis, we turn to the clergy interviews in order to better understand these statistical findings. How do clergy in highly-engaged and less-engaged congregations talk about how the size of their congregations impacts their engagement? How do they understand the connection between spiritual and material factors when it comes to community engagement?

Despite what one might assume, we were unable to find any evidence that highly-involved churches focus more on the importance of material needs than spiritual needs, or vice versa. We believe that this is directly related to one of the most significant findings from this study: clergy at highly-involved churches are far more likely to say that material and spiritual needs cannot be separated. For example, when asked about whether or not his church places more emphasis on spiritual or material needs, one pastor from a very involved congregation with a qualitative community engagement score of 4.5 stated,
“those things are completely interwoven, and I think that the healthiest manifestation of the church is one that is able to bring those two things together in a way that is not just complimentary, but understands that they were never really different things at all.”

Similarly, when asked whether his congregation put more emphasis on material over spiritual needs, a pastor from a highly-involved congregation with an engagement score of 4 asserted that he does not think “you can take care of one without the other.” This finding is especially interesting because it diverges from the established literature regarding the role of “this-worldly” and “other-worldly” theology. It seems in the case of clergy members who volunteered a response about the connection between spiritual and material factors, all of whom lead highly-involved congregations, they do not see a division between the concerns of this world and the world to come. For them, spiritual and material needs are one and the same.

On the other hand, one thing that motivates disengagement from community involvement is the fear that people will take advantage of the services and resources provided to them. This sentiment was referenced in several of the interviews with the least involved churches. For example, a small congregation with a community engagement score of 1.5 expressed, they “have to be really careful around here with folks that want to take the church for anything they can get... they don’t care about spiritual; they just want to get what they can get.” In a comment at a church with a similar level of community involvement, another congregation leader commented that “the only thing that they are wanting is money... They don’t want to hear about God’s word.” These quotes also demonstrate an emphasis on the spiritual component of community engagement. Not only are these congregation leaders concerned that people will take advantage of their services, but also, that those people who receive their services are only interested in it for the money and not for spiritual growth.

Those congregations that are less involved in the community tend to have clergy that express hesitance to participate in programs and services that have no spiritual component. Whereas more
involved congregation leaders express the importance of offering aid for both material and spiritual reasons, less involved congregation leaders are focused on individual spiritual growth.

Conclusions

The engagement of religious organizations in their communities has great potential for good. The social services and community connections congregations provide bolster neighborhoods and provide needed aid. But some congregations are more likely to be engaged than others. The quantitative and qualitative data presented here indicates that theology may be critically important to understanding why.

Engaged congregations tend to be larger and are also less likely to say that they are known for something spiritual. Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this research, however, is that engaged congregations are significantly more likely to say that spiritual and material factors are connected. This quantitative finding, together with qualitative support from clergy interviews, demonstrates that many clergy members see a deeply spiritual purpose for their engagement in the community. When they serve populations in need, they are not just doing so to meet those needs—they are doing so because they see it as spiritually nourishing. This finding challenges the binary construction of this-worldly and other-worldly religious orientations. Often, engaged congregations see them as one and the same.
Bibliography


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Question Wording</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Qualitative Community Engagement Score       | A qualitative measure of a congregation’s community engagement, based on clergy interviews, congregation reports written by students attending the place of worship, personal conversations, materials distributed at services, and congregation websites and other online presences.                                                                                       | Theoretical Range: 1 to 5  
Actual Range: 1.5 to 5  
Mean: 3.29  
SD: 1.03                                                                                                                                  |
| Conservative Ideology                        | On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the most liberal position and 5 the most conservative, where would you rank yourself when you think of your general political views? [Very liberal to Very conservative]                                                                                           | Theoretical Range: 0 to 5  
Actual Range: 0 to 5  
Mean: 3.20  
SD: 1.37                                                                                                                                  |
| Political Interest                           | Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don't care very much who wins? [1 to 5 scale from Don’t Care to Care a Great Deal]                                                                                                                 | Theoretical Range: 1 to 5  
Actual Range: 3 to 5  
Mean: 4.38  
SD: 0.79                                                                                                                                  |
| Congregation is Politically Engaged          | Did you participate in any of the following activities in the past two years? 3 activities listed; Yes (1) or No (0) for each.  
In a sermon, took a stand on a political issue  
In a sermon, took a stand on a moral issue  
Organized a church study group to discuss public affairs.                                                                                                             | Theoretical Range: 0 to 3  
Actual Range: 0 to 3  
Mean: 1.64  
SD: 0.88                                                                                                                                  |
| Congregation is Engaged in the 2016 Election | During elections, many churches provide materials to help members make important choices. For the 2016 election, will your church: 5 activities listed; Yes (1) or No (0) for each.  
Make voter guides available?  
Hold a candidate forum for candidates for any level of political office?  
Hold any meetings to discuss important issues in the election?                                                                                                                  | Theoretical Range: 0 to 5  
Actual Range: 0 to 5  
Mean: 0.91  
SD: 1.27                                                                                                                                  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be involved in a voter registration drive for the 2016 elections?</td>
<td>Be involved in getting out the vote for the 2016 election?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Attendance</td>
<td>What is the approximate average weekly attendance at all worship services?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Categories: 1=less than or equal to 100, 2=101-250, 3=251-500, 4=greater than 500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years with Congregation</td>
<td>How many years have you served this congregation?</td>
<td>Actual Range: .5 to 45 Mean: 9.57 SD: 9.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation Class</td>
<td>Would you say that members of your congregation are primarily:</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 1 to 5 Mean: 3.02 SD: 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1) Working Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Lower-middle Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Middle Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Upper-middle Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Upper Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scriptural Literalism</td>
<td>Scripture is the inerrant word of God. [1 to 5 scale, Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree]</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 1 to 5 Mean: 3.80 SD: 1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providential</td>
<td>Agreement with “God has a plan and I have a part to play in it.” [0 to 4] Plus “Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day life, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life?” [0 to 4]</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 4 to 8 Actual Range: 5 to 8 Mean: 7.59 SD: 0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>Coded 1 for Evangelical Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.37 SD: 0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>Coded 1 for Mainline Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.31 SD: 0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>Coded 1 for Black Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.</td>
<td>Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Theoretical Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Reason for Community</td>
<td>In interviews, those who provide a spiritual reason for community engagement in response to the question: “Does community engagement matter to God?”</td>
<td>0 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for Spiritual</td>
<td>In response to the interview question about what your congregation is known for, the clergy member mentioned something spiritual (e.g., Bible study, evangelism)</td>
<td>0 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for Community</td>
<td>In response to the interview question about what your congregation is known for, the clergy member mentioned something geared towards the larger community (e.g., homeless shelter, efforts to help foster children)</td>
<td>0 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectrum Score</td>
<td>Number provided in response to the interview question asking the clergy member to place their congregation on a scale from a total focus on spiritual to a total focus on physical.</td>
<td>1 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No separation between spiritual and physical</td>
<td>In response to the interview question asking the clergy member to place their congregation on a scale from a total focus on spiritual to a total focus on physical, the clergy member brought up the idea that the two can’t be separated.</td>
<td>0 to 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Mean Scores for the Bottom ⅓, compared to the Top ⅓, on the Qualitative Community Engagement Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean score for bottom ⅓ on engagement</th>
<th>Mean score for top ⅓ on engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Ideology*</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care about 2016 Election</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics at Church</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Activity at Church</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Attendance*</td>
<td>105.77</td>
<td>630.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years the Clergy Member has been with the congregation</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation Class</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>3.27</td>
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<td><strong>Theology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Scriptural Literalism</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.17</td>
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<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providential</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>7.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual reason for community engagement</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for something spiritual*</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for something in the community*</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectrum from spiritual focus (=1) to material focus (=5)</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No separation between spiritual and material*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*difference between the two variables is significant, p<.05
Table 3. Regression Model Predicting Congregational Community Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-0.160</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly attendance</td>
<td>0.190*</td>
<td>0.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for spiritual</td>
<td>-0.669*</td>
<td>0.314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known for community</td>
<td>0.320</td>
<td>0.247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No separation between material and spiritual</td>
<td>0.612*</td>
<td>0.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.245</td>
<td>0.375</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 64

Adjusted R2: 0.322

*p<.05