Stephen C. Rasor*
Christine D. Chapman*

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PROTESTANT CONGREGATIONAL LIFE SURVEY

Congregational profile surveys were completed by one person in each of 240 Protestant African-American congregations participating in MVP. Results are compared here to those of the random sample of congregations that participated in the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (US CLS) to help MVP leaders more readily identify the unique strengths of Protestant African-American congregations.[1] (Responses from MVP Catholic parishes and mosques are not included.)

Facilities

- Most MVP churches hold their primary services in a church (MVP, 93 percent; US CLS, 90 percent). Over 90 percent own their own buildings.
- Two in ten MVP churches report their facilities are used or rented by community groups at least once a week; such use occurs weekly in 39 percent of US CLS congregations.
- MVP facilities have slightly larger seating capacities (MVP median, 300; US CLS median, 258).

---

*Stephen C. Rasor, MVP Director, is professor of Sociology of Religion and director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

*Christine D. Chapman is full-time visiting professor, Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia and Research Director, Institute for Black Religious Life, Interdenominational Theological Center, also in Atlanta.

[1]A total of 343 congregations in the random sample completed the US CLS profile survey in April 2001. These congregations include Protestant churches, Catholic parishes, and nonChristian congregations.

Size and Finances

- In the year before participating in the survey, average weekly worship attendance (median) was 125 in MVP churches and ninety in US CLS congregations.
- The total number of adults (people eighteen years or older) regularly participating in the life of the congregation averaged eighty-nine in MVP churches and eighty in US CLS congregations.
- Almost all congregations (99 percent in both samples) report that the biggest source of income for the congregation is offerings, pledges, and donations.
- One-third of MVP churches (34 percent) but only 24 percent of US CLS congregations describe their financial situation as an "increasing financial base." A stable financial situation exists in 46 percent of MVP and 53 percent of US CLS congregations.

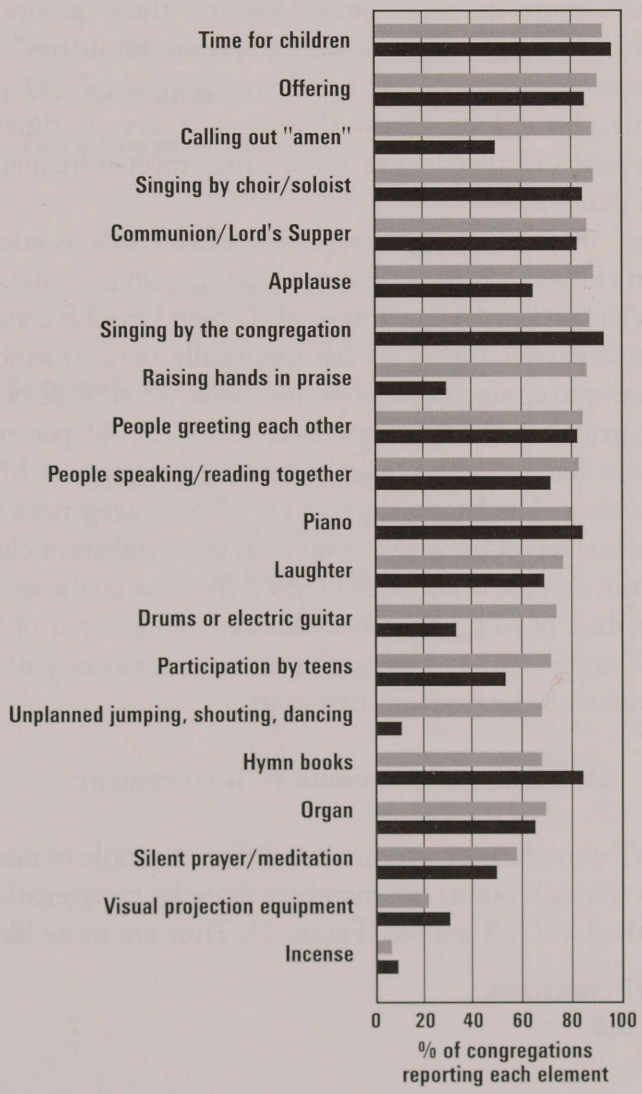
Worship

- Most MVP churches hold one (35 percent) or two (38 percent) worship services in a typical week. (Among US CLS congregations, 35 percent hold one and 21 percent hold two weekly services.)
- Worship services are longer in MVP churches. Seven in ten MVP congregations (72 percent) report that their primary service lasts at least 1.5 hours; only 15 percent of US CLS congregations have services that long.
- Similarly, sermons are longer in MVP churches. Eighty-three percent of MVP churches report the sermon lasts at least twenty minutes; only 43 percent of US CLS congregations have sermons of more than twenty minutes.
- Eighty-seven percent of MVP churches (but only 57 percent of US CLS congregations) use a written outline or bulletin in worship.

MVP Protestants
US CLS

- Figure 1 shows elements included in worship services. While many elements are more common in MVP churches, e.g., calling out "amen," raising hands in praise, and the use of drums or electric guitar, only the use of hymn books is much more likely to occur in US CLS congregations.

Figure 1: Elements Included in the Primary Worship Service



Other Services and Programs

- Somewhat more than half of congregations (MVP, 55 percent; US CLS 58 percent) use small groups for sharing or spiritual growth.
- Eight in ten MVP churches (84 percent) and 68 percent of US CLS congregations have organized prayer groups. MVP churches most often describe these groups as "attached to specific classes, groups, or ministries" (42 percent) or "part of our small group program" (31 percent). Some have groups that meet at certain times of the year (17 percent) or groups that meet infrequently (17 percent).
- Large majorities of congregations offer religious education classes (MVP, 94 percent; US CLS, 98 percent).
- MVP churches are much more likely than US CLS congregations to offer a group or class specifically for new members as a way to ensure they become integrated into the life of the congregation (MVP, 68 percent; US CLS, 42 percent). This is also the method used by the largest majority of MVP churches. The largest group of US CLS congregations (57 percent) report using follow-up visits by members or clergy for this purpose (47 percent of MVP churches do the same).
- One-half of MVP churches (but only 28 percent of US CLS congregations) report that one or members entered ministry in the previous five years.

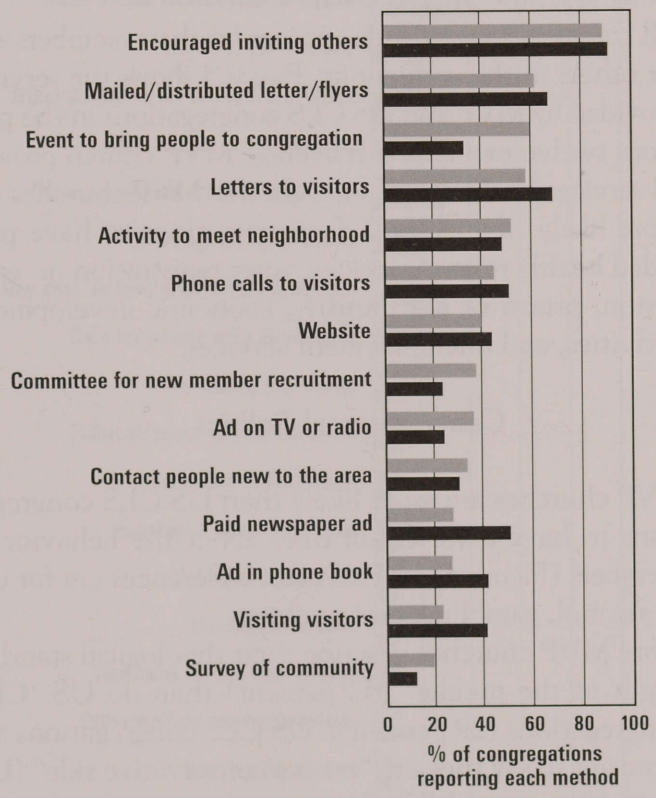
Outreach and Community Involvement

- MVP churches use a somewhat different profile of methods to reach out to nonmembers than do congregations in the US CLS sample (Figure 2). They are more likely

MVP Protestants
US CLS

to have a recruitment committee and to advertise on television or radio. US CLS churches are more likely to advertise in the newspaper or telephone book and to have members go to the homes of those who have visited the congregation.

Figure 2: Reaching Out to Nonmembers



- Few congregations have reorganized or started new worship services for distinct age, racial or ethnic, or interest groups (MVP, 6 percent; US CLS, 7 percent) or for people who don't usually attend (MVP, 4 percent; US CLS, 9 percent).
- Somewhat more congregations (MVP, 14 percent; US CLS, 12 percent) have been involved in planning or growing a new congregation.
- All congregations provide services for their members and for others in the community. Figure 3 shows the services provided by MVP and US CLS congregations in the previous twelve months. An average MVP church provided services in six of the areas shown. MVP churches are more likely than US CLS congregations to have provided health-related services, voter registration or education, prison or jail ministry, economic development activities, and unemployment services.

Congregational Politics

- MVP churches are more likely than US CLS congregations to have a variety of rules about the behavior of members (Figure 4). The largest differences are for use of alcohol, gambling, and smoking.
- More MVP churches describe their theological stand as "right in the middle" (52 percent) than do US CLS congregations (29 percent). US CLS congregations are more apt to say they are "on the conservative side" (US CLS, 60 percent; MVP, 31 percent).

MVP Protestants
US CLS

Figure 3: Services for Members and Others

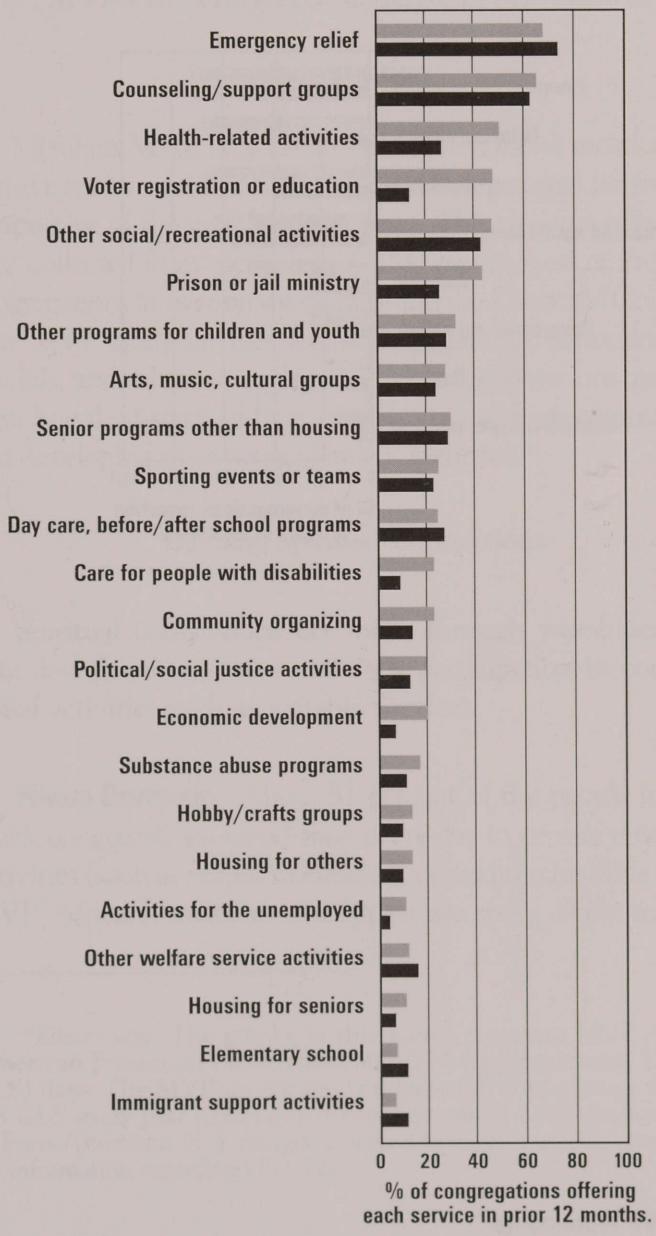
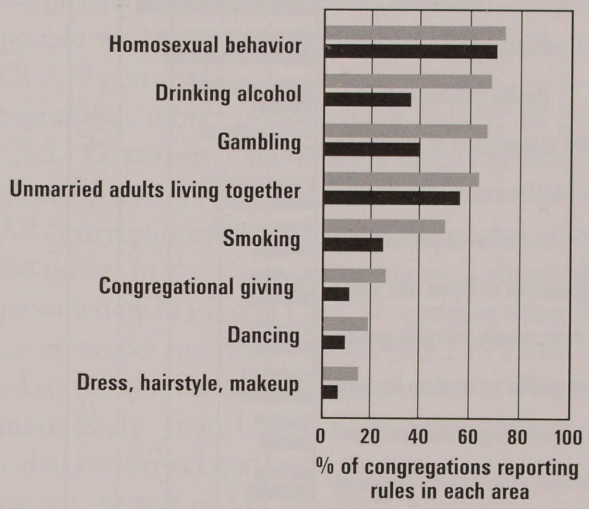


Figure 4: Rules and Prohibitons



MVP Protestants
US CLS

MVP PROTESTANT CHURCH SUMMARY

Introduction

Members Voice Project (MVP) is the nation's most comprehensive survey of African-American congregational life from the perspective of the people in the pews. This resource reflects the data collected from more than 13,000 parishioners of Protestant congregations in twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia. The MVP study enables local congregations, denominational officials, and others to understand what congregations are doing regarding their spiritual lives, reaching out to their communities, and developing their congregational identities.*

Building Spiritual Connections

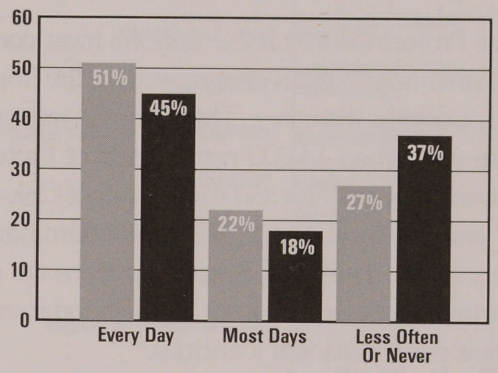
Spiritual connections are made through worshipers' private devotional activities and their participation in congregational activities such as worship services.

Private Devotions. About 51 percent of the people in MVP Black congregations spend time every day in private devotional activities (such as prayer, meditation, or reading the Bible alone). MVP African-American worshipers are more likely to spend

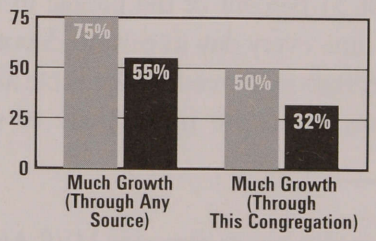
---

**Editor's note:* The graphs in this survey represent MVP African-American Protestant church data and U.S. Congregational Life (US CLS) data. The MVP survey was conducted in conjunction with the US CLS study that surveyed a diverse sample of 2,000 predominantly Euro-American U.S. congregations. Go to www.uscongregations.org for information regarding US CLS.

time in these activities as compared to US CLS worshipers across the country. (The national average among worshipers is 45 percent who spend time in private devotional activities.)

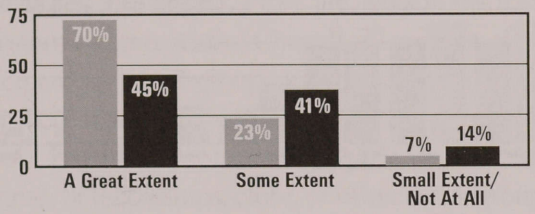


Growing in Faith. About half of the people in America's congregations (55 percent) and 75 percent in MVP African-American churches have experienced significant growth over the last years, through any source. Half of worshipers in MVP African-American congregations say their spiritual growth comes from involvement in their congregations.

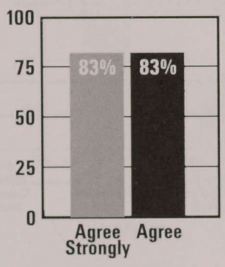


MVP Protestants
US CLS

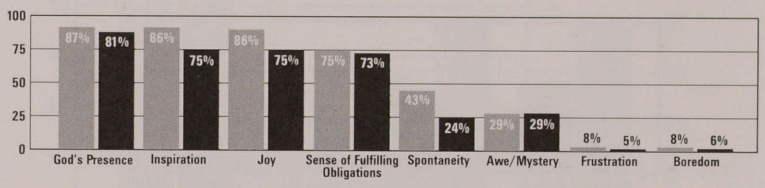
Help with Everyday Living. To what extent do the worship services of their congregations help worshipers with everyday living? Seventy percent of MVP Black worshipers reported they are helped "to a great extent" by worship or congregational activities, compared to 45 percent of US CLS Euro-American congregants.



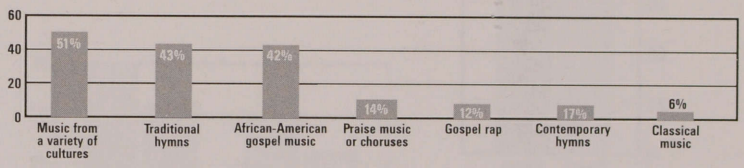
Meeting Spiritual Needs. Like the majority of worshipers across the U.S., 83 percent of MVP Protestant worshipers feel their congregation meets their spiritual needs—the same percentage as worshipers across the U.S.



Worship Experiences. Meaningful worship experiences are central for most congregations and their members. In MVP Protestant congregations, the largest number of worshipers "usually" or "always" experience God's presence during worship. The smallest percentage of worshipers "usually" or "always" experience boredom.



Making Music. MVP Protestants prefer the following styles of music in congregational worship: music from a variety of cultures (51 percent), traditional hymns (43 percent), and African-American gospel music (42 percent). Across the country, worshipers reported the following preferences most often: traditional hymns (61 percent), praise music (33 percent), and contemporary hymns (25 percent).

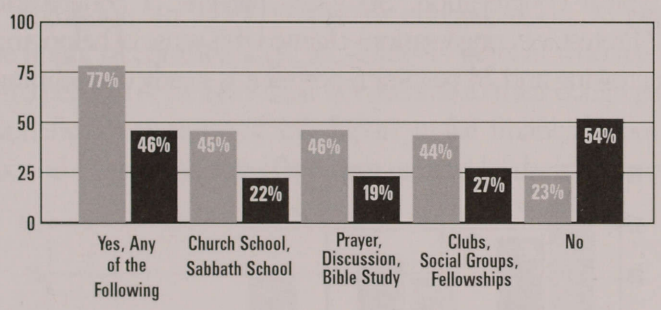


MVP Protestants
US CLS

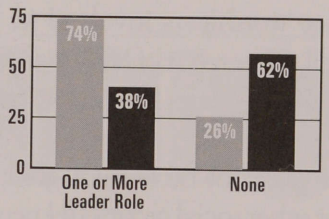
Building Inside Connections

Worshipers connect with others in congregations through group activities (such as church school, prayer and study groups, and fellowships or clubs), serving in leadership roles, and through financial support.

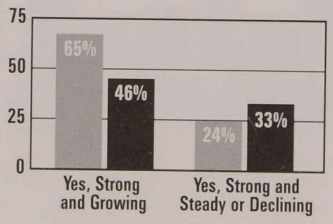
Involving Worshipers. How are worshipers involved in MVP Protestant congregations? Overall, 77 percent of MVP worshipers participate in small-group activities. About half are active in group activities like Sunday school, church school, or Sabbath school (45 percent); prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups (46 percent); or fellowships, clubs, or other social groups (44 percent). The percentage for MVP congregations is higher than the US CLS national average wherein 46 percent engage in some small group activity.



Involving Leaders. How many worshipers serve in leadership roles in MVP Protestant congregations? Seventy-four percent hold at least one leadership position in their congregation (such as governing board, committee, choir or usher, church school teacher, etc.). About 38 percent of worshipers across the U.S. serve as church leaders.

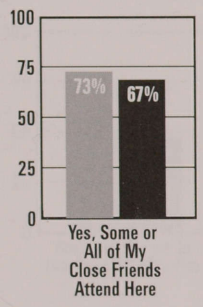


Belonging Here. Do worshipers in MVP Protestant congregations feel like they belong? Eighty-nine percent report a strong sense of belonging to their congregation, similar to that found in the typical congregation. Sixty-five percent of congregants in MVP Protestant congregations claimed this sense of belonging has been growing and 24 percent reported it is steady or declining.

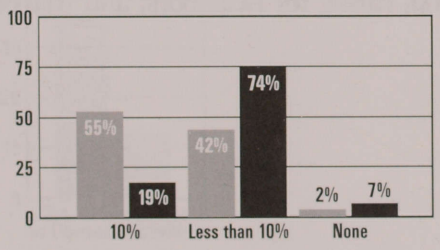


MVP Protestants
US CLS

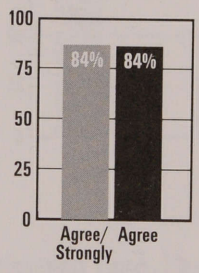
Making Friends. Are worshipers developing friendships with others in their congregations? About 73 percent of MVP Protestant worshipers say some or all of their close friends are members of the same congregation. This is similar to the US CLS national picture wherein 67 percent of worshipers say they have some close friends in their congregation.



Giving. Financial support connects people to a congregation and its mission. In MVP Protestant congregations, 98 percent make financial contributions, including 55 percent who regularly give 10 percent or more of their net income to their congregation. Nationally, 93 percent of worshipers make financial contributions, and 19 percent give 10 percent or more of their net income.



Being a Team. Do worshipers feel there is a connection between leaders and worshipers in their congregation? Most worshipers in MVP Protestant congregations (84 percent) agree with the statement "In general, there is a good match between our congregation and our minister, pastor, or priest." Across all worshipers in the U.S., about 84 percent agree with this statement.

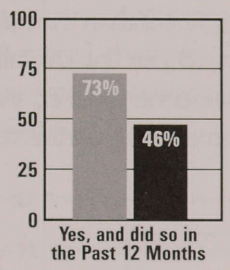


Building Outside Connections

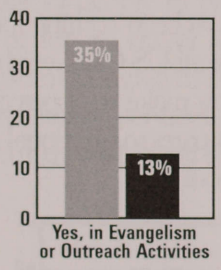
How do MVP Protestant congregations connect to the community and nonmembers? Outside connections consist of inviting others to attend, caring for neighbors, and welcoming new people.

MVP Protestants
US CLS

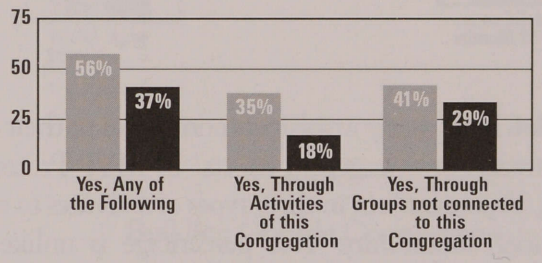
Inviting Others. Do MVP Protestant worshipers invite others to attend worship services? In the past twelve months, 73 percent invited a friend or relative who does not attend their congregations' services to their worship services. This trend is significantly greater than that of the average US CLS congregation wherein 46 percent asked someone to attend their worship services.



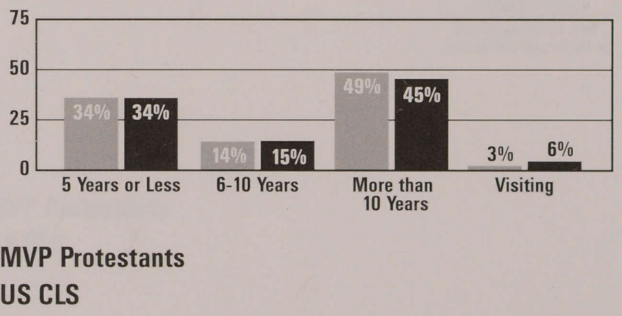
Reaching Out. How many worshipers contribute to their congregation's outreach or evangelism efforts? In MVP Protestant congregations, 35 percent join in these types of activities to reach out to the wider community. This percentage is unlike the national picture wherein 13 percent report being involved in evangelism or other outreach activities.



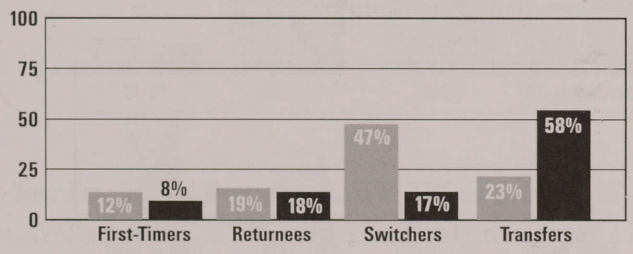
Serving the Community. Are MVP Protestant worshipers involved in any community service, social justice, or advocacy activities? Fifty-six percent of MVP Protestant worshipers take part in service or advocacy activities. Some join in community service activities organized through their congregation (35 percent of MVP Protestants take part in such groups). Some MVP Protestant worshipers (41 percent) participate in social service or advocacy groups not connected to their congregation. This is greater than the national average for all U.S. worshipers wherein 18 percent overall are involved in service or advocacy through their congregation, and 29 percent serve their communities through groups not connected to their congregation.



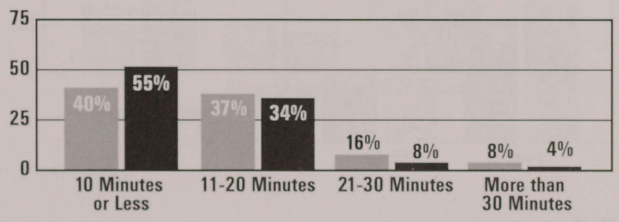
Welcoming New People. How many new people attend MVP Protestant worship services? About 34 percent of those attending worship services in MVP congregations have been coming for five years or less. Nationally, about 34 percent of all US CLS worshipers report attending for five years or less. Visitors make up 3 percent of worshipers in MVP congregations. This compares to a national average of 6 percent of worshipers who are visitors.



Knowing New People. What type of faith background is typical of the new people in MVP Protestant congregations? New people (those attending five years or less) come from four different faith backgrounds: first-timers (12 percent among MVP Protestants), those who have never regularly attended anywhere; returnees (19 percent), those who are coming back after not attending anywhere for several years; switchers (47 percent), those who have participated in other congregations of different faith traditions; and transfers (23 percent), those who were participating in another congregation of the same denomination immediately prior to attending their current congregation.



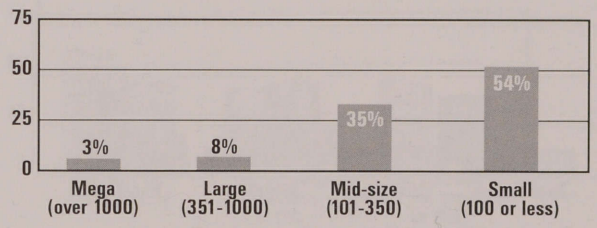
Getting Here. Do worshipers come from the immediate community, or do they travel in order to attend? The largest percentage of people in participating congregations takes ten minutes or less to travel to services. Most of the people in MVP Protestant congregations (76 percent) travel twenty minutes or less to attend services. Across all American congregations, 88 percent travel twenty minutes or less.



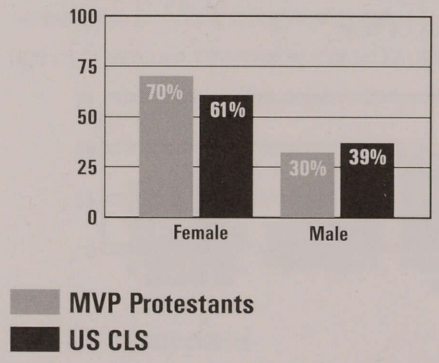
Building Identity Connections

Worshipers have an individual identity based on their age, education, and other factors. Worshipers also have a congregational identity that includes what they value and their dreams for the congregation's future.

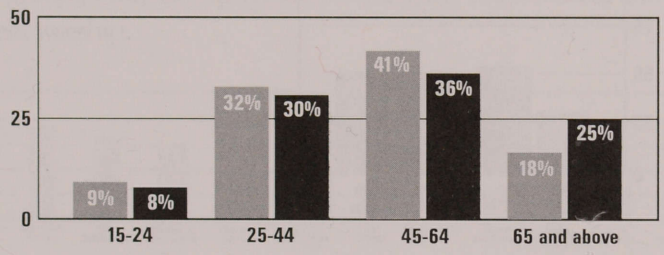
Your Size. Small congregations dot the landscape, but most worshipers find themselves in large congregations. The average MVP Protestant congregation is mid-size, with a median of 125 attendees. This chart indicates where MVP Protestant congregations fit into the size picture of all congregations.



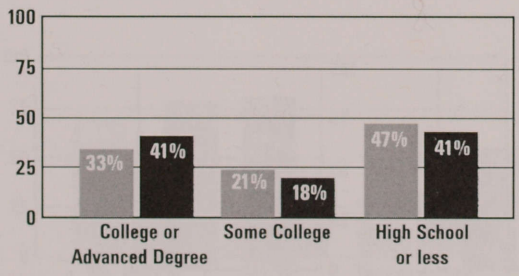
Your Gender Profile. Who makes up MVP Protestant congregations? There are fewer men (39 percent) than women (61 percent) in most US CLS congregations. Women outnumber men in even greater proportion in MVP congregations, where 70 percent are women.



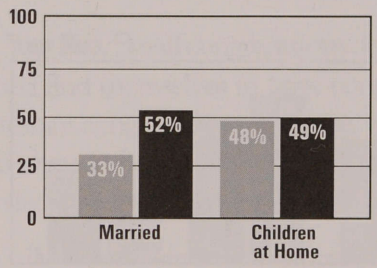
Your Age Profile. In most congregations across the country, those aged forty-five - sixty-four comprise the largest group (36 percent). The average age of worshipers in MVP congregations is forty-five, six years younger than the national average of fifty-one. People in the age range of forty-five - sixty-four comprise the largest age group in MVP Protestant congregations.



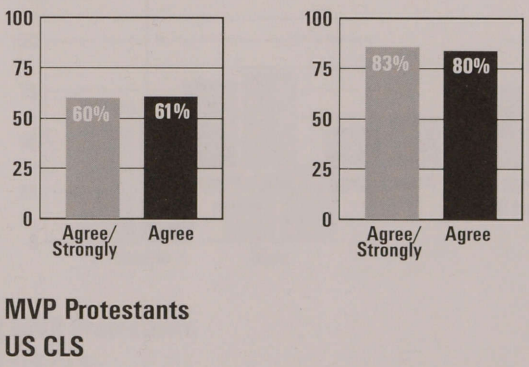
Your Educational Background. Worshipers in the U.S. tend to be well educated. The U.S. Census indicates that about 23 percent of people across the country hold a college degree as an educational minimum. Among US CLS worshipers, the figure is 41 percent. In MVP Protestant congregations, 33 percent report a college or advanced degree.



Your Household Type. Most worshipers in America are married; this is not true in MVP congregations. Overall, 49 percent of worshipers have children living at home, similar to the results for MVP Protestant congregations (48 percent). The U.S. Census indicates that only 52 percent of the population is currently married and about 33 percent have children living at home.

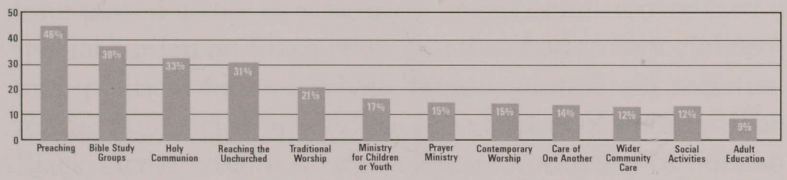


Seeing Possibilities. How open to change and new directions are worshipers in MVP congregations? Many worshipers in MVP Protestant congregations (60 percent) feel the congregation is always ready to try something new. More than three-quarters of worshipers (83 percent) also express a sense of excitement about the congregation's future. Many worshipers in US CLS congregations describe their congregation as willing to try new things (61 percent) and excited about the future (80 percent).



This congregation is always ready to try something new and has a sense of excitement. Worshipers also have a congregational identity that includes what they value and their dreams for their congregation's future.

What You Value. What do worshipers in MVP African-American congregations value? MVP worshipers most value preaching, Bible study groups, Holy Communion, reaching the unchurched, and traditional worship.



Committing to the Future. Do worshipers in MVP African-American congregations claim a clear vision, goals, or direction for their congregation's ministry and mission? Most worshipers in MVP congregations believe there is a clear vision or direction for the future. However, some are not sure that the vision is clear, or that it exists (28 percent). The national average indicates most US CLS worshipers believe their congregation has a clear vision for the future (71 percent).