

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v22i.9842>

The Role and Impact of Services Offered in Churches on Congregational Attendance and Overall Well-Being

Arthalia Weekes. LSCSW

The Role and Impact of Services Offered in Churches on Congregational Attendance

Abstract:

This study examined the issues surrounding lack of services church organizations offer and how this can impact the attendance of services and overall well-being of attendees. Across the nation and denominations individuals are searching for churches that can meet immediate and long term needs as well as have the flexibility to attend at various times due to constraints that may exist. When those needs are not being met, they can negatively impact the individual thus impacting congregation attendance. Considering that spirituality plays a vital role in the overall well-being of individuals; if this factor is lacking in any way this can influence life satisfaction, participation, or trust in a system that is designed to improve quality of life. There is a lack of understanding of the degree to which the relationship between types of services provided and the number of services provided impacts congregation attendance. Thus, understanding that there is a significant influence that services offered can have on attendance.

Using a correlational research design, the author examined to determine the extent of the relationships between services offered and church attendance as well as the impact services has on overall well-being. 1262 individuals that included clergy and lay members of various congregations and denominations were provided National Congregational Survey questionnaires that included open-ended items that were coded in sets of variables. The practical and theoretical implication of this study is that this can assist congregations across the world in developing services that are relevant for those who would potentially attend their churches which can improve quality of life.

Introduction/Problem Statement

When examining how religion influences community involvement, Mannheim notes: “We belong to a group not because we are born into it, not merely because we profess to belong to it, nor . . . because we give it our loyalty and allegiance, but primarily because we see the world and certain things in the world the way it [i.e., the group] does” (Luria et al., 2017).

Church attendance is usually measured in surveys by asking a direct question about frequency of churchgoing over a preset period of time, which is typically a year. Different studies have cast doubt over the validity of this indicator as it tends to overestimate actual attendance to a significant degree (Rossi & Scappini, 2014). Regarding attendance at religious services, the categories and details used in codification have changed significantly over the years. Originally, the sole objective of time use surveys was to study the time spent by individuals divided into broad categories of activities; more precise analysis only developed gradually over time. In the years 1975, 1985, and 1993 a single category was used to group together not only “Attending religious services,” but also presence at church for other reasons (singing in choir, leading youth group) and even individual religious practice (praying, meditating, Bible study group [not at church]). It was only from 2003 onwards that attending a religious service was classified independently, separating it by definition from presence for other reasons and individual practice. (Rossi & Scappini, 2014) This methodology alone is not sufficient to gather the information necessary to determine what impacts congregation attendance. Congregational attendance is impacted due to the type of services and the number of services provided for the attendees. Various types of religious services contribute to the variance in congregation attendance. As a result, this can impact the changes we see in attendance such as when there are not small groups for single parents, or children services offered at the church. Across the nation and denominations individuals are searching for churches that can meet immediate and long term needs as well as

have the flexibility to attend at various times due to constraints that may exist. There is a lack of understanding of the degree and way the relationship between types of services provided and the number of services provided impacts congregation attendance as well as overall well-being.

Literature Review

There are studies that exist regarding church attendance and correlating the relationship to those who actively practice faith. As religious values diminish, so does attendance at religious services. (Hirschle, 2010) In addition to this argument in the study conducted by Hirschle, further suggested that because economic growth increased the individual purchasing power then this also somehow became consumption related behavior in whether one attended services. This is interpreted as the more money one made also impacted church attendance in combination with one's faith. A key gap in this study is that it did not explore how the impact of types of services would impact an individual's faith and how that in turn impacted whether they attended church services. Further research has been conducted regarding the connection of congregational attendance and volunteerism. Although to some degree volunteerism is a service provided by the church this study does not indicate this as a factor. Instead, they found that individualism, power distance, and survival/self-expression values moderated the effect of religion on volunteering, with a stronger relationship between religious attendance and volunteering in nationalities with self-expression values, high power distance, and low individualism (Luria et al., 2017).

Masengo conducted a study regarding the neglect of people in the church with a disability. He presented some of the prejudices and biases held by the clergy regarding persons with disabilities and how that does hinder church goers. However, the study did not cover how clergy can play a role in how churches thrive or why individuals do not attend. The needs of other types of congregants were not considered. Magezi Explored how pastoral care can be operational in real life situations to address public issues within the church. Although the effects of CCMP showed promise and strength that included the intervention's ability to change church and community people's thinking (mindset), focusing on holistic empowerment, improvement of church internal ministries (financial situation and care for one another), ability to foster church and community joining of hands, innovative thinking in addressing community problems and practical transformation of both the church (internally) and community social issues (Magezi, 2019). It did not reflect how it can impact church attendance or the influence it can have on the well-being of individuals.

It was only from 2003 onwards that attending a religious service was classified independently, separating it by definition from presence for other reasons and individual practice (Rossi & Scappini, 2014). As indicated above, it is evident that there are significant gaps in correlating types of services and number of services to church attendance. It should be stressed that church attendance plays an important factor in estimating religious practice within a population.

Research Question/Hypothesis

Are types of services provided in congregations significantly associated with congregation attendance and overall well-being, controlling for leadership styles, volunteer opportunities, language, pastoral experience, location, and length of stay of the ministry? This author hypothesizes that there is a significant relationship in types of services provided and the number of services provided to congregation attendance and overall well-being controlling for leadership styles, volunteer opportunities, language, pastoral experience, location, and length of stay of the ministry.

Methodology

Study Population and Sampling

The study population for this research consists of adult clergy persons and lay members of several congregations across several denominations. The choice of this population is based on the research focus, which seeks to fill a void in the sociological study of congregations by providing data that can be used to draw a nationally aggregate picture of congregations. (Chavez, 2021)

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a combination of online searches. This researcher attained data from the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA) utilizing information from the National Congregations Study. According to ARDA this data was gathered using computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), and interviewed one key informant, usually a clergy person, from each congregation. The median interview time was 65 minutes. 75 percent of interviews were with clergy, 94 percent were with staff of some sort, and the remaining six percent were with non-staff congregational leaders. These interviews were conducted by telephone, and congregations were visited for in-person interviews if necessary. 91 percent of the interviews were conducted by phone; nine percent were conducted in person. Data were gathered between July 2018 and September 2019. The NCS-IV response rate was 69 percent. Complete data were collected from 1,262 congregations (Chavez, 2021).

The National Congregations Study (NCS) dataset fills a void in the sociological study of congregations by providing data that can be used to draw a nationally aggregate picture of congregations (Chavez, 2021).

Variables and Measurements

The dependent variable is congregational attendance, independent variable is types of services offered, and the control variables are political involvement, language, location, pastor experience, and length of time for the ministry.

Data Cleaning

A univariate analysis was utilized to examine univariate normality for each continuous variable and exploration of an adequate split for each categorical variable. Upon exploring the frequency of distribution missing values were identified. As a result of the missing values this author recoded to same variable with each distribution. Those cases were then removed, and frequency of distribution was evaluated once more showing there were no additional missing cases. Prior to transformation outliers were identified and the stem-leaf plots were examined which showed there were extreme values that needed to be removed. Outliers were examined and it discovered that extreme variables were present per Stem and Leaf plot. This writer explored extreme values and removed those cases after conditions were satisfied. This was conducted two more times to have distribution to approach normalcy as much as possible. A transformation using SQRT/LOG10 was utilized to improve skewness. However, even with the use of transformation the distributions remained skewed. The level of measurement was both categorical and continuous; with the majority being continuous variables. Due to continuous variables the possibility of the distribution being skewed was likely. The appropriate statistical test for this analysis would be Multiple Regression. Multiple regression identifies the best combination of predictors (IVs) of the dependent variable and is used when there are several independent variables and one dependent quantitative variable (Mertler & Rachel, 2016); its predicting and looking at relationship.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of quantitative data, a preliminary linear regression was used to check for Mahalanobis. Once completed an exploration was conducted to test outliers of the Mahalanobis chi-square. Any outliers were deleted from the data set. Several explorations of frequencies and missing cases were conducted. Data that needed to be recoded were recoded to ensure an effective analysis. Unwanted observations were removed from the dataset including duplicate observations or irrelevant observations. Steps were performed until all data was cleaned to perform the final regression analysis. Multiple regression analysis was utilized to explore the relationship between key independent and dependent variables.

Rationale

The choice of statistical analysis was guided by the research questions and the nature of my data. Multiple regression was used to understand how multiple independent variables, including categorical ones, are related to a continuous dependent variable. Because control variables can also be included in the model to account for their effects this analysis appeared to be a viable choice.

Research Design

The research design used to address the research question is Correlational Research design. Correlational research attempts to determine the extent of a relationship between two or more variables using statistical data. In this type of design, relationships between and among a number of facts are sought and interpreted. This type of research will recognize trends and patterns in data, but it does not go so far in its analysis to prove causes for these observed patterns. Cause and effect is not the basis of this type of observational research. The data, relationships, and distributions of variables are studied only. Variables are not manipulated; they are only identified and are studied as they occur in a natural setting (Winston Salem State University, n.d.). In utilizing correlational research design, it allows us to discover the strength and direction of relationships that exist between two variables. However, it is limited because establishing the existence of the relationship does not tell us much about cause and effect (Lumen, 2023).

Another design considered in interpreting the findings was that may be helpful in this research which is Experimental design. Experimental research design, often called true experimentation, uses the scientific method to establish the cause-effect relationship among a group of variables that make up a study. A true experiment is any study where an effort is made to identify and impose control over all other variables except one. An independent variable is manipulated to determine the effects on the dependent variables. Subjects are randomly assigned to experimental treatments rather than identified in naturally occurring groups. (Winston Salem State University, n.d.)

Strength of experimental design are they are useful for studying human behavior, researchers can have control over variables, provides specific conclusions, and can be easily duplicated (Formplus, 2023). Limitations of experimental design is prone to human error, it's expensive, time consuming, can produce artificial results, and may lead to personal biases of the researcher (Formplus, 2023).

The design within the experimental research design Repeated Measures design is an experimental design where the same participants participate in each independent variable condition. This means that each experiment's condition includes the same group of participants. Repeated Measures design is also known as within-groups or within-subjects design (McLeod & Guy-Evans, 2023). Within the repeated measures design a strength would be as the same participants are used in each condition, participants variables are reduced, and fewer people are needed as they participate in all conditions. Limitations that exist are that there may be order effect which refers to the order of the conditions affecting the participants. (McLeod & Guy-Evans, 2023)

Why these Research Designs

The designs used in this research is appropriate to the research question because the research question is looking at the relationship and impact (effect) a factor can have on another factor; which in this case is the dependent variable; this is fitting for correlational research design and experimental combined. The research designs proposed simply seemed more appropriate due to the definitions of specific research designs and what is commonly used for these types of research questions. It accounted for variables used within the research question and hypothesis. As I reviewed the different designs, I found that correlational and experimental were more appropriate as both examine the relationship and effect of something. The advantages to the proposed designs are the relationships of the variables are clearly established and the use of experimental design blends the extreme of one end of the spectrum such as descriptive to the other end of spectrum where variables are not controlled at all to where there is some control.

Ethical Considerations

In utilizing the secondary dataset, the information had already been collected and readily available. However, even in this case ethical consideration included making sure that the data obtained was de-identified and that consent of study subjects is reasonably presumed. There is no potential harm to the subjects used in the data as there was no context in measurements used that would cause harm. The data collected was from a reputable archived database whereas in even collecting the information you agreed to terms of how the data would be utilized to ensure no violations were present.

Potential Limitations/Challenges

Within correlational research it can determine association between exposure and outcomes but cannot predict causation. As a result, I thought that combining correlational research design with experimental design would address this area since the study aims to examine and determine the impact lack of services has on congregational attendance. According to Research Methods for Social Work, within experimental research design that no matter how well an experiment controls for other threats to internal validity, the credibility of its conclusions can be damaged severely if its measurement procedures appear to have been biased. There is also the propensity that research reactivity can threaten the validity of experimental findings (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). This demonstrates the necessity to combine the two types of design to mitigate challenges that arise.

Significance of Study

This author aims to understand if the types of services and number of services provided impacts congregational attendance. Religiosity or Spirituality of Americans plays a major role in shaping the behavior and consequences if certain services are not made readily available to those who may be in need. Within society, many churches play a vital role in the welfare of its people. They are partnering with local, national, and worldwide organizations to support those who are in need. If those said needs are not met it can have a negative impact upon those who it intends to serve. As a result, attendance impacts, but also the overall well-being of individual congregants. The practical and theoretical implication of this study is that this can assist congregations across the world in developing services that are relevant for those who would potentially attend their churches which can improve quality of life. Further research would be useful in this area to address specific needs using a mixed methods approach, which may prove more effective in examining the issues that have the most impact, shifting perspective in how churches are ran, and understanding in a more comprehensive way the impact of lack of services.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between the types and number of services offered by churches and their influence on congregational attendance and overall well-being. Using data from the National Congregations Study and applying multiple regression analysis, the findings contribute to a growing body of research exploring how institutional practices within religious organizations influence participation and engagement among congregants. The results suggest that the services offered by churches play a meaningful role in shaping both congregational involvement and the perceived well-being of individuals who participate in religious communities.

The findings reinforce the idea that churches function not only as spiritual institutions but also as social and support systems that address the diverse needs of their members. When congregations offer services that respond to the practical, emotional, and spiritual needs of attendees—such as programs for families, youth, and individuals experiencing life challenges—these offerings can strengthen engagement and promote continued participation in religious communities. Conversely, when such services are limited or absent, congregations may experience declines in attendance or reduced engagement from members seeking support elsewhere.

This study also highlights the importance of considering contextual and organizational factors, including leadership style, volunteer opportunities, language accessibility, and pastoral experience, when examining church participation. These elements interact with service offerings in ways that shape congregational experiences and influence whether individuals feel supported within a religious community. By accounting for these variables, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that contribute to religious engagement and attendance patterns. From a practical perspective, the results of this study have important implications for church leadership and religious organizations seeking to strengthen congregational engagement. Developing programs and services that reflect the evolving needs of congregants may serve as a strategic approach to fostering both participation and well-being. Churches that intentionally design ministries and outreach efforts to address social, emotional, and spiritual needs may be better positioned to cultivate strong, supportive communities that encourage sustained involvement.

While the study contributes valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the analysis relies on secondary data and a correlational design, causal relationships cannot be definitively established.

Additionally, the use of aggregated congregational data may not fully capture individual-level experiences of participation and well-being. Future research could expand upon these findings by employing mixed-methods approaches that incorporate qualitative perspectives from congregants and clergy to better understand how specific services influence engagement and spiritual development.

Overall, this study underscores the significant role that church-based services play in shaping congregational participation and individual well-being. As religious institutions continue to navigate shifting social dynamics and evolving community needs, understanding how organizational practices influence engagement will remain critical. By examining the relationship between service offerings and congregational attendance, this research contributes to broader discussions about the role of religious institutions in supporting community well-being and sustaining meaningful spiritual participation.

References

- Bachelor Print. (2022, September 29). *Quasi-experimental design – everything you need to know*. Retrieved October 14, 2023, from <https://www.bachelorprint.com/methodology/quasi-experimental-design/#1662468528484-3d72062a-24f2>
- Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). *Church attendance*. Retrieved September 22, 2023, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/church-attendance>
- Chavez, M. (2021). National congregations study, cumulative dataset.
- Formplus. (2023, July 27). *Experimental vs non-experimental research: 15 key differences*. Retrieved October 14, 2023, from <https://www.formpl.us/blog/experimental-non-experimental-research>
- Hamu, F. J., Sihombing, A. A., Prasojo, Z. H., Martasudjita, E. P., & Firmanto, A. D. (2023). Liturgical transformation of diocesan church in palangkaraya, indonesia. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 79(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7850>
- Hirschle, J. (2010). From religious to consumption-related routine activities? analyzing ireland's economic boom and the decline in church attendance. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49(4), 673–687. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01536.x>
- Iowa State University. (2023, July 20). *Quasi-experimental design*. Iowa State University Library. Retrieved October 13, 2023, from <https://instr.iastate.libguides.com/researchmethods/quasiexperimental#:~:text=%22Quasi%2Dexperimental%20research%20is%20similar,%2For%20no%20active%20manipulation.%22>
- Lumen. (2023). *Theoretical perspectives on religion*. Lumen Learning. Retrieved September 21, 2023, from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/>
- Lumen. (2023). *Correlation research*. Lumen Learning, Retrieved October 25, 2023, from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/>
- Luria, G., Cnaan, R. A., & Boehm, A. (2017). Religious attendance and volunteering: Testing national culture as a boundary condition. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 56(3), 577–599. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12360>
- Magezi, V. (2019). Doing public pastoral care through church-driven development in africa: Reflection on church and community mobilisation process approach in lesotho. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 75(4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5501>
- Masango, M. J. (2019). Neglect of people with disability by the african church. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 75(4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5631>
- McLeod, S., & Guy-Evans, O. (2023, July 31). *Experimental design: types, examples & methods*. Simply Psychology. Retrieved October 12, 2023, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/experimental-designs.html>

Mertler, C. A., & Rachel, V. R. (2016). *Advanced and multivariate statistical methods* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Open Library. (2020). *Non-equivalent group designs*. Ecampus Ontario. Retrieved October 14, 2023, from <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/psychmethods3ecan/chapter/non-equivalent-control-group-designs/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20strengths%20of%20more%20control%20over%20history%20effects.>

Rossi, M., & Scappini, E. (2014). Church attendance, problems of measurement, and interpreting indicators: A study of religious practice in the united states, 1975-2010. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53(2), 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12115>

Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. R. (2017). *Research methods for social work* (9th ed ed.). Cengage Learning.

Shaver, J. H., White, T. J., Vakaoti, P., & Lang, M. (2021). A comparison of self-report, systematic observation and third-party judgments of church attendance in a rural fijian village. *PLOS ONE*, 16(10), e0257160. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257160>

Winston Salem State University. (n.d.). *Key elements of a research proposal-quantitative design*. WSSU. Retrieved October 13, 2023, from https://www.wssu.edu/about/offices-and-departments/office-of-sponsored-programs/pre-award/_Files/documents/develop-quantitative.pdf