

Schoeman, WJ
University of the Free State

The Congregational Life Survey in the Dutch Reformed Church: Identifying strong and weak connections¹

ABSTRACT

For the first time in a South African church, a Church Life Survey was done. A pilot study was done in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) during August 2006. The aim of this empirical description is to identify the strengths and stronger connections of DRC congregations and help congregations identify their own religious role and identity. This will help congregations positioning themselves within the DRC and the wider context of other Church Life Surveys.

Die “Church Life Survey” (CLS) is vir die eerste maal in ’n Suid-Afrikaanse kerk gedoen. Dit is gedurende Augustus 2006 as ’n loodsstudie gedoen in die NG Kerk. Die doel van die empiriese, beskrywende ondersoek was om sterkpunte en sterkter konneksies in gemeentes van die NG Kerk te identifiseer. Dit behoort gemeentes te help om oor hulle rol en identiteit na te dink. Die CLS maak dit ook moontlik om dit in ’n breër konteks te plaas en met ander soortgelyke studies te vergelyk.

For any denomination or community, congregations are important. Growing and strong congregations will help communities and denominations function within society. Nel (2009b) claimed: “The congregation is a local expression of the church of Christ in this world. The church has a global and local context.” The aim of this article is to describe a quantitative, empirical research process that will help congregations find their strong and weak connections in a reliable and credible way within a global and local context.

Congregations are always analyzed, be it formally or informally. People talk about congregations and have perceptions concerning their own and other congregations (Nel 2009a). People demand better results from every institution they encounter, including their congregation and parish (Woolever and Bruce 2002:4). This is also true of congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Congregational leaders, therefore, need the kind of reality-based organizational analysis that business leaders in growing, healthy, excellence-orientated companies find helpful (Woolever and Bruce 2002:4). To meet the challenges they face, DRC congregations need an analysis that they can trust and use to plan their way forward.

Congregations have both a theological and an empirical identity (Nel 2009b). These two identities play an important role in the way in which a congregation is analyzed (Nel 2009a). As part of a practical theological reflection, it is important to ask: What is going on in this congregation? This descriptive-empirical task is about “[g]athering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations or contexts” (Osmer 2008:4). This is done by listening to different voices, in this case, by listening to the voices of the members of the congregation. Osmer (2008:35) claims that “[p]riestly listening is, first and foremost, an

1 Part of this article was delivered by the author as a paper (“The Congregational Life Survey in a South African church: strengths and weaknesses.”) at the SSSR conference on 2 November 2007 in Tampa, Florida, USA.

activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders.” Woolever and Bruce (2002:8) ask who speaks for the congregation. The Church Life Survey is a process that will help the leadership of a congregation to hear the voices of “ordinary” members. As a formal process, listening is done through empirical research (Osmer 2008:38). The Church Life Survey is an empirical way of listening to the congregation.

Listening is a hermeneutical and communal process of discernment. In doing this, congregations make decisions using certain resources. They may use any combination of the following (see Woolever and Bruce 2002:7, Van Gelder 2007:104-114):

- A theological understanding of the church and congregation;
- The Biblical text, for example using a church model from the Bible;
- Spirit-driven, the belief in the way the Spirit is leading the congregation;
- The way church tradition prescribes the organization of a congregation; and
- Information or data about the situation in and around the congregation; this data and information need to be valid and reliable, or else it could also lead a congregation in the wrong direction.

The Church Life Survey is a fifth resource denominations and congregations may use in looking at themselves. It needs to be noted that the other resources all play an important role in the discernment process. The rest of this article is exploring this fifth way, first of all by looking at the Church Life Surveys in general and then by applying this form of research within the DRC.

1. THE CHURCH LIFE SURVEYS

The Church Life Surveys started in 1991 in Australia with the aim to assist congregations to fulfil their mission as church. In 1991, 6 700 congregations in 18 denominations completed the survey in Australia (Kaldor 2002:96). The Australian survey was repeated in 1996 and also in 1997 in New Zealand. This time, 324 000 church goers from around 6 900 congregations in 20 denominations completed the survey (NCLS 2010). The success of the survey caused it to be used in England and the United States as well. In 2001, about 1.2 million worshippers in these four countries participated in the International Congregational Church Life Survey (Bruce et. al. 2006:3).

The survey provides useful information for individual congregations about their own situation and helps them to understand their role as a faith community. The survey provides congregations with the opportunity to reflect on their life and mission, their leadership, and their connection to the community (NCLS 2010, Nel 2009a). Most worshippers believe that their congregations are unique, but while each congregation is unique, much about congregations are universal (Woolever and Bruce 2002:3). The Church Life Survey is an attempt to provide reliable information about the more universal situation of denominations and congregations. Seeing the bigger picture will help congregations evaluate their own position.

The task teams for the survey identified the following aims and purposes for the research (see the US Congregational Life Survey, NCLS 2010):

- To develop resources that will help congregations better understand themselves, identify their strengths, and stimulate their efforts to create a positive future for themselves;
- To develop resources that help congregations assess their ministries and relate more effectively with their communities;
- To provide a national and international data base that will enable congregations to look at their ministries in relationship to denominational, national and international benchmarks; and

- To provide denominational leaders, congregational consultants, and congregational planners with information and resources to assist congregations.

Congregational health is envisioned as more than just numerical growth (Woolever and Bruce 2002:6, Sterland et.al. 2006:39-40, Nel 2009a). This means that a congregation cannot be described only in terms of the change in numbers, such as membership, attendance, income, etc. The Church Life Survey identified four dimensions or main connections of importance in a congregation (Woolever and Bruce 2002:4). These are:

- Spirituality and faith development (spiritual connections);
- Activities and relationships within the congregation (inside connections);
- Community involvement of the congregation (outside connections); and
- Worshipers' vision of the congregation's future (future connections).

Within the framework of these four connections, the following question was asked: "What are the qualities of a strong congregation?" (Woolever and Bruce 2004:9). Rather than looking at one strength or quality, ten qualities that place a congregation in the upper 20% of strength and effectiveness were found (Woolever and Bruce 2004:9-10 and 125-131):

- Growing spiritually;
- Meaningful worship;
- Participation in the congregation;
- Having a sense of belonging;
- Caring for young people;
- Focusing on the community;
- Sharing faith;
- Welcoming new worshippers;
- Empowering leadership; and
- Looking to the future.

These ten strengths or qualities are thus concepts that are empirically defined and used in describing growing congregations. They must not be seen as primarily normative indicators.

Without information about the changed nature of the community and the congregation, it may happen that "congregations move faithfully forward making decisions based on nonexistent realities" (Woolever and Bruce 2002:8). It is important to note that this is a databased approach and not a case-study approach. This article now wants to explore, from this point of view, the situation within congregations of the DRC, using the four connections and the ten strengths.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE DRC-SURVEY

There are 1176 congregations in the DRC. A random sample of 10% was selected from all the congregations. Thus 118 congregations were selected and asked to complete the questionnaire during August 2006. As 81% (95) of the congregations returned questionnaires, 12522 questionnaires completed by worshippers (15 years or older) attending any worship service on one of two Sundays in August 2006 were returned. D. Bruce from the Presbyterian Church (USA) provided the methodology that they used for calculating the ten strengths and indexes. The calculations were done in exactly the same way, except for the youth at home (Strength 5) which was not included in the DRC questionnaire.

The results of the PC (USA) on the strengths were used as a point of reference in discussing the situation in the DRC. There are certainly differences between the contexts of the two

denominations, differences in language and ecclesiology for example, but the Presbyterian results were only used as a point of reference. This helps congregations in the DRC to benchmark them within a wider context. These limitations must be kept in mind when the results of this research are discussed.

3. A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE RESPONDENTS

The following is a short description of the respondents that completed the questionnaire:

Less than 20 years	5
20 to 29 years	7
30 to 39 years	13
40 to 49 years	19
50 to 59 years	19
60 to 69 years	20
70 to 79 years	13
80 years and more	4

Employed full time, part time, or self	52
Unemployed	1
Full-time homemaker	11
Retired	27
Student	5
Other	3

No formal schooling	1
Some high school	13
Completed high school	31
Less than 3 years after school	22
More than 3 years after school	33

Never married	12
In first marriage	63
Divorced	5
Widowed	10
Remarried after death of spouse	3
Remarried after divorce	6
Living in a committed relationship	1

This is my first time	1
Hardly ever or special occasions only	1
Less than once a month	2
Once a month	3
Two or three times a month	23
Usually every week	63
More than once a week	6

In summary, 37% of the respondents are older than 60 years. More than 50% are employed and have a tertiary education. More than 60% are married. This is more or less the description of an aging, middle-class denomination. They usually attend the worship services every week. This may be an indication of the loyalty and commitment of the respondents.

4. SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

The Christian church connects believers to one another. They share the same belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Healthy congregations develop and encourage this connection between God and the believers (Kaldor et. al. 2002:27). The spiritual growth of believers and the congregation itself are therefore an important part of congregational life.

Strength 1: Growing Spiritually

Table 6: Questions on growing spiritually: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Are growing in their faith through participation in activities of their congregation	38	33
B	Spend time at least in private devotional activities a few times a week	90	66
C	Feel their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation	79	82
D	Report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	15	15
E	Report the prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	7	13

Worshippers place a meaningful emphasis on private devotional activities (B). Personal religious activities take an important place in the religious life of the worshippers. The congregation is also helping in the growth of their faith (A). Most of the worshippers feel that their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation (C). The congregation plays an important role in the faith formation of its members, but faith cannot grow in isolation, and meaningful worship is therefore needed.

Strength 2: Meaningful Worship

Table 7: Questions on meaningful worship: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Always or usually experience God's presence during services	94	73
B	Always or usually experience inspiration during services	84	70
C	Always or usually experience joy during services	83	73
D	Always or usually experience awe during services	71	18
E	Rarely experience boredom during services	30	63
F	Rarely experience frustration during services	26	67
G	Report the sermons, preaching, or homilies as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	57	40
H	Report worship services or activities of the congregation help them with everyday living to a great extent	48	43

Worshippers experience God’s presence (A), inspiration (B), joy (C), and awe (D) to a great extent in worship services. These experiences play an important role in the spiritual growth of the worshippers. They therefore report that sermons and preaching (G) are a valued aspect of their congregation.

5. INSIDE CONNECTIONS

Christians live in community with each other; they are part of the community of believers. “Our life together in a community of faith is not an optional extra but part of the core of our Christian life,” Kaldor et. al. (2002:37) claims. In a fragmented and individualistic society, people are looking for a place to belong. The question is: Does the church provide in this need? Attending a worship service is an important part of the religious life of the members, but there are more to being a congregation than only attending the worship service on a Sunday. In a congregation, its members relate to one another and form a community. How can these relationships and connections be described?

Strength 3: Participating in the Congregation

Table 8: Questions on participating in the congregation: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Usually attend worship services every week or more than once a week	69	78
B	Are involved in one or more small groups (e.g., Sunday school, prayer or Bible study, discussion groups, fellowships)	53	62
C	Have one or more leadership role in the congregation (e.g., board member, teacher, leading worship)	42	57
D	Often participate in important decision-making in the congregation	18	31
E	Give 5% or more of their net income to the congregation regularly	47	56

The participation and involvement of all the DRC-worshippers is lower than that of the PC (USA). They attend the worship services less often (A). Just more than half are involved in small groups (B). They are also not to a great extend part of the leadership (C) and the decision-making processes in the congregation (D).

Strength 4: Having a Sense of Belonging

Table 9: Questions on having a sense of belonging: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Report they are participating more in the activities of the congregation than compared to two years ago	25	28
B	Say most of their closest friends are part of the congregation	13	13
C	Feel they have a strong and growing sense of belonging to their congregation	40	50

The sense of belonging to the congregation is also lower than with US respondents. Fewer than half of the respondents feel a strong and growing sense of belonging to the congregation (C). If the involvement were lower, so would be the sense of belonging. “Strong congregations find

ways to encourage emotional attachment while giving people the freedom to be themselves,” is the opinion of Woolever and Bruce (2002:47). The implications are that the level of involvement and sense of belonging in the DRC congregations are not as strong as it could be.

Strength 5: Caring for Young People

Table 10: Questions on caring for young people: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Are satisfied with what is offered for children and the youth (less than 19 years of age) in the congregation	66	55
B	Report ministry for children or the youth as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	13	15
C	Percentage of children and the youth (living at home) who worship in the congregation	Not asked	75

The worshippers are satisfied with the care for the young people in the congregation (A).

6. OUTSIDE CONNECTIONS

The church has a mission beyond its own borders and an obligation to the wider community it serves. Churches have the challenge to build, rebuild, or strengthen connections with the communities and people they want to serve (Kaldor et. al. 2002:51). A congregation cannot just look to the inside, but must be connected to the wider community. Is this the case with DRC congregations?

Strength 6: Focusing on the Community

Table 11: Questions on focusing on the community: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Are involved in social service or advocacy groups through their congregation	22	29
B	Are involved in social service or advocacy groups in their community	29	38
C	Contribute to charitable community organizations	50	77
D	Report wider community care or an emphasis on social justice as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	27	13
E	Report openness to social diversity as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation	3	8
F	Worked with others to try to solve a community problem	16	26
G	Voted in the last (presidential) election	60	81

In the DRC, the focus on the community is lower in most of the aspects. The exception is the congregation’s emphasis on community care and social justice (D). For the rest, the worshippers report a lower community involvement. Less than a third of the worshippers are involved in social service through their congregation (A) or in the community (B). Just 60% of the respondents voted in the municipal elections of March 2006 (G).

Strength 7: Sharing Faith

Table 12: Questions on sharing faith: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Are involved in evangelistic activities in the congregation	8	17
B	Feel at ease talking about their faith and seek opportunities to do so	12	11
C	Have invited to a worship service a friend or relative who has not attended in the past year	52	48
D	Report reaching those who do not attend church as one of the three most valued aspect of their congregation	13	11

Worshippers are prepared to invite a friend or relative to a worship service (C), but are not much involved in evangelistic activities (A). To invite somebody you know is easier than being involved in evangelistic activities. The sharing of faith is done within a known atmosphere.

Strength 8: Welcoming New Worshippers

Table 13: Questions on welcoming new worshippers: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Who have been going to worship services or activities of this congregation for 5 years or less	31	26

A congregation grows by welcoming new worshippers. This response is slightly better, but is it “new” worshippers or just DRC members or friends from other congregations that are welcomed? The welcoming of newcomers remains important: “Newcomers are more likely than other attendees to report that the initial catalyst to attendance was an invitation from a spouse, friend or contact through a church activity” (Sterland et.al. 2006:51).

7. FUTURE CONNECTIONS

Vision and purpose give direction to a congregation. Without vision and purpose, a congregation will go nowhere or do nothing meaningful. In the view of Kaldor et. al. (2002:72), “[a] shared picture of the future they are working towards binds people together and gives them energy to make the vision a reality.” The role of the leadership in the congregation is to inspire and lead the way in fulfilling the congregation’s vision and purpose.

Strength 9: Empowering Leadership

Table 14: Questions on empowering leadership: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Feel the congregation’s leaders encourage them to find and use their gifts and skills to a great extent	48	34
B	Feel the minister, pastor, or priest takes into account the ideas of worshippers to a great extent	41	48
C	Describe the leadership style of the pastor, minister, or priest as one that inspires people to take action	45	44
D	<u>Strongly</u> feel there is a good match between the congregation and the minister, pastor, or priest	41	45

The one response that is standing out is the feeling that the congregation’s leaders are encouraging the worshipper to use their gifts and skills (A). This is also the strong point for the worshippers in the congregation. The leadership style inspires them to take action (C).

Strength 10: Looking to the Future

Table 15: Questions on looking to the future: Percentage of worshippers who ...		Average DRC	Average PC (USA)
A	Feel the congregation has a clear vision, goals, or direction for its ministry and mission, and they are strongly committed to them	26	30
B	Have a sense of excitement about their congregation's future	36	19
C	Feel the congregation is currently moving in new directions	18	28
D	Feel the congregation is always ready to try something new	73	50

Worshippers feel excited about the congregation’s future (B) and have a strong feeling that the congregation is always ready to try something new (D). Worshippers have a positive attitude when looking to the future.

8. A SUMMARY OF THE STRENGTHS OF DRC CONGREGATIONS

The ten strengths can be categorized and summarized by calculating an index number for each of the strengths. The following is a summary of the ten strength indexes. To have a reference point, it was compared to that of the PC (USA). (See the stated limitations in this regard in the last paragraph of point 2).

Table 16: Summary of the ten strengths	DRC	PC (USA)
Spiritual connections		
1. Growing Spiritually	46	42
2. Meaningful Worship	62	56
Inside connections		
3. Participating in the Congregation	45	57
4. Having a Sense of Belonging	26	30
5. Caring for Young People	(39)	48
Outside connections		
6. Focusing on the Community	30	39
7. Sharing Faith Scores	21	22
8. Welcoming New Worshippers	31	26
Future connections		
9. Empowering Leadership	44	43
10. Looking to the Future	38	32

In looking at Table 16, the question is: What is standing out? Using the different indexes and drawing comparisons between the DRC and the PC (USA) can identify stronger and weaker connections.

The stronger connections:

- Spiritual connections: Both strengths (growing spiritually and meaningful worship) are in the case of the DRC stronger than those of the PC (USA). The emphasis of worshippers may be on an individualistic relationship and view towards religion. Religion is a private matter and “my” personal relationship with God is of the utmost importance.
- Looking to the Future connections: Worshippers are excited about the future. Tomorrow is better than yesterday. It possible that this vision is also part of an individualistic view about one day and not a commitment to the future here and now.

The weaker connections:

- Inside connections: These connections are not as strong as they can be. Both participating and belonging to the congregation are weaker. Congregations in the DRC have a strong geographical base and loyalty may be taken for granted because the members reside within the boundaries of the congregation.
- Outside connections: The community is not in the sights of the congregations. The congregations are not strongly involved and connected to the community. The involvement of congregations in the community needs to improve.

Research shows that focusing on the future is an important aspect of congregational life. In the words of Woolever et. al. (2006:63): “Optimism about the future is associated with greater levels of congregational involvement among worshippers and, at the same time, involvement promotes greater optimism about the congregation’s future.” This is a strength that can be used in making the weaker connections stronger.

Certain priorities can be identified to make the connections in congregations stronger. Three factors are important (Bruce et. al. 2006:121):

- Ensuring that new people are welcome and become active members;
- Empowering the leaders and using them effectively; and
- Focusing on the spiritual development of the worshippers.

These three factors are strengths of the DRC congregations. They may be used and developed further in the process of growing healthier congregations.

It must be remembered that this is only a pilot project and the beginning of, hopefully, a much bigger study. This empirical description can only be part of a more comprehensive reflection on the role of the congregation from a practical theological perspective.

A final remark: It seems that the worshippers in the DRC and its congregations are living in their own private world and are lacking involvement with each other and especially with the wider community that they are supposed to serve. DRC congregations need an approach that focuses on serving the community, i.e. being a church for the other. The Church Life Survey provides an empirical approach of listening to the membership of congregations that may help in describing and making stronger the different connections of the congregation, as a community of believers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce D, Sterland S, Brookes N, Escott P. 2006. *An international survey of congregations and worshippers: methodology and basic comparisons*. Journal of Beliefs and Values. Vol 27, No 1, April 2006, pp 3-12.
- Bruce D, Woolever C, Wulff K, Smith-Williams I. 2006. *Fast-growing churches: what distinguishes them from others?* Journal of Beliefs and Values. Vol 27, No 1, April 2006, pp 111-126.

- Kaldor P, Castle K, Dixon P. 2002. *Connections for life. Core qualities to foster in your church*. Sydney: Openbook Publishers.
- National Church Life Survey (NCLS), 2010 www.ncls.com accessed 24 May 2010.
- Nel, M., 2009a, Congregational analysis revisited: Empirical approaches. *HTS Theological Studies* 65(1), Art. #187, 13 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v65i.187.
- Nel, M., 2009b, Congregational analysis revisited: A theological and ministerial approach. *HTS Theological Studies* 65(1), Art. #303, 17 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v65i.303.
- Osmer R.R. 2008. *Practical Theology. An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Sterland S, Bellamy J, Escott P, Castle K. 2006. *Attracting and integrating newcomers into church life: research in four countries*. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. Vol 27, No 1, April 2006, pp 39-52.
- Van Gelder C. 2007. *The ministry of the missional church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Woolever C, Bruce D. 2002. *A field guide to U.S. congregations. Who's going where and why*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Woolever C, Bruce D. 2004. *Beyond the ordinary: Ten strengths of U.S. congregations*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville.
- Woolever C, Bruce D, Wulff K, Smith Williams I. 2006. *What do we think about our future and does it matter: congregational identity and vitality*. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. Vol 27, No 1, April 2006, pp 53-64.

TREFWOORDE

Kerk
Church Life Survey
NG Kerk
Gemeente

KEY WORDS

Church
Church Life Survey
Dutch Reformed Church
Congregation

Prof WJ Schoeman
Fakuleit Teologie
Universiteit van die Vrystaat
Tel: 051 4012668
Faks: 051 4013508
Sel: 0834611990
E-posadres: schoemanw@ufs.ac.za