



Congregational Vitality Assessment Report

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

CONVERGENCE

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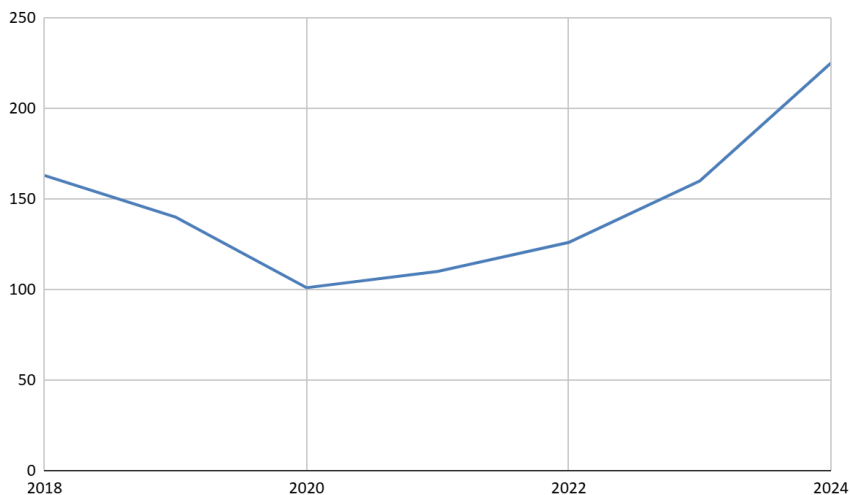
OUR PARTNERSHIP

Convergence partnered with First Congregational Church of Old Lyme in 2024 for Assessment and Consultation services. This report contains the data from your church assessment, an analysis of the data, and creative thinking about what the church could consider as they determine their future.

CHURCH DATA

MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOGRAPHICS

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme has approximately 960 people who participate or support the church in some way. The church has 1 worship service a week, which has had an average of 225 people in attendance (face to face and online) in recent months. The weekly attendance is around 200 in person and is around 25 online. Attendance dipped during the pandemic but has rebounded higher than 2018-2019 at this point.



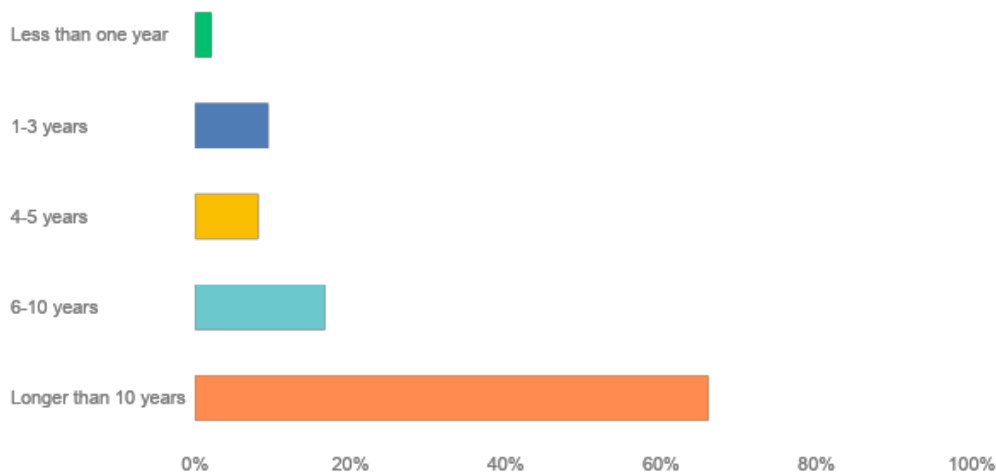
The church holds 45-50 non-worship activities per month - about 200 attend these as well

- AA - 8x/month
- Yoga Group - 8x/month
- Bible Study - 4x/month
- Bible Study Offsite - 4x/month
- Food Pantry - 4x/month
- Diaper Bank - 1x/month
- Ladies Who Stitch - 4x/month
- Ladies Benev Society Lunch - 1x/month
- LBS Board - 1x/month
- Bd of Trustees - 1x/month

- Senior Choir - 4x/month
- Red Cross Blood Drive - 1x/month
- Memorial Services - 2x/month
- Musical Masterworks Concert - 2x/month
- Board of Stewardship - 1x/month
- Writers at the Well - 1x/month
- Newsletter mailing group - 1x/month
- Senior Center events - 3x/month
- Youth Breakfast run to NYC - 1x/month
- Organ Concert - 1x/month
- Grief Group - 1x/month

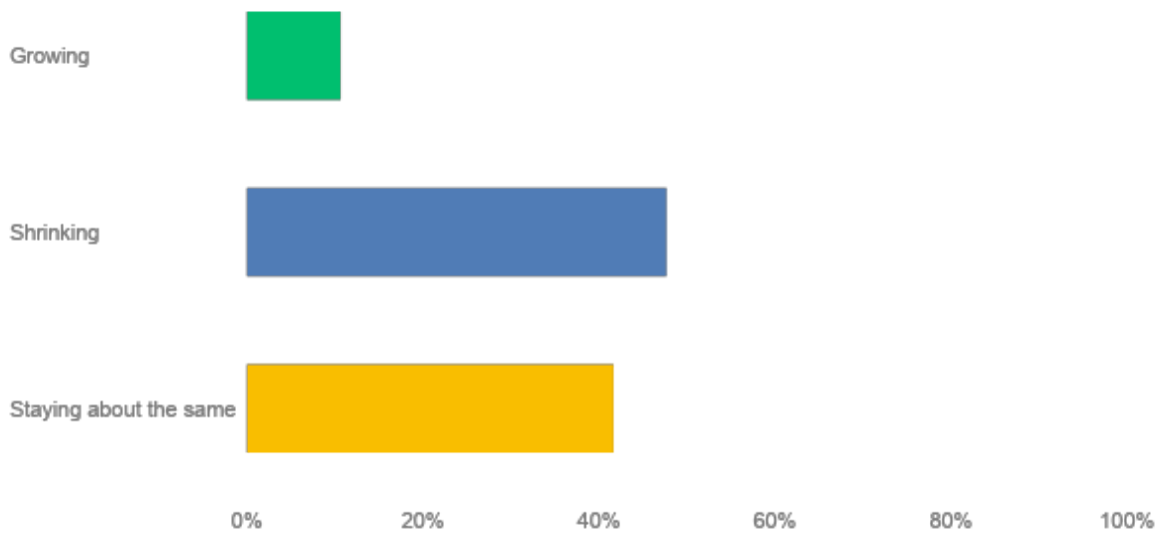
240 people completed your participant survey.

Most survey respondents (66%) have participated for longer than 10 years. Only 12% (28 people) have participated for 3 years or less.



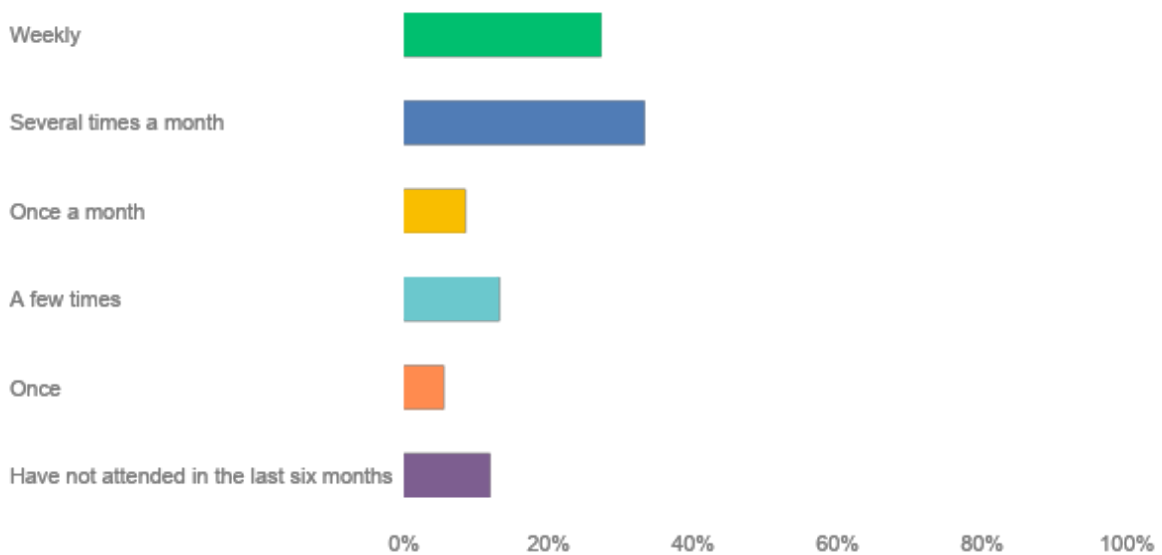
According to the leader survey, in 2023, 14 people joined/began participation in your congregation. In past years, new members (not counting confirmands) have ranged from 17-35 per year. The number of new members per year has decreased year over year. Confirmands have also decreased year over year.

When asked, “Do you think your congregation is growing, shrinking, or staying about the same:”



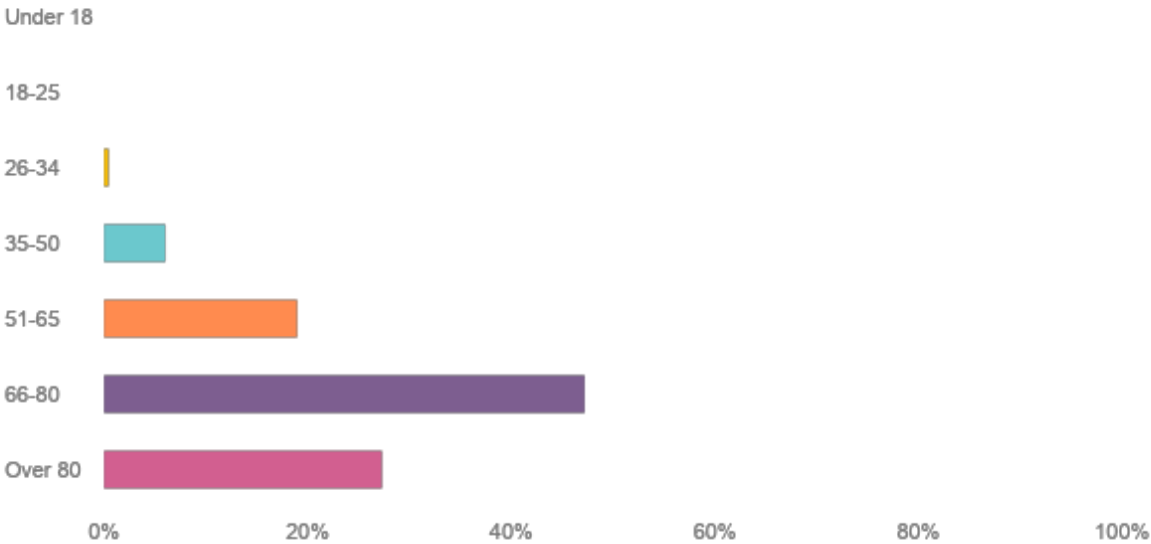
47% of respondents feel your congregation is shrinking, 42% that it is staying about the same, and 11% that it is growing.

The majority of survey respondents (61%) are attending at least several times a month. However, 12% (28 people) have not attended in the last six months, and another 19% (45 people) have only attended once or a few times. This is a significant portion of people who care enough to fill out a survey but no longer participate. In the sections ahead, we will look at whether perspectives differ among those who participate regularly and those who do not.

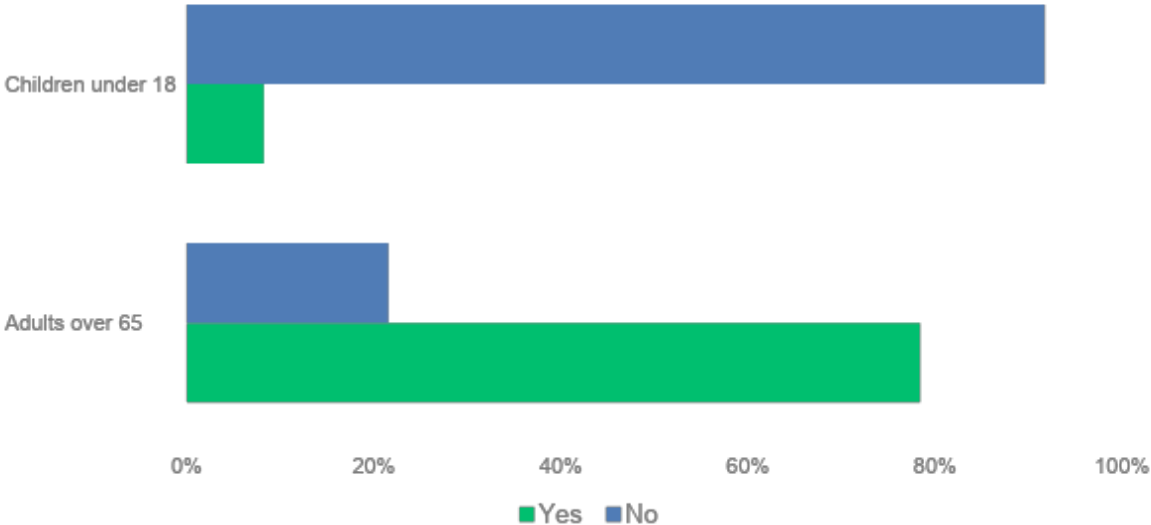


CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS

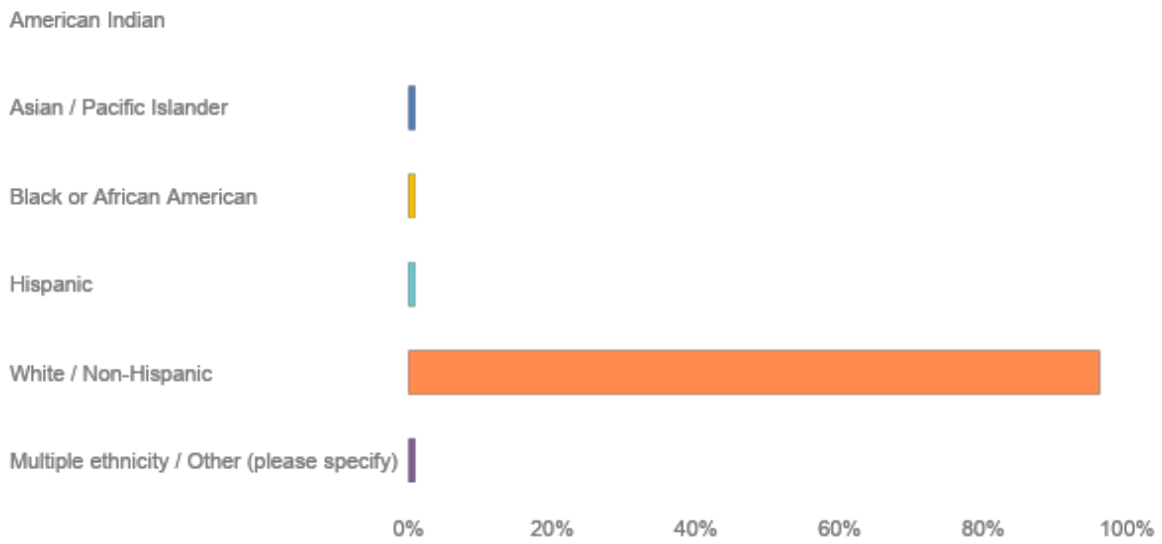
While many people skip demographic questions on surveys, 219 of your respondents did share at least some demographic information. Your respondents were largely over 65 (74%) which is likely similar to your congregation as a whole. However, our consulting visit revealed a significant presence of younger families. We recommend focus groups to make sure these voices are heard.



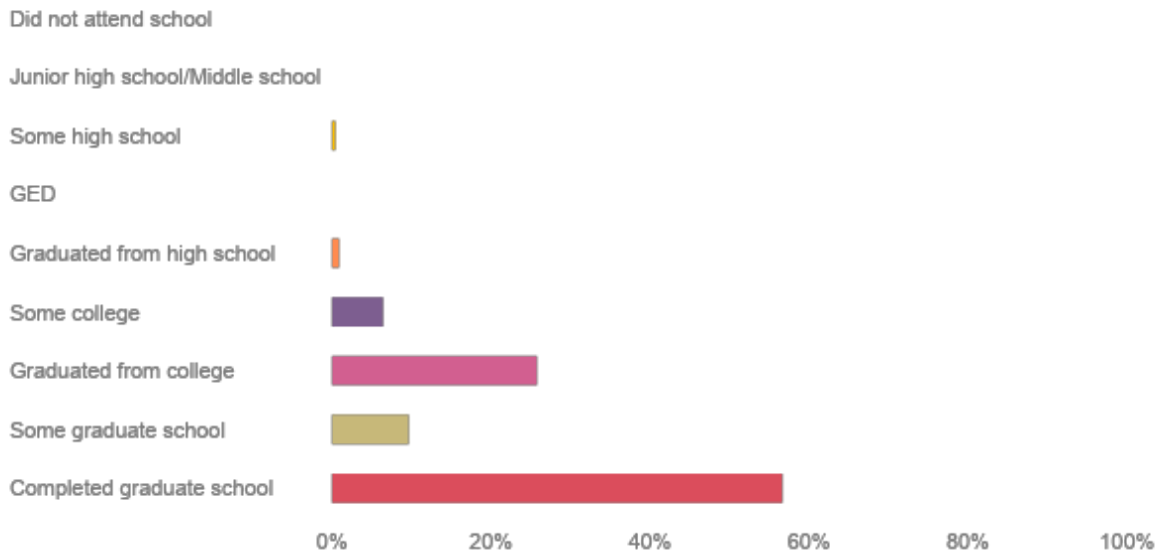
78% of respondent households contained adults over 65, and 9% contained children under 18.



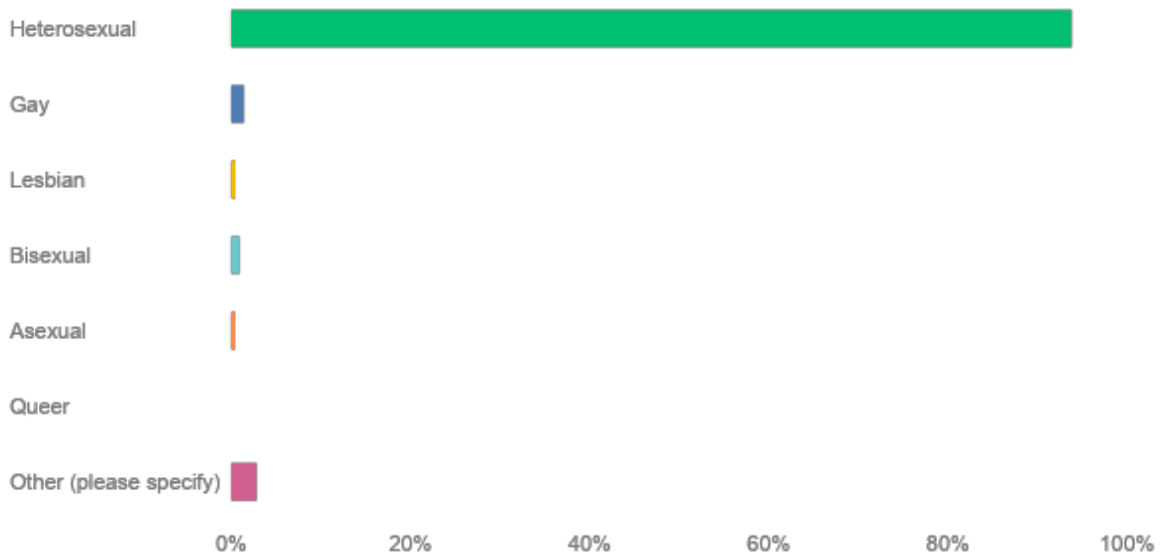
Your respondents were predominantly White/Non-Hispanic (96%) which is likely similar to your congregation as a whole.



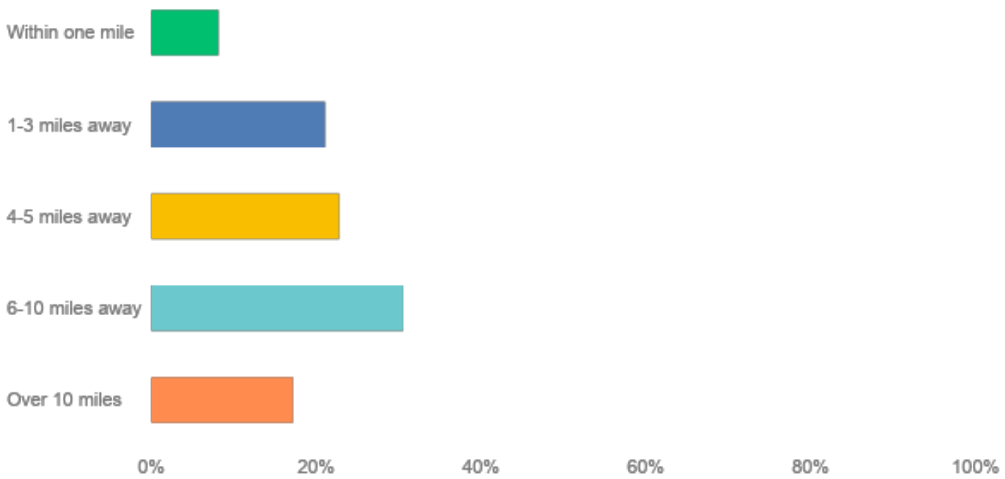
Your respondents were highly educated, with 99% completing at least some college. The majority (66%) had completed at least some graduate school.

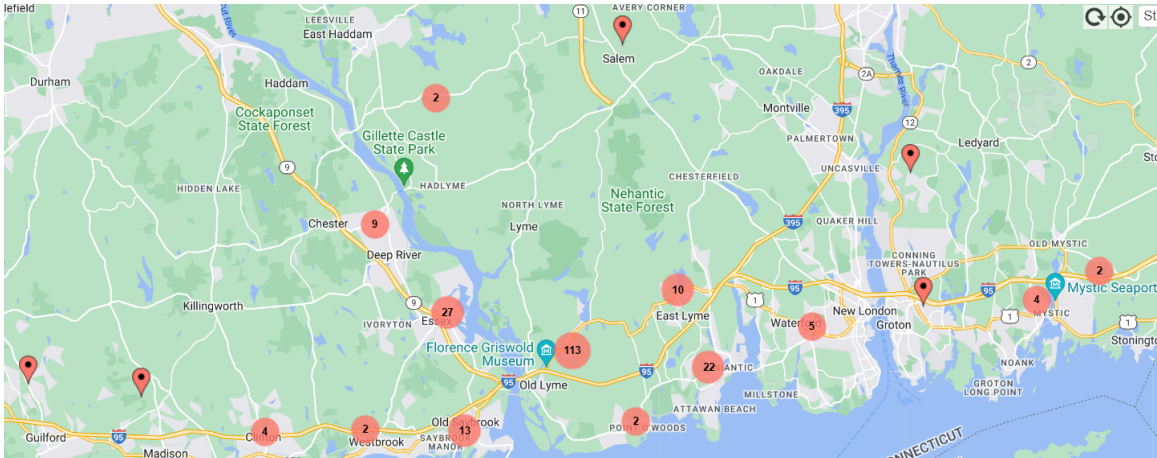


94% of your respondents identified as heterosexual and 3% as LGBTQIA.



Your congregation is quite geographically dispersed. 8% of your respondents lived within one mile of the church building, 22% lived 1-3 miles away, 23% lived 4-5 miles away, and 47% lived 6+ miles away. The zip code map of respondents shows their geographic spread.





CONGREGATIONAL PERCEPTIONS

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their perceptions of the congregation and its situation. Over 90% of respondents felt the church:

- Has a building and parking that are easy for newcomers to find
- Successfully engages people of all ages
- Is spiritually vital and alive
- Has a clear mission and purpose
- Is working for social justice
- Holds strong beliefs and values
- Supports vibrant ministries through the financial and time investments of its members
- Supports members in developing spiritual practices such as prayer
- Is a source of learning for adults
- Is a source of learning for children
- Is a source of learning for youth
- Engages all the senses in worship/gatherings
- Has worship/gatherings that makes me think

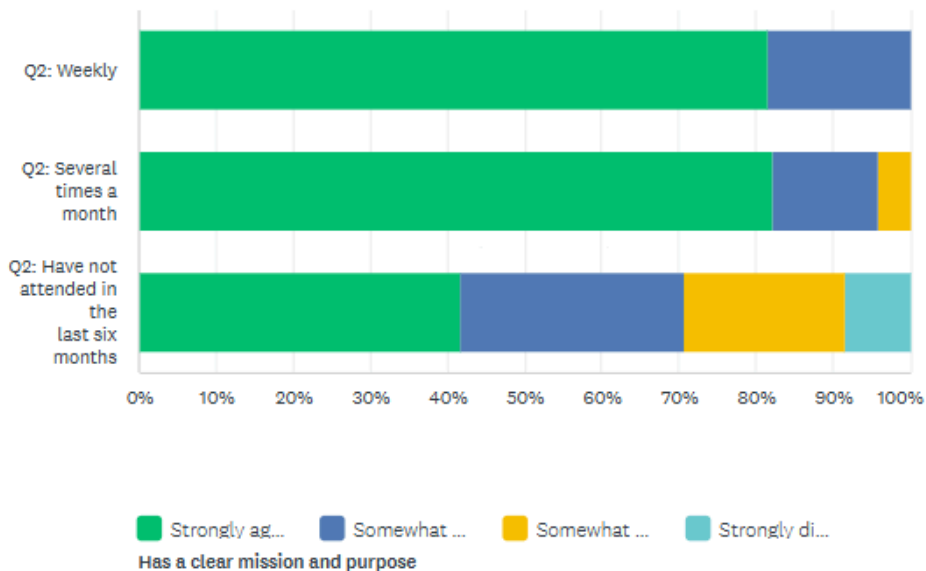
Over 80% thought the church:

- Has worship/gatherings that inspires awe
- Has worship/gatherings that calls me to action
- Builds relationships among members
- Is like a close-knit family

This last one can be a good and a bad thing. Being too close knit can feel cliquish and close out newcomers, while being very distant from one another can prevent relationships from growing among your members.

79% of respondents are excited about where the church is headed. This is down slightly from 86% who report that they felt that way in 2019. This dip in optimism may be due to the effects on participation during the covid pandemic.

Those who attend frequently are in general more positive and optimistic than those who have not attended in the past 6 months. For example, for those who attend weekly or several times per month, 82% strongly agreed that the congregation is spiritually vital and alive compared with only 42% of those who have not attended in the past 6 months.



On other questions, the greatest differences (at least 20 points difference) between regular attendees and those who have not attended in the past 6 months were in the areas of:

- like a close-knit family
- successfully engages people of all ages
- has a clear mission and purpose
- is a source of learning for adults, children and youth
- builds relationships among members
- engages all the senses
- has worship that makes them think, inspires awe, calls them to action

Only 48% of non-attenders were excited about where the congregation is headed, compared with 87-90% of those who attend at least several times per month.

When asked, "How did you come to be involved with this church?," your members responded with these words:



Most people joined because of a move to the area and/or an invitation from a friend or family member. Those who have joined in the past 5 years were more likely to mention hearing about it from news articles or community actions/events.

When asked, “What keeps you involved with this church?” your members responded with these words:



What keeps people participating are the people, the sermons, the ministers, the social justice/missions, the music and the community.



Respondents were concerned several things could hold back the congregation:

- Aging (31 responses)
- Polarization (31)
- Finances (30)
- Resistance to Change (23)
- Lower participation/number of members (20)

Many of these challenges are not uncommon to congregations such as yours.

SITE VISIT REPORT

(Presented by Rev. Gregg Carlson Senior Consultant, Convergence)

I completed two full days of interviews both one-on-one and small groups. This also included training opportunities with the church staff and the Convergence Task Force. On Sunday I presented part of the morning sermon and then led a Congregational Forum to review results of the recent survey that over 240 Old Lyme congregants completed. Below is a summary of themes and observations I made and received through the interviews.

Old Lyme is a long-time center for Social Justice. Their previous pastor Rev. David Good served the church for 37 years and had vision of developing mission partnerships with the Lakota in SD, in Haiti, in South Africa, with Koinonia Farm in GA and established the nonprofit Tree of Life ministry seeking reconciliation for Palestinian Muslims and Jews. The focus on these partnerships extended beyond his tenure as he remained active in working with these partnerships for the 10 years of his retirement until his death last April. Current Senior Pastor Steven Jungkeit had a good relationship

with his predecessor and the focus of Rev. David's legacy is still central to the church's current ministry identity.

Strengths of Old Lyme Congregational

- The church has a long history of being a voice and an action center for progressive values.
- The pulpit and the sermon have been the loudest voice, but the church is known regionally as being politically active.
- They have been in the forefront of inter-religious cooperation (especially with the Muslim community), refugee re-settlement, radical welcome of the LGBTQ+ community, affordable housing and feeding the hungry.
- Old Lyme Congregational is not just a parish church but is a regional one. While UCC churches can be found in many of the surrounding communities, members come from as far away as 30 miles.
- They are drawn by the clear sense of purpose and that the church is living its faith through its many programs. Even with this regional focus some members characterized the church as having a powerful spirit of community and a focus on radical welcome.
- The worship attendance is growing, the Sunday I was present the building was full. The children & youth program is vibrant.
- A strength can also be viewed in the Ladies Benevolent Society's White Elephant Sale. Which takes over the church in August, the sale is a community event which raises about \$100,000 for organizations across the region and the world. There are challenges as the leaders of this event are aging and finding the volunteers are becoming more challenging.
- Several people commented that the three-pastor team worked well together and brought much to the church and that the support staff was an effective team.

Challenges Facing Old Lyme Congregational:

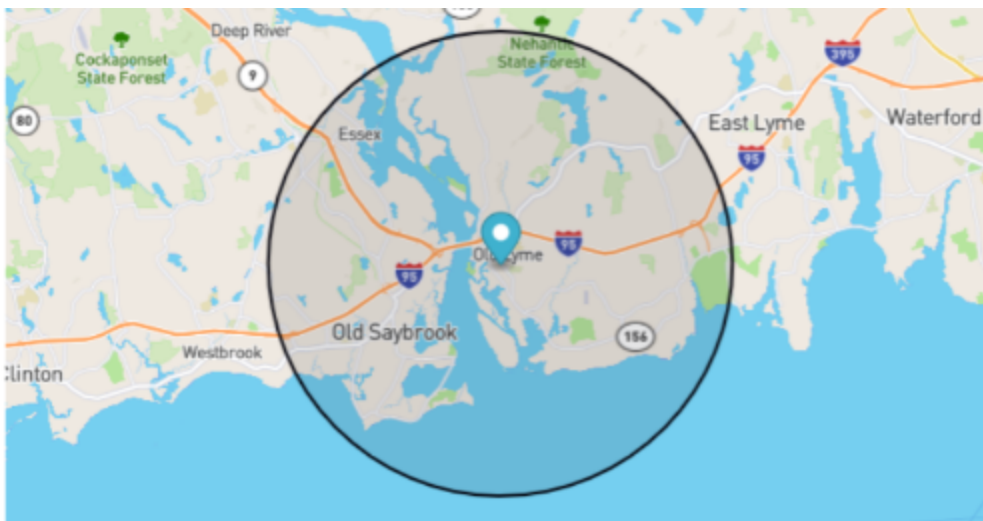
- Many people commented that the church holds on to the past too tightly. That change is difficult and takes a long time. In our rapidly changing world, the church is going to need to grow some change muscles.
- Membership is declining and aging. While worship attendance is up from six years ago the number of active members is declining, primarily through death and some leaving because they do not like the progressive voice of the pastor. This has impacted volunteer capacity with many feeling that people are exhausted, and the workers of the church are spread too thin.
- There have been some minor disagreements around the church's progressive stand. The church does not emphasize its progressive stance on the website and their Facebook page is out of date.
- Mission partnerships begun by Rev. Good are facing issues of leadership transition, in-country conflict, cost of sending teams and clear purpose.
- The senior pastor commented that there are days he still feels like an interim, this was also mentioned by others. This may reflect the strong legacy of Rev. David Good. Now maybe the time for the pastor to help shape the next focus of the church's mission.

- Climate Change is real. The church needs to examine its operations and ministries like overseas mission trips to be sure we are making the best decisions for the environment.
- There were concerns expressed that the service/sermon runs too long. One way of dealing with that would be to change the service length expectation and say this is a 75- or 90-minute service.

Opportunities for Old Lyme Congregational:

- Now is an opportunity to see whether it is time to let go of some legacy programs to allow for a new focus of volunteer energy and resources.
- There is an opportunity with the Church website and social media to clearly state your progressive values and radical welcome.
- Implement new ministry opportunities in spiritual development and ministry to reflect the regional nature of your church community.
- The election results may bring many new people to explore your church, but you have little space to accommodate them at 10:00.
 - Could the church make South Lyme Chapel a satellite location where the service is streamed with a host minister present to coordinate. Or could something similar be done with a few of the area senior care centers?
 - Now may be the time to consider a second worship service. This could be a copy of Sunday morning at 11:30 and/or there is an opportunity to explore an alternative informal service at another time and space.
- Several people mentioned that now would be a good time to review and update your by-laws and your mission and vision statements to reflect who you are today and how you will operate as a church into the future.

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

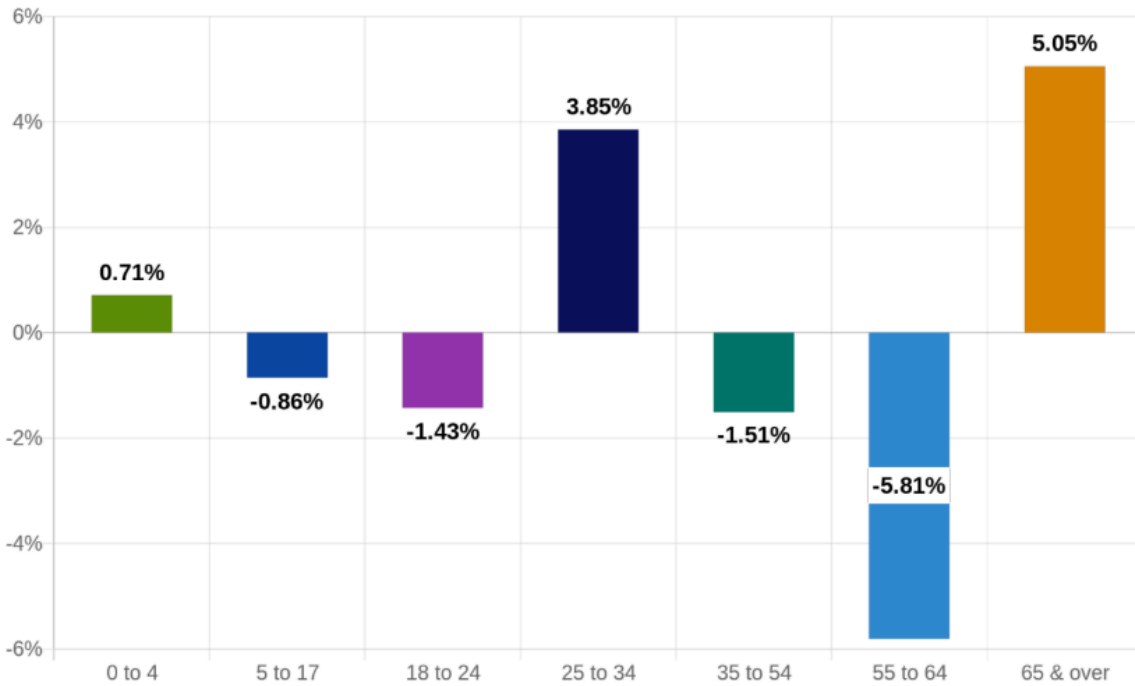


2024 population ~24,884

2029 projection 25,829

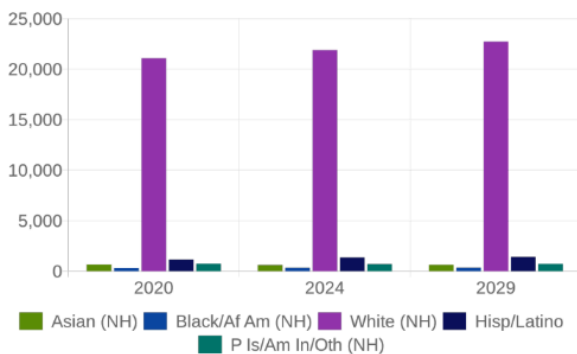
The population in the area around your church building is growing faster than the state as a whole. Family households are not growing as fast as the population suggesting that the increasing population per household is not from additional children. Children are present, but their population is growing more slowly than that of adults. The fastest growing age groups are 25-34 and over 65.

Phase of Life Changes

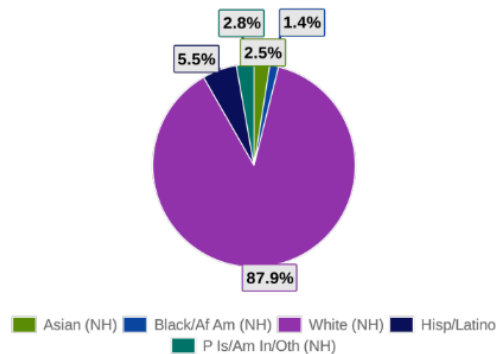


Your neighbors are predominantly white, highly educated, high-income white collar workers or retirees and their children who are still living at home.

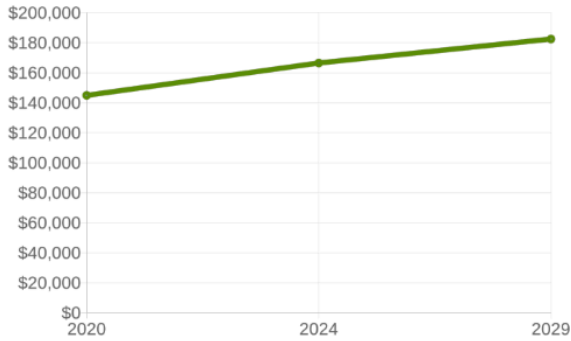
Racial-Ethnic Population Trends



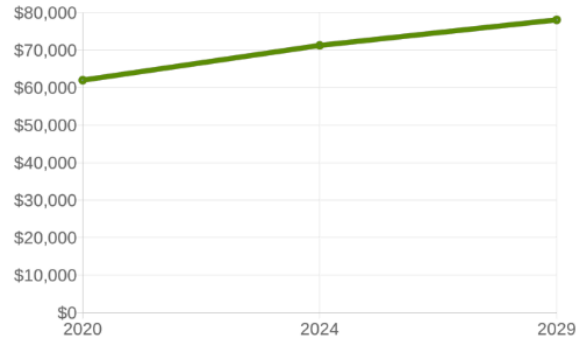
Current Year Racial/Ethnicity as Percentage of Pop



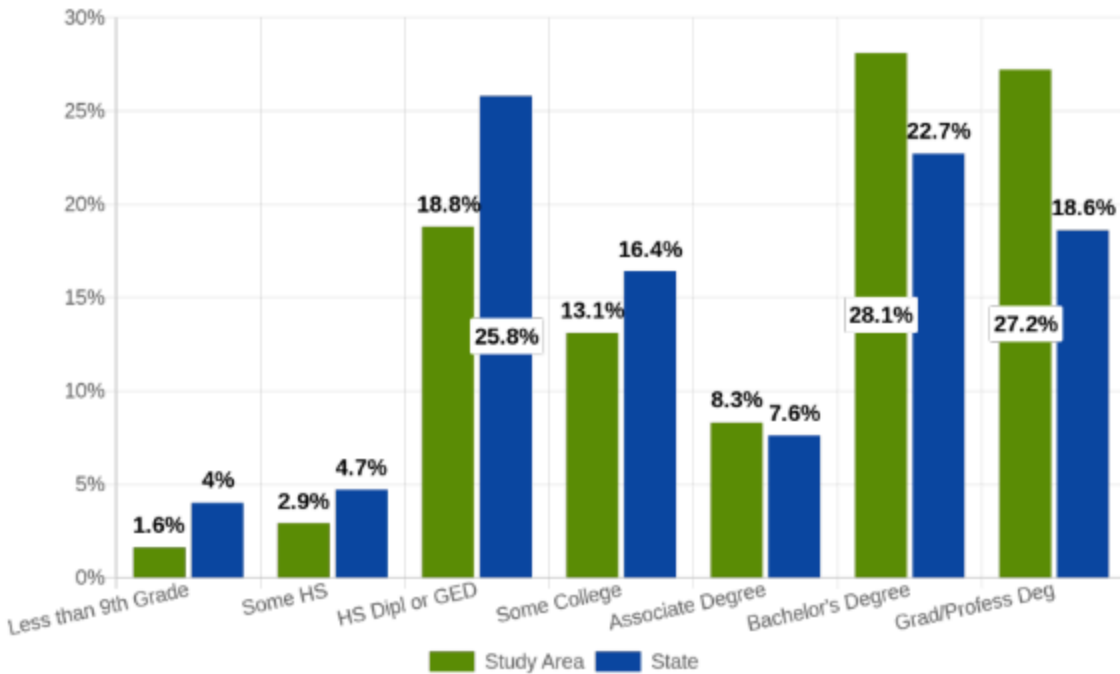
Average Household Income Trend



Per Capita Income Trend

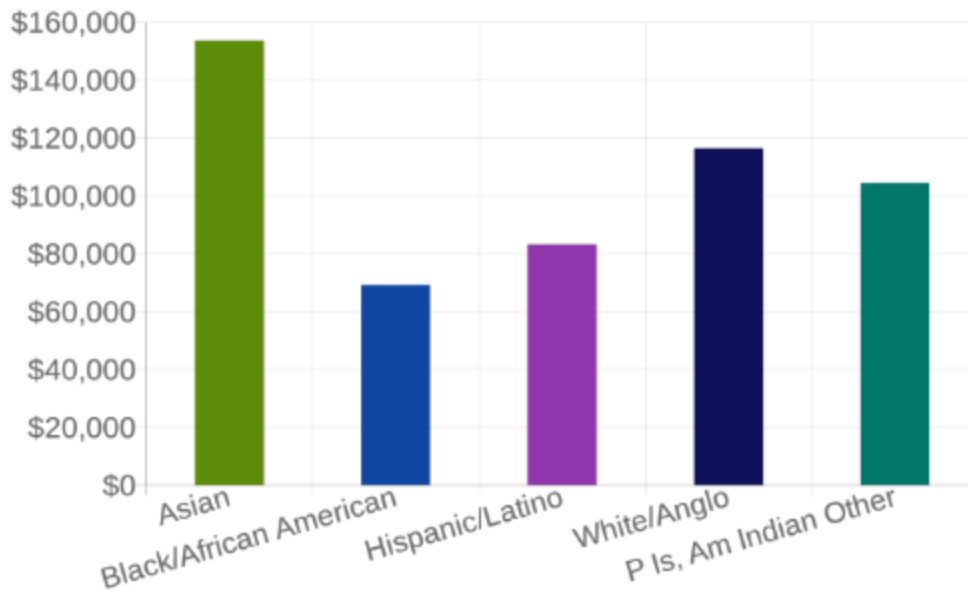


EDUCATIONAL LEVEL COMPARED TO THE STATE



Your congregation echoes the demographics of your community.

Due to this high income characteristic, one thing to be aware of is a significant income gap between your white neighbors and some of your neighbors of color, particularly Black/African American and Latino households.



This may be an area where your congregation can identify needs of these lower (in comparison) income households in case you can work or partner to address any unmet needs.

While your neighbors do not have strong religious beliefs, they have similar values to those of your congregation, such as that God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship. They believe people in the church are not always the best representatives of how Jesus would behave and that belief in Jesus does not require membership in a church.

In moral beliefs, they believe strong families are important and that tolerance is necessary for social peace and well-being. They also believe in climate change and that they have great hope for their community.

Your neighbors are not very likely to have a religious preference or participate in a congregation. The segment that is not involved with a religious congregation is around 67% and growing slowly over time. People in your area are more likely to stop involvement with a congregation than start it. The segment that identifies with the United Church of Christ is around 2.4% and is growing over time.

For those who do not participate in a religious congregation, the top reasons were that they think religion is too focused on money, judgmental, and/or untrustworthy.

Among those who might consider participating in a religious congregation, they are looking for:

- Warm and friendly encounters
- Quality sermons
- Traditional worship experiences
- Opportunities to develop personal relationships

- Holiday programs/activities

Some are also looking for opportunities for adults/seniors/retirees and ways to volunteer in the community/social causes.

	Study Area	Study Area %
C13 Booming with Confidence - Philanthropic Sophisticates	1,898	17.82%
C11 Booming with Confidence - Sophisticated City Dwellers	1,365	12.82%
D16 Suburban Style - Settled in Suburbia	937	8.80%
Q62 Golden Year Guardians - Enjoying Retirement	877	8.24%
C12 Booming with Confidence - Golf Carts and Gourmets	619	5.81%
A04 Power Elite - Picture Perfect Families	560	5.26%
J34 Autumn Years - Suburban Sophisticates	555	5.21%
H27 Bourgeois Melting Pot - Life of Leisure	484	4.55%
E20 Thriving Boomers - No Place Like Home	412	3.87%
C14 Booming with Confidence - Boomers and Boomerangs	311	2.92%
Q65 Golden Year Guardians - Mature and Wise	290	2.72%
L41 Blue Sky Boomers - Booming and Consuming	275	2.58%
K37 Significant Singles - Wired for Success	229	2.15%
F22 Promising Families - Fast Track Couples	221	2.08%
D15 Suburban Style - Sport Utility Families	176	1.65%

In addition to the largest demographic segments which are all older households described as Booming with Confidence, Golden Year Guardians, Autumn Years, Thriving Boomers, and Blue Sky Boomers, your area also has very wealthy family households described as Power Elite, and middle-income family households described as Suburban Style and Bourgeois Melting Pot. While these neighbors may have many material resources, they will still have emotional and spiritual needs that you could address.

While strong community connections are not a magic bullet to grow a church, they are a mark of a vital church. Creating distinctive initiatives to add value to the lives of those in your neighborhood, will help your congregation be known to those who may be seeking a Christian congregation. Being creative on how to meet any unmet needs of those in your community should also be a priority. Keep in mind - all needs are not material, and those who may seem to have more than enough fiscal and physical wealth may still have deep spiritual and relational needs.

Your neighbors' biggest life concerns include:

- ongoing impact of COVID-19
- social and political tensions/discord
- health crisis/illness
- racism/racial injustice
- fear of the future or the unknown

Your team completed 24 interviews of community leaders. These leaders included:

- Rena and Gerry Powers, Blue Door
- Julie Boras (Medical Professional) and Shawn Heard (Social Services Director)
- James Fairfield-Sonn, Professor
- Katie Huffman. Old Lyme Library
- Claire Bellerjeau, SSK&P
- Chris M, AA
- Gary Gregory, Chair, Conservation Commission
- Amy Hollis, Ex Director SSK&P and the Shoreline Basic Needs Task Force/ Hunger Action Team
- Stephanie Gould and Peter Luchesse, Lymes' Senior Center and Board
- Martha Shoemaker, First Selectperson, Town of Old Lyme
- Ian Neviaser, Superintendent of Region 18 School System, Lyme-Old Lyme
- Dr, Terry Doherty
- Fr. Joseph Ashe, Christ the King Church
- Wendy Bury, Managing Director, Lyme Academy of Fine Arts
- Dana Dixon, Director of Health Services, Homeless Hospitality Center
- Heather McNeil, Director Old Saybrook Youth & Family Services
- Mary Ann Martinez, Executive Director, New London Meal Center
- Dr. Michael D'Occhio
- Olwen Logan, LymeLine
- Alisha Milardo, Roger Tory Peterson Estuary Center - Director
- Goufran Allabebidi, Member of New Britain Mosque; President of The Tree of Life Foundation
- Ken Coffee, Coffees Country Market
- Susan Consoli, Social Services Coordinator Old Saybrook, CT

Themes from these interviews included:

- Aging population
- People more likely to stay year round
- Increased wealth
- Increasing gap between rich and working poor who meet their needs
- Disconnected services for aging residents
- Working poor can not survive on their income due to high cost of living
- Political polarization increasing - local political parties contribute to this
- All civic organizations facing declines
- Lack of affordable housing
- Homelessness in aging seniors
- Opioid addiction is an issue
- Volunteer base declining
- Some younger families and babies in the area

Ideas for addressing local issues were:

- Advocates/carers/transporters for older adults
- Continue church's work with immigrants and refugees
- Help with meals at Meal Center
- Participate in Shoreline Basic Needs Network
- Partnering with other churches on youth programming
- Zoning changes for more affordable housing
- Help for those navigating systems of assistance
- Continue/increase assisting SSKP with addressing food insecurity
- Convening conversations across political differences - reduce polarization
- Bible studies/groups at local nursing/assisted living homes
- Spread the word on library events
- Continue support for addiction/recovery programs
- Open church grounds and advertise as place of meditation and retreat
- Increase interfaith collaboration
- Collaborate with existing groups, decreasing disconnection between programs

Meeting the needs of your neighbors may not end up with them attending worship, but is an important part of being a congregation grounded in the place where you are located. Such connections also generate the goodwill needed for community financial support of your congregation and its work, which is rapidly becoming an important segment of the financial picture for congregations.¹

To read more about the people that make up your community, see the reports in this folder: [Mission Insite Demographic Reports](#).

NEARBY CONGREGATIONS

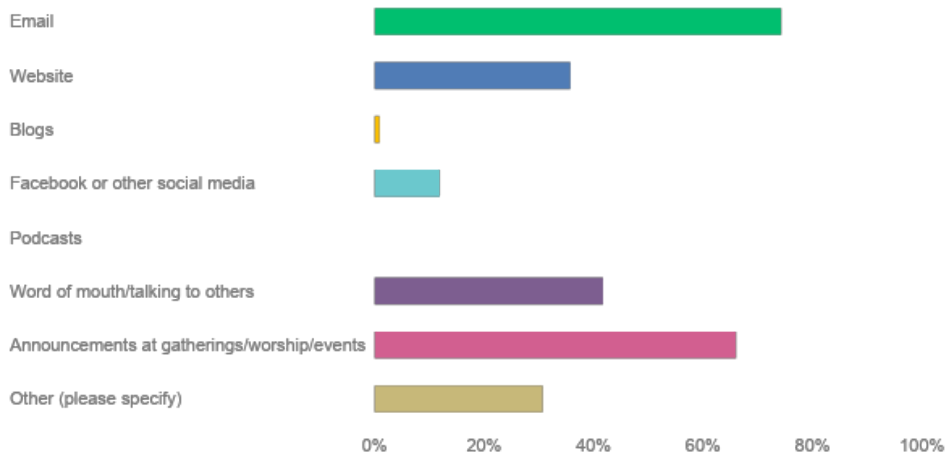
People in your area have many to choose from. There are at least 3 other churches of your denomination of varying sizes within 10 miles of your building. There are also other progressive/welcoming churches of other denominations. The potential for partnerships and joint activities with some of those churches is great. As FCCOL is likely one of the larger of these churches, partnerships could also help participants in those congregations access more faith activities than might otherwise be possible.

COMMUNICATIONS

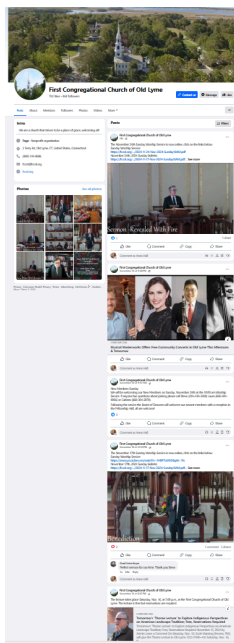
First Congregational Church of Old Lyme primarily communicates regularly using email, a website, and Facebook or other social media. The top ways respondents hear about church news and events

¹ In several recent cases, the majority of donations for capital campaigns to support historic church buildings came from outside the congregation (Partners for Sacred Places). Community connections and goodwill are essential for this kind of community financial support to occur.

are email (74%), announcements (66%), and word of mouth/talking to others (41%). The 31% other category was primarily mentions of the mailed monthly newsletter.



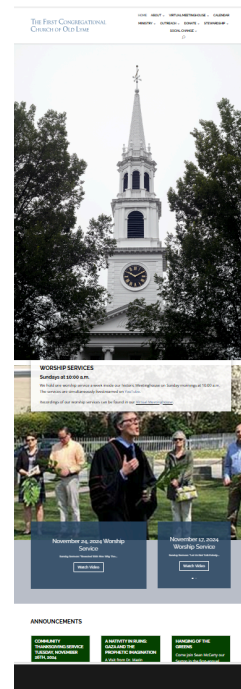
Your website is basic in design but up to date. It conveys a more traditional feel than your social justice emphasis. It took several scrolls and clicks to find out how to get involved with more than just Sunday mornings. A GET INVOLVED tab at the top above the “fold” could help greatly with this. There were no links to social media on the front page of your website.



Your Facebook page is more for those not currently participating in your congregation, as the majority of your members are not getting their congregational news this way. While it is up to date, it also presents a limited impression of your congregation, primarily featuring worship videos, lectures, and concerts.

While both your website and your Facebook are up to date, they present the impression of a very traditional church for older adults. It was very hard to find information or pictures about children’s ministries or social justice. This may not be the impression you want to give those seeking a congregation in your area. We would recommend more pictures of your people doing things together, more engaging posts about issues and more short inspirational video content from your pastor to mirror more closely the congregation you seem to be.

Think through all of the images you have on your communications formats. Prominent pictures of steeples and pulpits give a certain impression, while pictures of participants doing amazing things together could give another impression. Keeping all communications formats fresh looking and up to date is a great way to be welcoming to those seeking a church and to engage your members and those in your community in the programs of the church.



EXTERNAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We at Convergence believe a vital church is instrumental in changing their community for the better.

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme is an engaged congregation! Your leader survey indicates the top priorities for the church in the community are:

- Food Pantry
- Racial Justice
- Middle East Justice

The church is measuring impact in these areas through:

- Number of families served
- Relationships with Muslim countries

The leader survey indicates that 200 members took part in some action during 2023 relating to these three priorities.

In 2023, the congregation engaged in:

- 50 provisions of fiscal/material/facilities support for priority issues
- 10 provisions of training and practical support to community members
- numerous sermons touched on social justice issues
- 100 non-church members impacted
- 30 education opportunities on priority issues
- 20 public actions (vigils, protests, press conferences)
- 10-12 media engagements
- 25 advocacy for policies around priority issues
- 50 collaborations with other congregations or organizations on priority issues
- 20-30 opportunities provided for children/youth to take action
- 20 interfaith or intercultural experiences

7% of the congregational budget goes to external organizations.

Survey respondents are volunteering either in church or their community quite frequently, with 146 survey respondents reporting a total of over 9000 hours spent volunteering in church settings and activities in 2023. Some reported only 1-2 hours while a couple reported over 500!

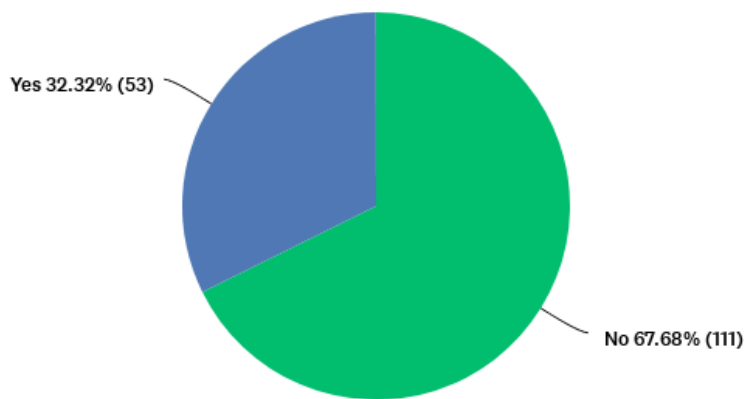
163 survey respondents reported a total of almost 16,000 hours spent volunteering in the community outside of church programming. Some reported only an hour while 4 people reported over 1000 hours.

- Weavers Group
- Cub Scouts
- Senior Center
- AA
- Neighborhood Association
- Florence Griswold Museum

This is an excellent track record of community engagement! If your congregation vanished, you would be dearly missed by all who are impacted positively through this work.

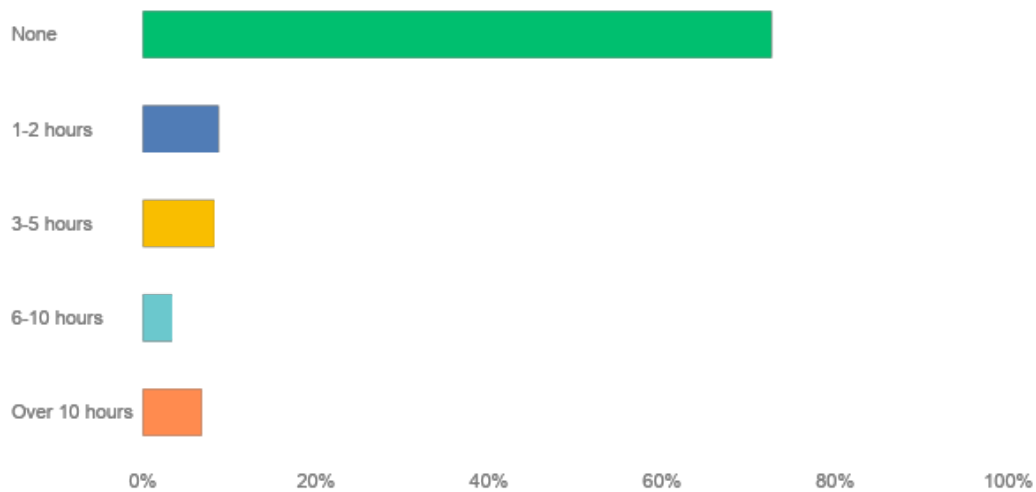
CONFLICT SKILLS

While conflict is not currently flaring up in your congregation, there are indicators in the data of some unhealed past conflict and unhealthy communications patterns around political differences.



32% of respondents answering this question, or 52 people, reported conflict in your congregation within the last two years.

The majority of respondents (73%) reported no training in healthy engagement with differences or conflict within the past 5 years.



According to survey respondents, 94% say your congregation embraces differences of opinion and belief and 88% say that your congregation deals with disagreements and conflicts openly rather than hushed and behind closed doors. 84% felt the church invites all members into visioning and decision-making.

The most likely reactions to conflict reported by survey respondents are to defer to the pastor or other church/denominational leaders or negotiate to reach a solution. However, 12% report that the congregation can respond by working behind the scenes to form alliances.

Any congregation working to grow or renew could benefit from healthy conflict skills. Perhaps those who have been trained as healthy conflict could encourage other participants to take a conflict course, or you could hold one just for your congregation. This could be a very beneficial part of the process as you all discern your next steps.

SPIRITUAL LIFE

Growing and renewing a church requires a deep engagement with spiritual practices. First Congregational Church of Old Lyme regularly promotes group Bible study and exploring timely topics in light of faith. The church occasionally promotes religious practices such as individual Bible study and individual or group prayer practices. The church does not promote family devotions, talking with your family about faith, or fasting.

Members who responded to the survey indicate a moderate level of participation in individual prayer, meditation, or devotions, with 91% doing so at least occasionally and 55% doing so weekly or almost weekly or even more often. Over 90% practice exploring timely topics in light of faith at least occasionally, with 46% doing so almost weekly or more often.

Over 79% talk with their family about faith at least occasionally, with 24% doing so almost weekly or more often. However, less than 50% practice Bible study occasionally, if at all. Less than 36% practice family devotions occasionally, if at all. Fasting is not practiced significantly in your congregation.

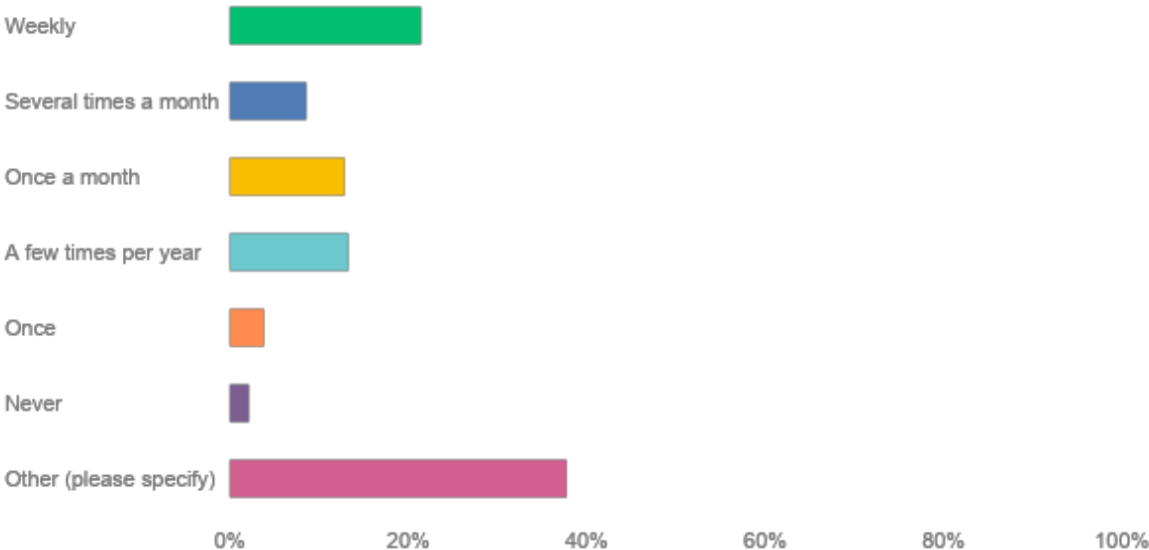
First Congregational Church of Old Lyme may exhibit a typical challenge in the mainline church today. We are great at service but can be weaker in areas of personal and spiritual growth. Any church facing significant work ahead, as all are due to the pandemic, would be well-served to look for opportunities to expand your spiritual development experiences but do so in a way that honors busy lives, commuting realities and short attention spans. A deep well of spirituality can carry members through many challenges and help them engage in healthy ways when things seem hard.

FINANCES AND FACILITIES

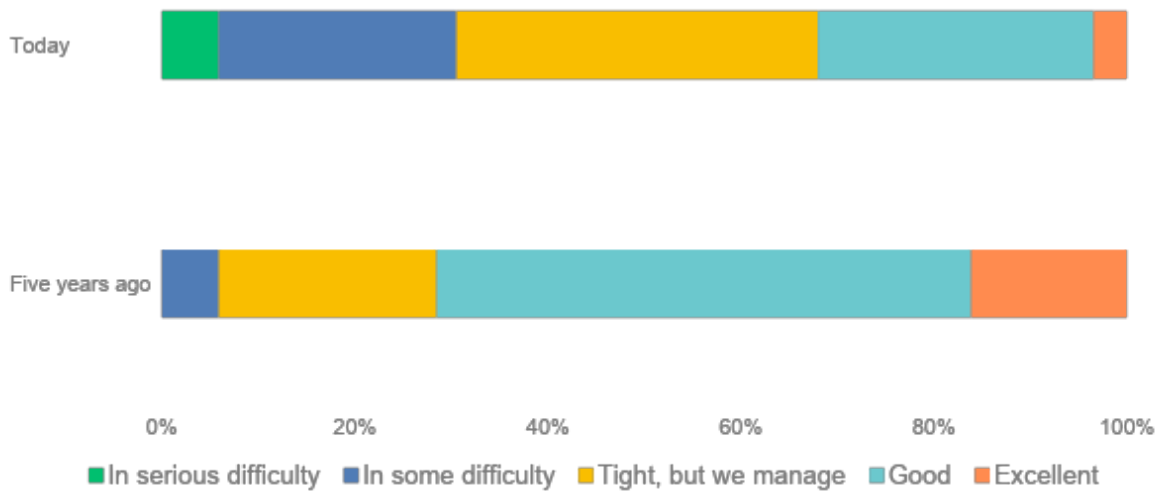
FINANCES

Your annual budget for 2023 was over \$917,000. However, your tithes, offerings, and other income were less than \$700,000. This is a significant gap between giving and budget and has widened over the years. Other income of \$252,475 was used to fill that gap. While you have an endowment, regular withdrawals could diminish it over time.

98% of respondents are giving regularly. The large other category was primarily mentions of annual pledge fulfillments. Average monthly tithes/offerings are \$55,000, or approximately \$61 per person involved with your congregation.



Most respondents (68%) described the church finances as tight or in difficult condition. Only 29% would have described them as tight or difficult 5 years ago.



Five years ago, the annual budget was \$814,060 with tithes and offerings of \$687,000. The gap between giving and budget has grown over time.

The church’s finances are both a strength and a challenge.

- The church has no debt.
- They have over \$3M in an endowment (that they can take 5% a year from to support operations). They have a \$600K preservation fund that they can use to support property costs.
- They have a \$900,000 annual operating budget, support from congregant pledges have been decreasing but the leadership have been able to manage in the short term.

Vital churches have giving that sustains their normal operations and use their assets for impact in their community and world. One way to increase this ratio of gifts to budget is, of course, to grow your congregation. Another way is to increase the giving of your present members. A third way is to engage those in the greater community who support the work your church is doing in spirit to offer their financial support as well.

Now is not the time to cut budgets. This is a time of opportunity, and the church needs to invest to take advantage of it. We recommend that you:

- Re-invigorate the Spire Society to increase planned giving. You have financial professionals within the congregation that can assist.
- Promote tax advantages of donor directed giving from retirement funds
- Promote stewardship monthly with stories in the church communications
- Consider doing some community fund raising for property maintenance, also see what grants might be available for historic property maintenance.

- Do a cost-benefit analysis on the three auxiliary properties (parsonage, little house and South Lyme Chapel) to determine best steps moving forward

FACILITIES

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme has facilities that respondents identify as the right size for your ministries, although the leader survey suggests they may be too big for your current congregational size. The facilities are in excellent to adequate condition according to the pastor and congregational surveys.



Photos on your social media show attractive and well maintained spaces in your main building, but of course can't get in all the nooks and crannies, especially after a few years where many spaces might be empty most of the time.

The church also owns three additional properties (parsonage, little house, and South Lyme Union Chapel) that should be part of a long-term strategy.

Continue to be attentive to your space. Make sure it is clean, well-repaired, smells good (ask a stranger to come and tell you the truth, we develop a tolerance to smells over time), and is clearly marked as to restrooms, elevators, and other necessary spaces. All of this will ensure your welcome to those in your space is as warm in practice as it is intended.

CONGREGATIONAL WELCOME

In terms of congregational welcome, 99% of respondents at least somewhat agree the church wants more members, 100% say the church wants to be racially and culturally diverse. 100% feel the church is welcoming to people of all races, and 100% feel the church is welcoming to people of all sexualities, and genders. 94% feel the church is welcoming and accessible to those with disabilities. 81% of respondents believe the church loves the enthusiasm of people with new ideas. 81% of survey respondents report it is easy for new people to join existing church groups.

However, only 55% of church members say they make it a point to speak to any new people present in worship. Unless this is a temporary effect of online worship during the pandemic, this is an area that will need addressing if you are to make newcomers feel truly welcome.

Living up to your desire for growth with larger numbers of church members trained and ready to roll out the welcome by greeting new people and welcoming them into existing groups will make a huge difference in the perception of welcome by those who visit.

OPENNESS TO CHANGE

In areas relating to openness to change, survey respondents indicated:

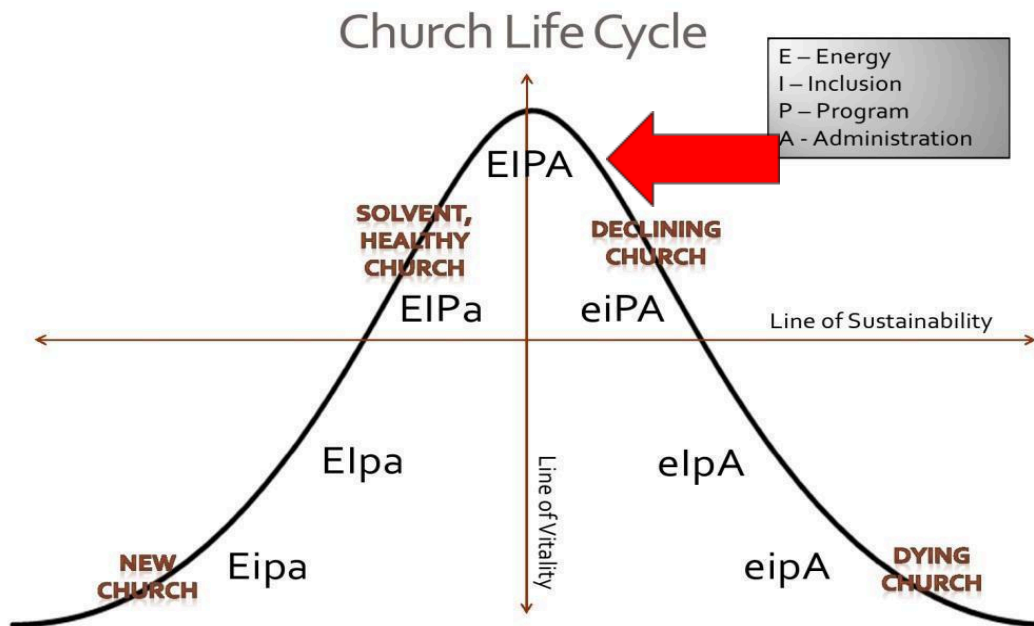
- 92% felt the church is always ready to try something new
- 82% felt the church embraces change
- 79% felt the church helps members make their ideas for ministry a reality
- 77% felt new ideas are always welcome at the church
- 77% felt the church regularly does new things in worship
- 72% felt the church prides itself on an embrace of change and constant adaptation.
- 70% felt the members of the church are willing to change in order to achieve shared goals
- 70% felt they frequently talk about change during worship and other activities.
- 67% felt members are always willing to try something new at church
- 51% felt the church is more comfortable when things remain the same.
- 45% felt putting a new idea into action takes a long time at your church
- Change skills were seen by 23 commenters as something that could hold back your congregation.

This data indicates that you are moderately skilled in change but that some resistance may hold you back from moving into your future. With so many changes facing all of us these days, it never hurts to work on this area. The biggest growing edge seems to be that some members are not open to change and may even demonstrate unhealthy behaviors when faced with congregational change.

Your congregation will likely benefit from a healthy communications training as well as an emphasis on the importance of change as part of listening to God's call for our lives. This emphasis can be incorporated into a worship/sermon series quite easily as there is no shortage of material in the Bible and hymnals on change. Adult and children's education series on change can also be helpful. The attitude of the congregation will optimally be "What does God want us to do next?" and a willingness to change whatever is needed to answer that call.

YOUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFECYCLE

Every congregation experiences growth and decline. These stages are marked by certain milestones that point to changes in organizational health and development. To better understand this, we use four indicators to measure health: energy, inclusion, programs and administration. At each stage in the life of a church, these indicators play a more or less active role. These roles are indicated by the upper and lower case letters on the graph.



The “Energy” indicator highlights the level at which the congregation is motivated into action around the vision and mission of the church. It speaks to the spirit of the faith community as well as its passion about its ministries.

The “Inclusion” indicator highlights the dedication and enthusiasm of church participants to invite people to be a part of the ministries of the church. It speaks to an outward focus on growth and an intentional commitment to hospitality.

The “Program” indicator highlights the level at which the church is able to start, grow and maintain ministries that transform both the community and the people within the church. These are particular to each church context and to the needs of the people within the church.

The final indicator, “Administration,” highlights the need of every church to have systems that promote growth through policies, procedures and staffing. Collectively, these indicators tell a story of where a church might be in their lifecycle.

Currently your church would be considered upper Quadrant 3. You are strong in Inclusion and mostly optimistic in your Energy. You have some solid Programming for your people and the community, although you may have some legacy programs that are more of an energy drain than an additive at this point. Your newer folks add some new church energy when gathered, but you are also lacking in some of the sustained Energy needed to get things done. Your building, financial and energy restraints, and congregational polity means you may still occasionally get bogged down in Administration. You are at a point where you must be intentional about your energy and attention

in order to be a highly functioning church. Those churches in your position that do not invest that energy and attention wisely can easily slip into over-focusing on programming and administration which can eclipse inclusion and growth, leading to decline and loss of vitality.

The greatest threat to your future is that you do nothing to change the course you are on. Whatever course of action you choose it will be important to follow through to full implementation. Now is not the time to cut budgets. This is a time of opportunity, and the church needs to invest to take advantage of it.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

One great challenge to a progressive church in this age, do we live into our values knowing that some will not agree with us? Or do we tone down those values so that we are nice but not doing what we are called to be? The greatest threat to your future is that you do nothing to change the course you are on. Whatever course of action you choose, it will be important to follow through to full implementation.

These recommendations could strengthen your church's vitality in the next year:

BE BOLD

You seem to be hiding your progressive values behind a traditional facade. Now is a time to be bold and let people know what you are up to! There are those in your community who share your values and would like to join the work, if they know about it.

Another concern among your folks is the aging of your congregation. Your current members will age, that is a fact of life. Yet you wish for more young participants at this time. However, you must consider why you want more young people. Are you simply seeking people to take on the workload and fund your congregation? That is not a very enticing invitation. Younger people are different from you and have their own needs.

If you truly have a heart for younger people and young families, asking how you can meet them where they are and help them with their needs is a good place to start. Be bold in helping meet their needs! A congregation with a compelling mission is more likely to attract younger people when compared with one that only has the mission of finding new members to replace the old on boards/committees and budgets.

To be bold, you will need to focus your mission and identity so that you can communicate it clearly and enthusiastically. Everyone who joins you in taking actions and serving others may not attend worship - do not let this sidetrack you! The aim is following God's calling and gathering others into

this work, not preserving an institution. A sense of boldness and confidence will inevitably gather additional people into your missional and worshiping community.

It might be time to let go of some legacy programs to allow for a new focus of volunteer energy and resources. There is an opportunity with the Church website and social media to clearly state your progressive values and radical welcome. Implement new ministry opportunities in spiritual development and ministry to reflect the regional nature of your church community.

The election results may bring many new people to explore your church, but you have little space to accommodate them at 10:00. Could for instance the church make South Lyme Chapel a satellite location where the service is streamed with a host minister present to coordinate? Or could something similar be done with a few of the area senior care centers? Now may be the time to consider a second worship service. This could be a copy of Sunday morning at 11:30 and/or there is an opportunity to explore an alternative informal service at another time and space.

Now would also be a good time to review and update your by-laws and your mission and vision statements to reflect who you are today and how you will operate as a church into the future.

PARTICIPATION

Smaller numbers than in 1950 or 1990 are only a problem for vitality if you are trying to do too much for your size. What programs, activities and structures belong to a bygone era and are not a good fit for what God is calling you toward today?

We all have individual callings but only some of that will be our collective calling. What are you all called to work on together to bring God's love to life in our world? All of those other programs, activities and structures will need to be paused, ended, or handed off to those most passionate about them to do as a non-congregational program. You can still pray for them and bring them casseroles when they are busy living out their calling!

The collective calling you all have will need to be focused on 2-3 areas at most, with specific goals you are working toward in the near, medium, and long term. This will be hard, but you will find more enthusiastic participation with a clear focus, and new people will be more likely to join a group of people with a focused mission rather than a vague idea. Get started by:

- Right-sizing for your current participation levels
- Unifying around 2-3 focus areas per year
- Streamlining and pruning all programs that don't support that focus.

Participation will be more enthusiastic and engaged when you have a clear and simple ask for folks to participate in something that truly makes a difference in the world.

CHANGE SKILLS

Working on the above areas to be bold and engage people in your work together will require change skills. We have good news: You (and any congregation) can build change readiness!

Change is going to happen whether we like it or not. God is in the change just as God is in the stillness. While we may be weary of change, we can't try to hold our churches as places where no change happens to soothe our weary souls. If we do, we will cause congregational decline which is a change most of us don't want to see! You will need to intentionally develop your change skills. There is no way to truly listen to what God is calling your church to do and be without being open to doing things in new ways.

The best way to build your change skills is to practice change. Change something or try something new every week in worship. Be explicit about why you are doing this - change is built into any spiritual journey, and finding God in change is something we all need to practice.

SUSTAINABILITY

You will need to give some attention to financial sustainability, but your instincts in these areas may not be helpful for a vital church. Annual giving is declining and there is a growing temptation to cut the expenses. Now is not the time to cut budgets. Staffing expenses are at 64% of the budget (within expectations for a church without debt). Cutting these areas will stop your current momentum toward growth and energy.

We have several recommendations that will not stop your momentum and growth but will build additional sustainability.

- Re-invigorate the Spire Society to increase planned giving. You have financial professionals within the congregation that can assist.
- Promote tax advantages of donor directed giving from retirement funds,
- Promote stewardship monthly with stories in the church communications.
- Consider doing some community fund raising for property maintenance, and see what grants might be available for historic property maintenance.
- Do a cost-benefit analysis on the three auxiliary properties (parsonage, little house and South Lyme Chapel) to determine best steps moving forward

WHAT IS NEXT FOR FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF OLD LYME:

*The question for you as members and leaders of First Congregational Church of Old Lyme is: “**are you willing to live into God’s future**”? Our recommendations, born out of our expertise in the life cycle and renewal of churches, are for First Congregational Church of Old Lyme to work on the above areas. Over the next 12 months, Convergence will be in partnership with you to help you build*

a plan that will guide you forward. Each of you can have a part in shaping that plan. Putting your energy into these things will help your already vital congregation grow more vital and transformational in the years to come.