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When Spiritual and Material Meet: Explaining Congregational Engagement in the Local Community

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Abstract:

Places of worship are often vital local institutions, providing needed social services and engaging in the community. Yet, there is much we do not know about why certain congregations are more involved in the community than others. This article looks beyond mission orientation to more deeply examine how theology motivates engagement. Using a multi-method approach, we examine clergy survey data and interview data (n=64) from a single city in the Southern United States to provide an in-depth look at congregational community engagement. Through t-tests, regression analysis, and qualitative analysis, we find that when spiritual and material concerns are theologically linked, congregations are significantly more likely to be engaged in the community. This result holds even when other influences on community engagement are taken into account through a regression model. These findings challenge current distinctions in the literature and emphasize the theological importance of community engagement for some congregations.

Keywords: congregations, community engagement, clergy, theology

Religious organizations are often at the heart of problem-solving in local communities (Putnam 2000, Polson 2015). More than half of congregations provide some health or human services (Clerkin and Grønbjerg 2007) and many play longstanding roles in community systems (Chaves and Wineburg 2010). They provide communities with food pantries, drug rehabilitation services, educational support, prison ministries, and so on (e.g., Ley 2008, Greenberg, Greenberg, and Mazza 2010, Kerley et al. 2010, Unruh and Sider 2005, Twombly 2002). These services have measurably positive impacts on their communities (Cnaan, Sinha, and McGrew 2004). For instance, church-based health promotion interventions lead to better health outcomes (Campbell et al. 2007) and faith-based community substance abuse prevention programs lead to lower drug use among teens (Marcus et al. 2004).

Even with half of all congregations engaged in providing services to the broader community, that still leaves about half of all congregations *not* engaging. Congregations vary significantly in the extent to which they are engaged in service to the community (Polson 2015, Chaves 2004, Chaves and Tsitsos 2001). Why are some congregations more involved in the local community than others?

We employ a multimethod approach to understand those factors that encourage congregational community engagement. We collect quantitative data in the form of clergy surveys and qualitative data in the form of clergy interviews (n=64) through the Little Rock Congregations Study, a longitudinal research study based in a single city in the Southern United States. Additionally, we calculate a community engagement score, based on qualitative data from each of the 64 congregations, including clergy interview responses, site visits, and publicly-available information. This score distills a wealth of qualitative information about the nature and extent of congregational outreach into a single number, used as the most important outcome variable in the statistical analyses that follow.

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

Congregational Community Engagement

With their primary goal being the spiritual well-being of their members, congregations must carefully prioritize their activities (Wielhouwer 2004), and it is not a given that places of worship will engage in their local communities (Cnaan and Curtis 2013). Yet many do. What might motivate congregations to deviate from a focus solely on spiritual well-being to provide social services to those outside their membership? Here, we look closely at congregational community engagement, specifically at congregational behaviors that provide service, are targeted to those outside their membership, and are not overtly partisan. We are particularly interested in how the theology of the religious tradition or specific congregation might influence the extent of their community involvement.

Theological Influences on Congregational Community Engagement

Historically, the religion literature has divided religious institutions into two binary categories, based on the extent of their engagement with the broader community: worldly or otherworldly (Weber 1922/1993, Troeltsch 1931/1992). Worldly churches are oriented towards earthly matters whereas

otherworldly churches are more concerned with the spiritual well-being of their members in the world to come. Another way to talk about the theological focus of a congregation is mission orientation—or what the congregation views as its most important goals. In her foundational work on American congregations, Ammerman (2001) identifies three such orientations: 1. member-oriented, with a focus on fellowship activities for members and fostering spiritual growth, 2. evangelistic, with a focus on sharing the faith and preparing for the world to come, and 3. activist, with a focus on social change and serving the poor and needy. Ammerman (2005) argues that the vast majority of congregations choose to focus their external efforts on either evangelism and a gospel of personal transformation or on offering immediate aid and comfort (p. 131).

Looking only at Presbyterian churches, Hoge, Perry, and Klever (1978) use survey data to show that the top mission-orientation priority for the vast majority of these churches are member-oriented "congregational nurture goals" like preaching, fellowship, and religious education. Disagreements are more likely to arise at the second-level priorities, with congregations generally split between evangelism and social involvement. Guth et al. (1997) find that theological role orientations are powerful predictors of political and social justice activism among clergy.

Theologically conservative churches, which are often evangelical, tend to be less community-engaged in part because they are typically more inwardly-focused (Iannaccone 1988), with an emphasis more on "saving souls and less on secular participation" (Schwadel 2005). Congregants of evangelical churches are more likely to be involved in activities within the church, rather than activities outside of the church (Uslaner 2002). Their focus on spiritual salvation inhibits social activism (Hoge, Perry, and Klever 1978) as theologically-conservative congregations may hesitate to participate in community programs without a strong spiritual basis (McRoberts 2003, 417), worrying "that concentrating on material needs would divert important energy from the more critical task of evangelism" (Ammerman 2005, 116). Theologically liberal churches, on the other hand, are more

likely to be involved in liberal-leaning community causes like social justice (Todd and Houston 2013), although the relationship is not linear (Mock 1992).

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

When Spiritual and Material Meet

Only 17% of congregations in Ammerman's 2005 study had both evangelism and community service as primary goals (Ammerman 2005). Building on this work, we theorize that clergy who see both evangelism and community service as primary goals—or to put it another way, clergy who see the spiritual and material as linked—will lead congregations that are more community-engaged.

We argue that the most engaged places of worship will be those who see social involvement as related to, and even indistinguishable from, the top-priority spiritual goals of the congregation. Indeed, some congregations' theological worldviews may see helping the poor as a means of fostering spiritual growth and outreach to the needy as essential for preparing for the world to come. In fact, many community-engaged congregations not only see "no contradiction" between faith and community engagement (McRoberts 2003, 412), but they are actually motivated by their faith to engage in the community. Just as Harris (1994) identified religion as a resource for political mobilization, we argue that religion can be a motivator for congregational-level community engagement. Thus, worldly and otherworldly are not mutually exclusive. Otherworldly goals can motivate worldly engagement.

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

Thus, we expect that clergy who see religion and community engagement as connected will lead congregations that are more engaged in the community. Even when speaking of this relationship in theoretical terms, it is hard to imagine it as solely unidirectional. Congregations that are very involved in the community may develop a theological ethos or congregational culture that emphasizes that engagement. Indeed, a mutually reinforcing relationship, whereby the experience of community engagement is part of a positive feedback loop to the theology of community engagement, may be seen as integral to the process for some religious leaders.

Other Influences on Congregational Community Engagement

Of course, theology is not the only motivator driving congregational community engagement. Perhaps the most obvious facilitator of, or constraint on, congregations serving in their local communities is resources. Engaging in social service provision and other forms of community

participation takes both human and material resources (Cavendish 2000). Membership numbers play a key role in determining a congregation's level of involvement in the community (Olson et al. 1988, Todd and Houston 2013). Larger churches are able to provide more, and more specialized, social services (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Additionally, effective community engagement requires organizational capacity, including effective communication networks, experienced leadership, and social resources (Brown 2006, 1582).

Due in part to the "fiscal advantages of size" (Taylor et al. 2000, 79), congregations with more people typically have more resources, including larger budgets, more staff members (Chaves 2004), and higher levels of giving (Scheitle and Finke 2008). As congregation size grows, church budgets often grow larger than the needs of their congregants, and can use the available surplus to fund community programs (Stonebraker 1993). Larger attendance numbers not only provide congregations with more volunteers to help with social service provision, but also enable them to attract more qualified and experienced leaders (Eng and Hatch 1991). Brown (2006) emphasizes clergy leadership and civic ties as important resources that can lead to greater political activism. Clergy are often seen as trustworthy and reliable sources of guidance (Djupe and Calfano 2009), and those who have been with their congregations longer may have both the experience necessary to lead major community-engagement efforts and also the trust of their congregation. Leadership can be a critical factor in community engagement (Todd and Houston 2013).

Some places of worship have civic cultures that promote political discussion and participation (Brown and Brown 2003), while others engage only under rare circumstances (Campbell and Monson 2007). We expect that political engagement may have spillover effects into community engagement. Indeed, many of the social service activities in which congregations may participate could be seen as having a political component, even if they are not seen as political by congregants (Greenberg 2000). At the same time, there are places of worship where social service

provision is explicitly divorced from politics (Greenberg 2000) and some research shows that religion influences partisan political activities differently from community engagement (Glazier 2019). Churches may see a tradeoff between political and community engagement and decide to specialize in one over the other (Glazier 2018, Becker and Dhingra 2001).

Another important variable to account for is race. For instance, the literature indicates that Black Protestant churches may be more active in the community, due to race, religious tradition, a history of political engagement, or all of the above (Cavendish 2000, Ammerman 2005). For instance, Black churches do more for mental health, even when controlling for congregation size and budget (Blank et al. 2002). Race matters for the amount and the type of services congregations provide (Brown 2008, Littlefield 2010), as does income and ethnic diversity (Polson 2015).

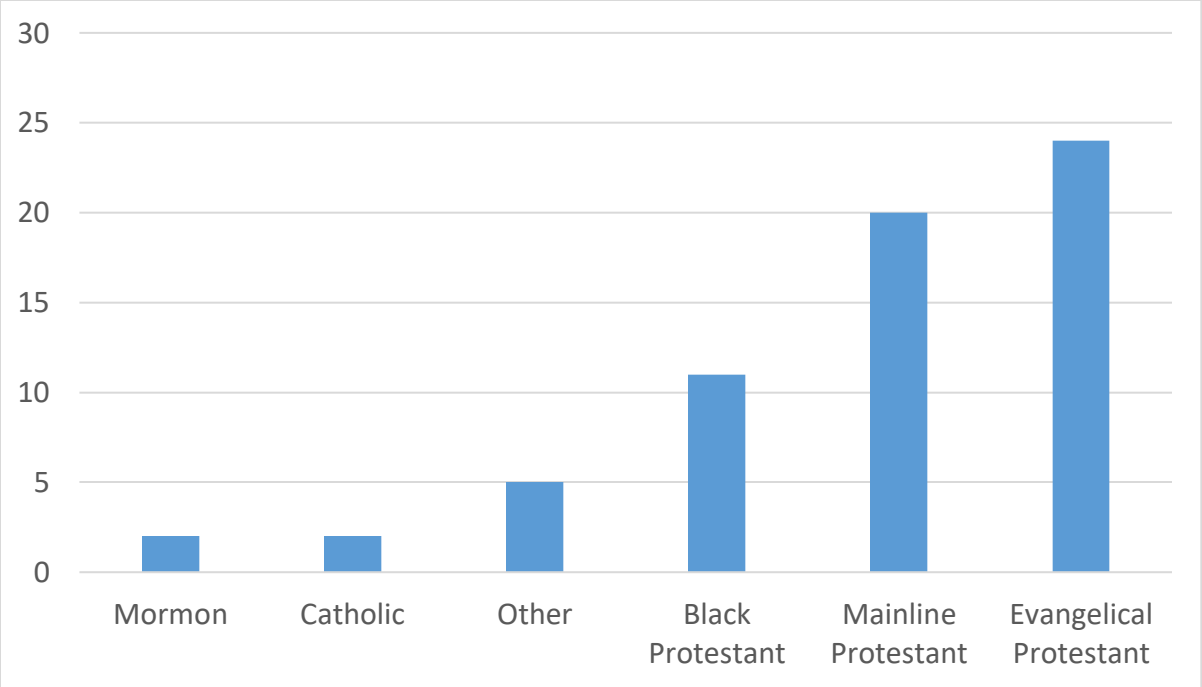
Methods

The data used in the following analyses were collected through the Little Rock Congregations Study in August-December, 2016. The multi-method research design involved first contacting the congregation leader of every place of worship within the city limits of Little Rock (n=392), a city of approximately 200,000 people in the Southern United States. Like many cities in the South, Little Rock is racially divided, demographically split with a population that is 49% white and 42% Black and geographically split by a history of redlining and segregation (Ueland and Warf 2006, Clark 1986). Clergy were contacted through mail, email, phone, and social media and were encouraged to complete the survey that was mailed to them. The response rate was 21.4% with a total of 84 returned surveys.

Researchers contacted all 84 responding clergy to request an interview and ultimately conducted 64 semi-structured interviews with clergy members, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes (a 76.2% response rate). This final sample of 64 clergy who were both interviewed and

surveyed makes up the population that is analyzed here. Figure 1 below displays the distribution of clergy by religious tradition, with the majority of respondents from the Evangelical, Mainline, and Black Protestant religious traditions. One Jewish Rabbi, two Muslim Imams, and one pastor each from a Unitarian Universalist church and from a Seventh-day Adventist church also participated in the research and are represented by the "other" category in Figure 1. Two Catholic parishes and two wards from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon congregations) also participated. The vast majority (91%) of the responding clergy were male, and they had a great deal of experience as religious leaders—an average of 23.6 years in total (SD=15.3) and 9.5 with their congregation (SD=9.7).

Figure 1. Religious Tradition of Responding Clergy



The interview protocol followed by each of the interviewers included fourteen questions, grouped into three general categories: congregational life, theological beliefs, and community and political involvement. The interviews were conducted by 38 graduate students enrolled in a course on field research methods where they spent an entire semester working on this project and being

rigorously trained in conducting interviews (Glazier and Bowman 2019). Although the interviews were semi-structured, both the interview protocol and the training were very thorough, to ensure that specific, codable responses were obtained and coded for each of the key questions. The full interview protocol is included in the Appendix. Researchers coded each of the 14 interview questions according to a codebook that assigned codes at two levels: one primary code for each question response and up to five secondary codes for each question response. The interview codebook is available from the authors upon request. Reliability for a single coder was ensured through re-coding a random sample of 10% of the interviews (agreement=88.56%, Cohen's kappa=0.875).

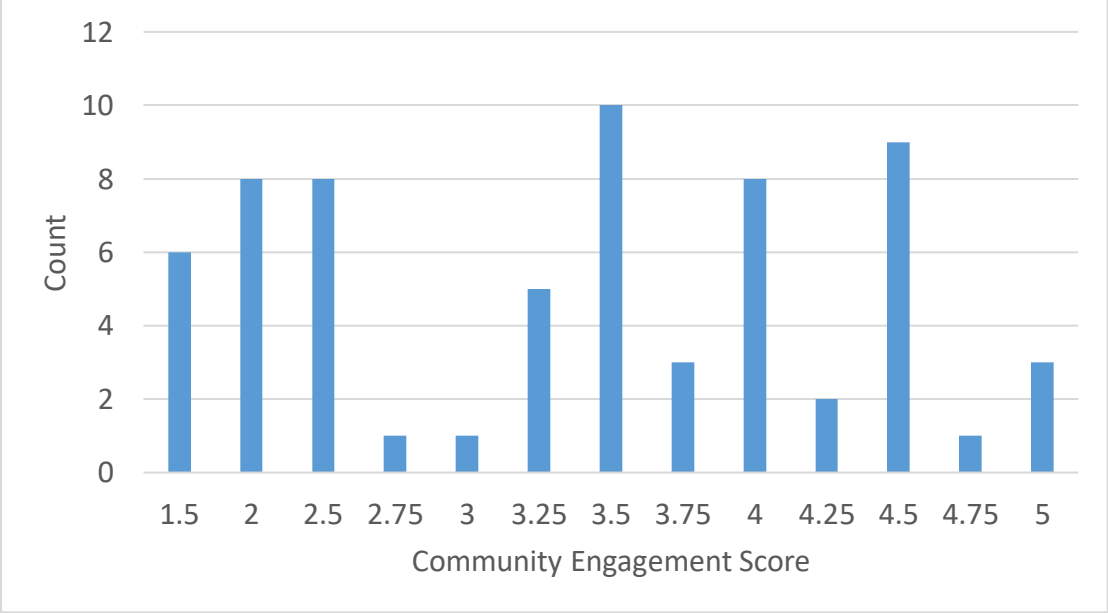
Using these interview data, together with congregation reports written by students attending the place of worship, personal conversations, materials distributed at services, and congregation websites and other online materials, researchers calculated a community engagement score for each congregation. The two authors coded the congregations together, discussing each congregation's qualitative data and position relative to other congregations. The internal validity of the coding system was checked by recoding 1/3 of the congregations after a significant amount of time had passed to ensure intercoder reliability (agreement=81%, Cohen's kappa=0.745).

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

In coding discussions, congregations were often placed at decimal points along the 1 to 5 scale as they were evaluated relative to other congregations. Thus, the qualitative differences among

the congregations in the community are reflected in the quantitative coding. A histogram distribution of the community engagement scores of the 64 congregations in our sample is presented in Figure 2. Calculating this score enabled researchers to distill a wealth of qualitative data into a single number representing the community engagement of the congregation. The final, created variable conveys richer data than, say, a count of the number of social services provided (e.g., Polson 2015), because it takes into account the scope, depth, and target of the provided programs, while using the interpretive knowledge of human coders familiar with the congregations, rather than just numeric counts. The mean community engagement score is 3.29, with a standard deviation of 0.13. This community engagement score serves as the dependent variable in the following quantitative analyses. We describe a typical congregation at each of the five major scale points in some detail here, to allow the reader to evaluate the external validity of the community engagement scale.

Figure 2. Histogram Distribution of the Community Engagement Scores of the 64 Participating Congregations



A congregation that receives a score of 1 on the community engagement scale would be among the least-engaged congregations in the sample. These types of congregations are often

inwardly-focused, with the spiritual well-being of members the foremost concern. Events sponsored by the congregation are limited to members and the congregation does not make efforts to reach out to the community beyond their membership. A congregation with a score of 2 is more involved in the community, but typically through annual social events such as festivals or gatherings to celebrate religious holidays. Community Easter Egg hunts or fish fry fundraisers are examples of events that places of worship with a community engagement score of 2 might engage in.

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

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

In parts of the analysis that follows, the qualitative community engagement score is divided into 3 categories at natural cut points for analysis: congregations scoring between 1 and 2.5 are categorized as low community engagement (n=22), those between 2.6 and 3.9 are moderate

community engagement (n=20), and those at 4 or above are categorized as high community engagement (n=22).

The total sample is made up of 64 congregations with clergy members who completed both the survey and the interview. These data are not nationally representative and should not necessarily be expected to generalize. The Little Rock Congregations Study instead provides a close-up view of community engagement in a single, Southern city with a particular religious-political history. The particular history and make up of Little Rock and the fact that our research team has spent years building relationships in the community to facilitate this work (Glazier and Topping 2020) makes the specific findings unique, but the process could be replicated in other cities. Our sample of 64 diverse congregations is large enough to make some statistical comparisons possible, while also providing a rich source for qualitative data analysis. Indeed, this is the goal of a multi-method approach to understanding congregational community engagement: the statistical data can point us in the direction of those factors that have the greatest influence on engagement and then in-depth interview data can help us better understand the nature and circumstances of that influence. In the following section, the results of difference of means tests to compare the most and least community-engaged congregations are presented first, followed by a regression model, and then a discussion that draws on qualitative data from the interviews.

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

Table 1. Variable and Question Information

Variable	Question Wording	Descriptive Statistics
Community Engagement Score	A measure of a congregation's community engagement, based on clergy interviews, congregation reports written by students attending the place of worship, personal conversations, materials distributed at services, and congregation websites and other online presences	Theoretical Range:1 to 5 Actual Range: 1.5 to 5 Mean: 3.29 SD: 1.03
Conservative Ideology	On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the most liberal position and 5 the most conservative, where would you rank yourself when you think of your general political views? [Very liberal to Very conservative]	Theoretical Range: 0 to 5 Actual Range: 0 to 5 Mean: 3.20 SD: 1.37
Political Interest	Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don't care very much who wins? [1 to 5 scale from Don't Care to Care a Great Deal]	Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 3 to 5 Mean: 4.38 SD: 0.79
Congregation is Politically Engaged	Did you participate in any of the following activities in the past two years? 3 activities listed; Yes (1) or No (0) for each. In a sermon, took a stand on a political issue In a sermon, took a stand on a moral issue Organized a church study group to discuss public affairs.	Theoretical Range: 0 to 3 Actual Range: 0 to 3 Mean: 1.64 SD: 0.88
Congregation is Engaged in the 2016 Election	During elections, many churches provide materials to help members make important choices. For the 2016 election, will your church: 5 activities listed; Yes (1) or No (0) for each. Make voter guides available? Hold a candidate forum for candidates for any level of political office? Hold any meetings to discuss important issues in the election?	Theoretical Range: 0 to 5 Actual Range: 0 to 5 Mean: 0.91 SD: 1.27

	Be involved in a voter registration drive for the 2016 elections? Be involved in getting out the vote for the 2016 election?	
Weekly Attendance	What is the approximate average weekly attendance at all worship services? Categories: 1=less than or equal to 100, 2=101-250, 3=251-500, 4=greater than 500	Actual Range: 12 to 3900 Mean: 435.38 SD: 794.25 Categorical Range: 1 to 4 Mean: 2.27 SD: 1.21
Years with Congregation	How many years have you served this congregation?	Actual Range: .5 to 45 Mean: 9.57 SD: 9.70
Congregation Class	Would you say that members of your congregation are primarily: (1) Working Class (2) Lower-middle Class (3) Middle Class (4) Upper-middle Class (5) Upper Class	Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 1 to 5 Mean: 3.02 SD: 0.95
Scriptural Literalism	Scripture is the inerrant word of God. [1 to 5 scale, Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree]	Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 1 to 5 Mean: 3.80 SD: 1.57
Providential	Agreement with "God has a plan and I have a part to play in it." [0 to 4] Plus "Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day life, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life?" [0 to 4]	Theoretical Range: 4 to 8 Actual Range: 5 to 8 Mean: 7.59 SD: 0.69
Evangelical Protestant	Coded 1 for Evangelical Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.37 SD: 0.48
Mainline Protestant	Coded 1 for Mainline Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.31 SD: 0.46
Black Protestant	Coded 1 for Black Protestant religious tradition and 0 for all others.	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1

		Mean: 0.17 SD: 0.38
Spiritual Reason for Community Engagement	In interviews, those who provide a spiritual reason for community engagement in response to the question: "Does community engagement matter to God?"	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.49 SD: 0.50
Known for Spiritual	In response to the interview question about what your congregation is known for, the clergy member mentioned something spiritual (e.g., Bible study, evangelism)	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.17 SD: 0.37
Known for Community	In response to the interview question about what your congregation is known for, the clergy member mentioned something geared towards the larger community (e.g., homeless shelter, efforts to help foster children)	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.43 SD: 0.49
Spectrum Score	Number provided in response to the interview question asking the clergy member to place their congregation on a scale from a total focus on spiritual to a total focus on physical.	Theoretical Range: 1 to 5 Actual Range: 1 to 4.5 Mean: 2.83 SD: 0.64
No separation between spiritual and physical	In response to the interview question asking the clergy member to place their congregation on a scale from a total focus on spiritual to a total focus on physical, the clergy member brought up the idea that the two can't be separated.	Theoretical Range: 0 to 1 Actual Range: 0 to 1 Mean: 0.17 SD: 0.37

We evaluate the influence of resources on the community engagement of congregations through three clergy survey variables: the size of the congregation, measured through average weekly attendance numbers; the socio-economic class of the congregation, as reported by the congregation leader; and the number of years the clergy member has been with the congregation.

We evaluate four political variables in the analyses below, each drawn from clergy survey questions: ideology, personal political interest, the extent to which political topics are discussed in

sermons and small groups in the congregation, and the engagement of the congregation in the 2016 election. The statistical comparisons presented below also include dummy variables for three religious traditions: Evangelical Protestant (n=25), Mainline Protestant (n=20), and Black Protestant (n=11). The other religious traditions in our sample are too small to allow for statistical comparisons.

We utilize both clergy survey responses and coded interview data to measure theology. To examine whether theologically conservative congregations will be less engaged in the community, we look at two clergy survey questions: one about belief in scriptural literalism, and one about belief in providence (that people can know and help carry out God's will) (Glazier 2017).

Our main theoretical contribution is our hypothesis that the more a clergy member sees spirituality and community engagement as connected, the more likely it is that their congregation is engaged in the community. We turn to five variables from the clergy interviews to operationalize this belief. First, clergy were asked to place their congregation on a spectrum ranging from a total focus on spiritual matters (1) to a total focus on physical/material matters (5). Three is the mid-point of this scale and 57% of respondents placed their congregation at 3 (the mean response is 2.8), indicating that most congregations see themselves as focusing on both spiritual and physical. However, the qualitative analysis of the clergy interviews reveals that a significant minority of clergy (n=11) responded to the spectrum question by volunteering that the two—spiritual and material—could not be separated. These clergy members were coded 1 and all others were coded zero, which became our second measure of theological connection between religion and community engagement. Although certainly an imperfect measure, this variable begins to get at the idea of a reciprocal and intertwined relationship between engagement and theology—it is not a clean story of unidirectional causal influence.

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

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

Results

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

Table 2. Mean Scores for the Bottom ⅓, compared to the Top ⅓, on the Qualitative Community Engagement Score

Variable	**Mean score for bottom ⅓ on engagement**	**Mean score for top ⅓ on engagement**
Politics		
Conservative Ideology*	3.86	2.73
Care about 2016 Election	4.28	4.56
Politics at Church	1.54	1.90
Election Activity at Church	0.86	1.00
Resources		
Weekly Attendance*	105.77	630.56
Years the Clergy Member has been with the congregation	9.22	8.70
Congregation Class	2.70	3.27
Theology		
Scriptural Literalism	4.20	3.17
Evangelical Protestant	0.59	0.30
Mainline Protestant	0.18	0.40
Black Protestant	0.09	0.17
Providential	7.61	7.45
Spiritual reason for community engagement	0.36	0.69
Known for something spiritual*	0.36	0
Known for something in the community*	0.18	0.69
Spectrum: from spiritual focus (=1) to material focus (=5)	2.75	3.04
No separation between spiritual and material*	0	0.34

*difference between the two variables is significant, $p<.05$

The quantitative data indicate that congregations with high levels of engagement are not drastically different from those with low levels of engagement. One of the biggest differences we do see is in the effect of resources; the size of the congregation makes a significant difference for community engagement. This finding is in line with extant literature and is likely a result of the greater resources to which larger faith communities often have access. Community-engagement can be a resource-intensive process and churches must consider whether or not they have the time, money, and people it will require to successfully start or contribute to a community program. The resources of a long-standing pastor and a higher socio-economic class, on the other hand, were not significant. The data do indicate a trend towards more community involvement for wealthier congregations, but most clergy rated their congregation as middle class, leaving a small *n* of wealthier congregations (only 1 clergy member categorized their congregation as upper class). A figure of the full sample breakdown is available in the Appendix. This suggests that clergy self-reports of congregation economic class may not be reliable and other data may be more useful if researchers are interested in understanding the role of economic resources on community engagement.

The political variables we measured also do not differ much between highly-engaged and less-engaged congregations. There are no significant differences based on political activity in church, election-related political activity, or caring about who wins the 2016 election. The only political variable that is significantly different is clergy ideology. We find that conservative clergy are less likely to lead community-engaged congregations, a finding expected by the literature.

To test our theory of the theological importance of linking the spiritual and material, we turn now to the theology variables. We find that highly-engaged and less-engaged congregations are equally likely to mention a spiritual motivation behind their community engagement. Where we do see some statistically significant differences is in whether the congregation is known for spiritual or community-centered programs. Engaged congregations have clergy who are more likely to cite the

latter and less likely to cite the former, indicating that there may be a spiritual/community trade-off at work here (Glazier 2018). The finding that engaged congregations are more likely to say they are known for community-engaged programs makes intuitive sense, since places of worship that take the time to be engaged in the community are likely to say that is something that they are known for.

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

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

In the next step of the analysis, we ran a regression model with the community engagement variable as the dependent variable. The small number of congregations in this study (n=64) limits the statistical power of the model, so only those variables with significant differences in Table 2 are included in the model: ideology, weekly attendance, being known for something spiritual, being known for something in the community, and seeing no separation between spiritual and material. The results of the regression are presented in Table 3 and make it possible to see the variables that

influence congregational community engagement when all of the significant variables from Table 2 are taken into account.

Table 3. Regression Model Predicting Congregational Community Engagement

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Ideology	-0.160	0.085
Weekly attendance	0.190*	0.091
Known for spiritual	-0.669*	0.314
Known for community	0.320	0.247
No separation between material and spiritual	0.612*	0.308
Constant	3.245	0.375
N	64	
Adjusted R2	0.322	

*p<.05

There are three independent variables in the model that achieve standard levels of statistical significance: weekly attendance, the clergy member saying that the congregation is known for something spiritual, and the clergy member seeing no separation between the spiritual and material. The attendance variable is categorical in this analysis. Moving up one attendance category (for instance, from less than 100 to 101-250 weekly attendees) results in a corresponding increase of .19 in terms of the community engagement score (which ranges from 1 to 5). Both of the other two significant variables are dichotomous and are significant in opposite directions. The coefficients are similar, indicating that being known for something spiritual decreases the community engagement score about as much as seeing no difference between spiritual and material increases it.

Interestingly enough, being known for something in the community is not a significant predictor of engagement. Those with a spiritual focus are less engaged, but those with a community focus are not more engaged, when all of the variables in the regression model are considered together. Instead, it is seeing physical and spiritual needs as inseparable that leads to greater

community engagement. When the most important variables are considered together in a regression model, the results indicate that a theological view of spiritual and material connection is the most powerful influence on community engagement. Spirituality appears to be central to the community engagement of these congregations.

In the next stage of the analysis, we turn to the clergy interviews in order to better understand these statistical findings. How do clergy understand the connection between spiritual and material factors when it comes to community engagement? Clergy at highly-involved churches are far more likely to say that material and spiritual needs cannot be separated. When asked about whether or not his church places more emphasis on spiritual or material needs, one pastor from a very involved congregation with a community engagement score of 4.5 stated,

> "those things are completely interwoven, and I think that the healthiest manifestation of the church is one that is able to bring those two things together in a way that is not just complimentary, but understands that they were never really different things at all."

Similarly, when asked whether his congregation put more emphasis on material over spiritual needs, a pastor from a highly-involved congregation with an engagement score of 4 asserted that he does not think "you can take care of one without the other." Another pastor, when presented with the spiritual-material spectrum, said, "you're not going to like this. There's no divergence. If spiritual doesn't manifest itself in material, its worthless, but if the material has no soul then its worthless. There is no difference."

These kinds of statements diverge from the literature regarding the role of "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" theology. In the case of clergy members who volunteered a response about the connection between spiritual and material factors, all of whom lead highly-involved congregations, they do not see a division between the concerns of this world and the world to come. For them, spiritual and material needs are one and the same.

This contrasts with less-involved congregations, who don't make the same connections. Whereas one community-involved pastor of a Black Protestant church said, "we can't consider ourselves spiritual if we're not concerned about the social needs of the community", the pastor of a more inwardly-focused Black Protestant church said,

> "We're especially focused on the spiritual…there is some outgrowth of the spiritual concerns, but we're not a group that's going to say, let's talk about fixing poverty, or let's talk about what are we going to do about the homeless. We don't see those as like a problem that we solve."

In our interviews, the clear theological basis of the differences in spiritual vs. material priorities was clear. As one Baptist clergy member put it directly:

> "We would say without hesitation that we're more concerned about someone's spiritual health than their physical well-being. That may sound harsh, but you've got to realize where we're coming from. We believe that someone who is lost and dies lost that they're separated from God forever. That's our belief; that's the Biblical belief. Well, if that's true, which we believe that that's true, then our focus can never be more material than spiritual."

Another clergy member, who leads a very involved congregation with an engagement score of 5, also linked theology and community service, saying, "I think we do a lot for a church the size that we are, and we're proud of that. I think it bears out the theological things that I said earlier." In talking about the complex and reciprocal relationship between engagement and theology, this clergy member went on to say, "When you're around people who care about something, you're going to care about it, too. It goes deeper than cognitive work…When you're surrounded by people who value serving others more than they value personal enrichment or whatever, it rubs off." Thus, religious leaders do see theology motivating community engagement, but it seems like they also see community engagement changing the hearts of their members.

Conclusions

When religious congregations are engaged in their local communities, the community benefits. The social services and community connections congregations provide bolster neighborhoods and provide needed aid. But some congregations are more likely to be engaged than others. The

quantitative and qualitative data presented here indicate that theology may be critically important to understanding why.

Engaged congregations tend to be larger and less likely to say that they are known for something spiritual. Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this research, however, is that engaged congregations are significantly more likely to say that spiritual and material factors are connected. This quantitative finding, together with qualitative support from clergy interviews, demonstrates that many clergy members see a deeply spiritual purpose for their engagement in the community—a theological connection that less involved congregations do not make. When they serve populations in need, they are not just doing so to meet those needs—they are doing so because they see it as spiritually important.

We cannot tell from these data whether these theological explanations come after the congregation's community-engaged priorities are already set or whether they drive them, but we expect that the process is mutually reinforcing. The data from our interviews with clergy indicate that those who lead very engaged congregations see that work as theologically meaningful and as impacting the spiritual development of their members in a positive feedback loop, but there is much we don't yet know about that complex relationship. Similarly, our surveys of congregation leaders tell us about them as individuals, but there is much we don't know about the details of their theological beliefs, their relationship with their members, and their leadership style. The data presented here represent a close look at mainly Christian congregations in one city in the Southern United States. Other studies have examined different populations, like Latino congregations in Chicago (Burwell et al. 2010) or Protestant churches in Philadelphia (Unruh and Sider 2005), but we can't generalize from these results. More research would be needed to see if congregations outside of this context are similarly influenced by theology in making decisions about community engagement. The preliminary findings presented here challenge the binary construction of this-

worldly and other-worldly religious orientations. This multimethod examination of dozens of congregations reveals that, often, engaged congregations see spiritual and material motivations as one and the same.

Appendix A. Clergy Interview Protocol

1. Introduction and Overview
    a. We want to know more about how churches contribute to the community and how they build community among their congregants.
    b. Interviewing approximately 80 churches in Little Rock
    c. Confidentiality (IRB handout).
        i. Request that they select a box and sign.
        ii. Be sure to mention potential media coverage.
    d. Taping for accuracy
    e. Thank you
2. Easy Questions
    a. Tell me a little about your church and your congregation. What is it like to worship here? (Set at ease).
3. Transition and providential questions. I hope you don't mind if I ask you a theological question now. We want to understand how your church's theological beliefs might influence your congregants.
    a. Could you tell me a little about your church's beliefs regarding how involved God is or isn't in our lives?
        i. Probe, for instance:
            1. Do you think it matters to God how involved people are in the community?
            2. Do you think it matters to God which political party is in power or which politician is elected?
    b. These beliefs about God you have articulated—do you think they are shared by most members of your congregation?
        i. Probe—are these beliefs that you talk regularly about in your worship service or in meetings or are they just understood by most members?
4. Community and political questions. I would like to talk a little about the relationship of your church with the community.
    a. [Show spectrum]. In talking with places of worship in Little Rock, we find that most churches fall somewhere along this spectrum, where one end represents a total focus on spiritual concerns, without paying much attention to physical or material problems, and the other end represents a complete focus on physical concerns without paying much attention to spiritual problems, and the center point represents and equal focus on both the spiritual and the physical. Where would you put your church? [get a firm number here].
        i. If they want examples (only provide if asked):
            1. Some churches focus more on spiritual concerns like the eternal salvation of their members and others in the community.
            2. Some churches focus more on physical/material concerns like food and security for their members and others in the community.
    b. Could you tell me a little about what kinds of things your church does when you focus on physical/material concerns?
    c. What do you see as the most pressing issues in your community?

i. Do you ever discuss these issues in your sermons or in your meetings? What kind of guidance do you offer congregants concerned about these same issues?
ii. Do you ever talk about politics at church?

d. We often find that churches have a particular ministry or focus when it comes to working with the community. Are there any community or political issues on which you or your congregation has been particularly active? What is your church known for?
    i. Probe—why do you think people at your church care about that issue?

5. Wrapping up
    a. Thinking back over our conversation, is there anything you want to add or clarify?
    b. Just so you know, the next steps of the research project:
        i. *If it is a church we are surveying*: we are looking forward to attending your worship service on [date] and surveying your congregants on November 6.
        ii. *All churches*: we will be hosting a big event for the community in the spring where we will share the things that we have learned through this research project, again, without using specific church names, just discussing the overall findings and the good work that churches are doing in Little Rock. We will be sure to send you an invitation.
    c. Thanks again for your time.

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