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An Oregon Conference Investigation of the Relationship
between Community Connectedness and Congregational
Spiritual Vitality

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

By, Rhonda Whitney, Ph.D.

Mandated Growth

- Mark 16:15-20

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”



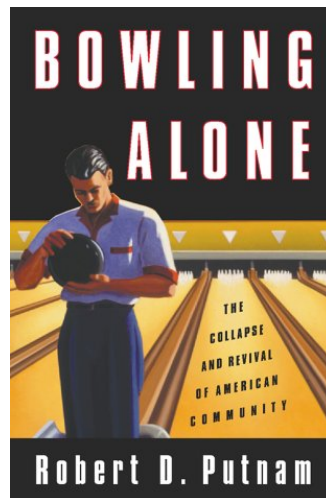
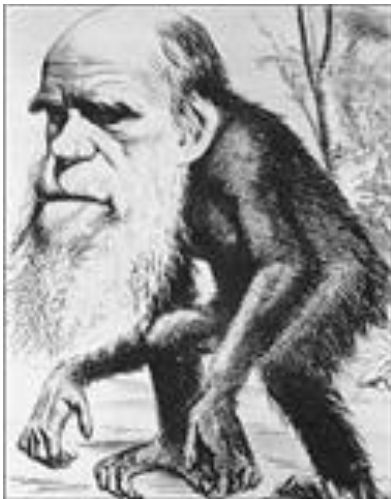
Problem

Church growth is minimal though emphasis on soul winning remains strong.

Oregon Conference
1999 – 2009
0%

Problem, con't.

- 1) Culture of separatism
- 2) Societal isolation trends: An epidemic of loneliness
- 3) Formal evangelism emphasis



Purpose

- To discover if a significant relationship exists between members' connectedness in their communities and the health and vitality of their local congregations.



The Questions We Asked

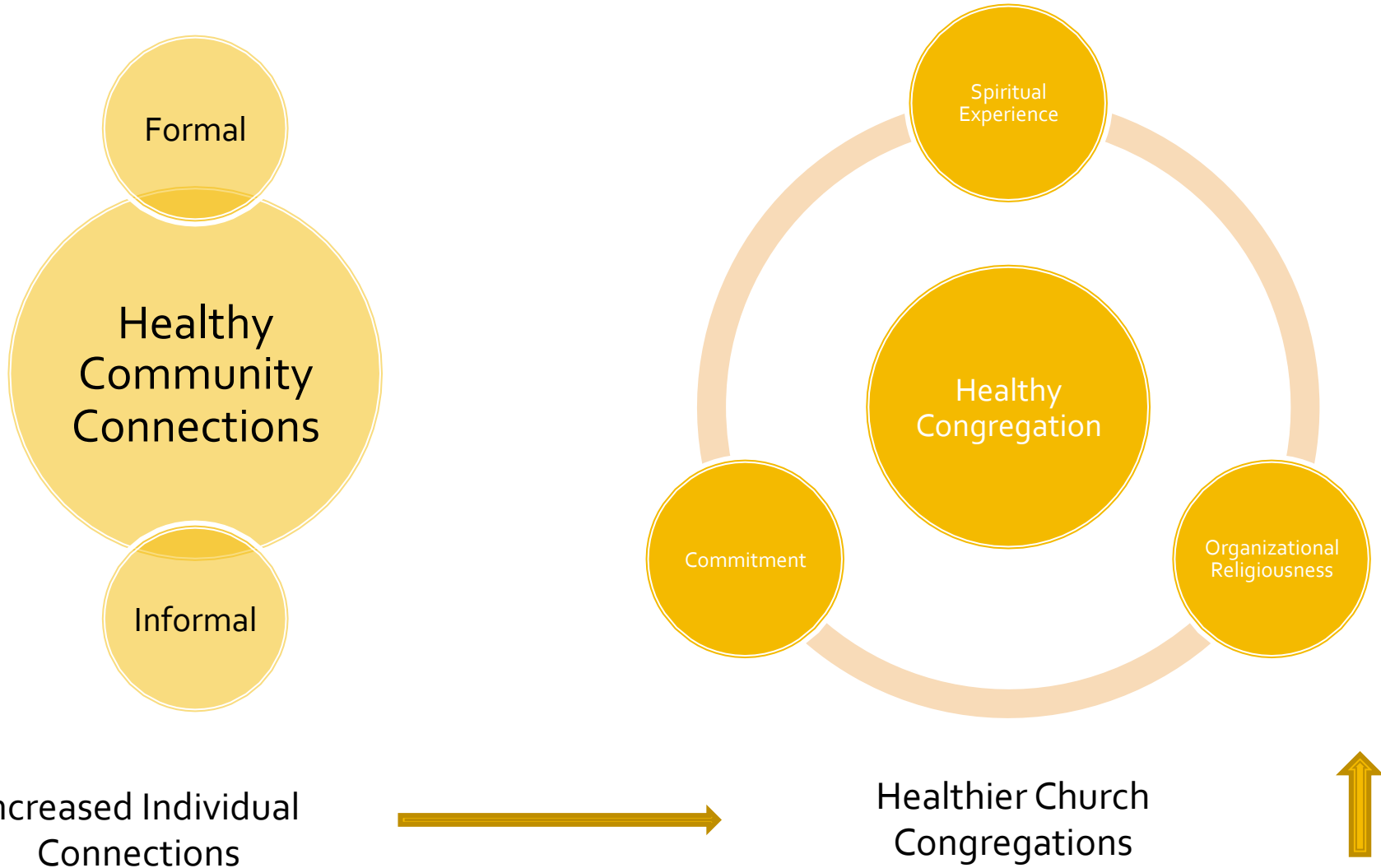
Is there a relationship between members' community connections and the health of the local congregation as shown in greater:

congregational spiritual vitality?

membership growth ?

congregational giving levels?

The Definitions We Used



Connections are Easy

- Connectedness covers a broad spectrum of interactions, formal and informal
 - Quantity is key
 - Everyday interpersonal lifestyles of courteous, kind, and compassionate connecting

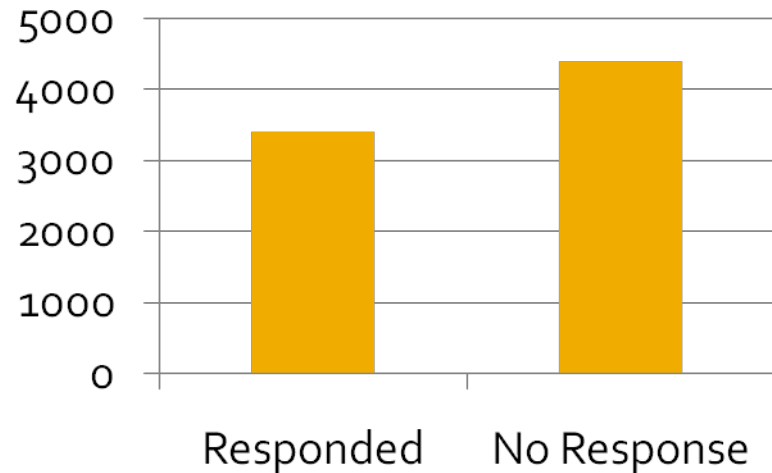
Method

- Subjects:
 - English speaking churches in the Oregon Conference
- Data Collection:
 - Used lists of active church members provided by pastors and clerks
- Research Design:
 - Snapshot of congregations in October, 2009
- Instrumentation:
 - Survey developed for this study; tested and validated

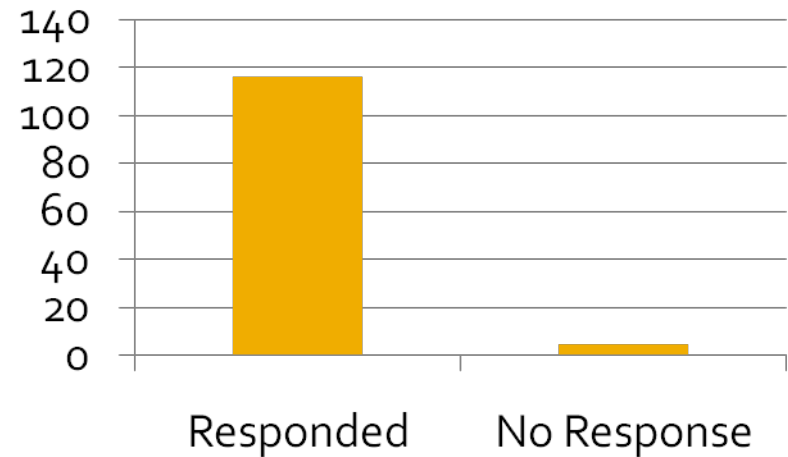
Who Responded

- 3,408 members reported, representing 116 churches

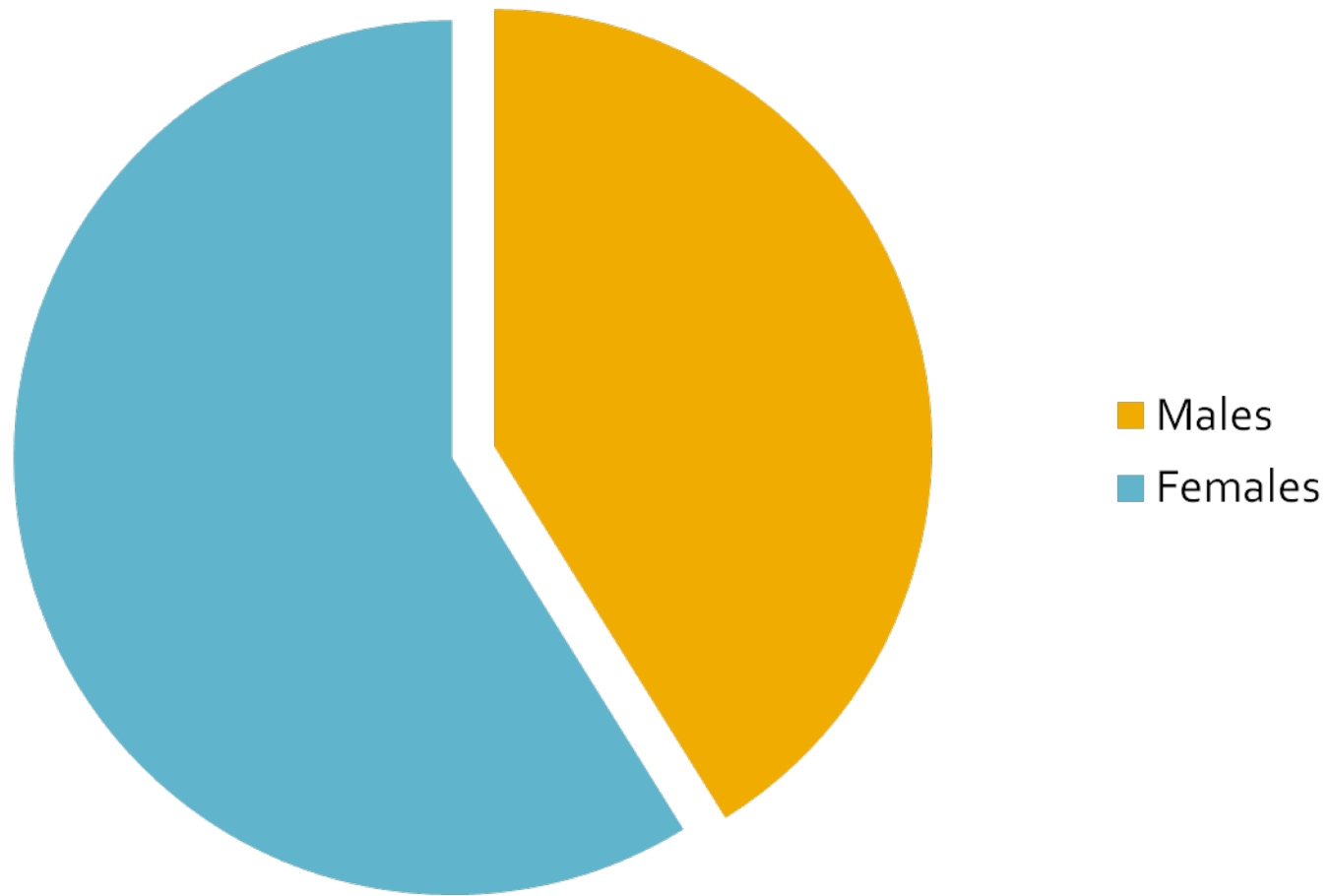
Individuals



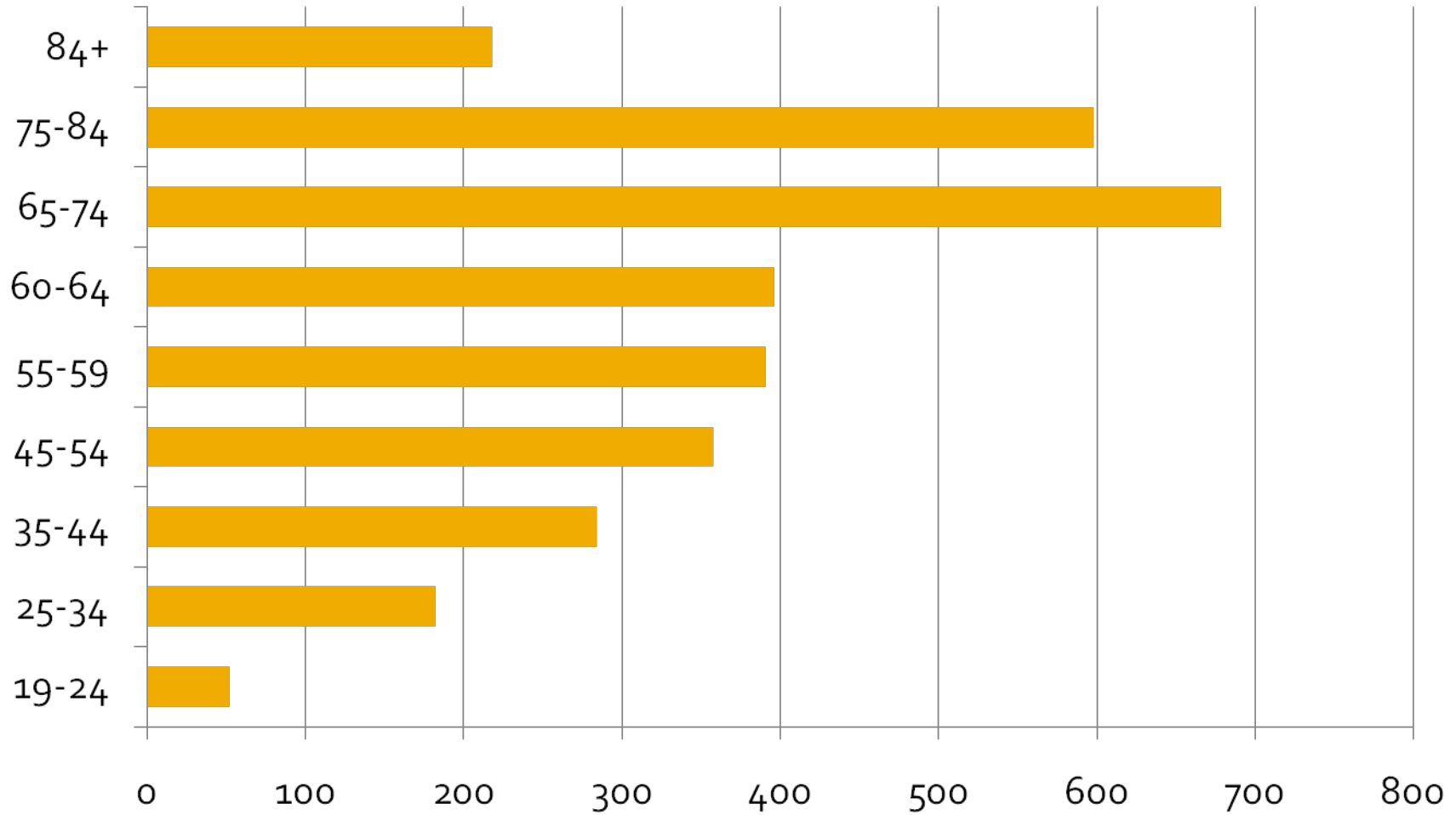
Churches



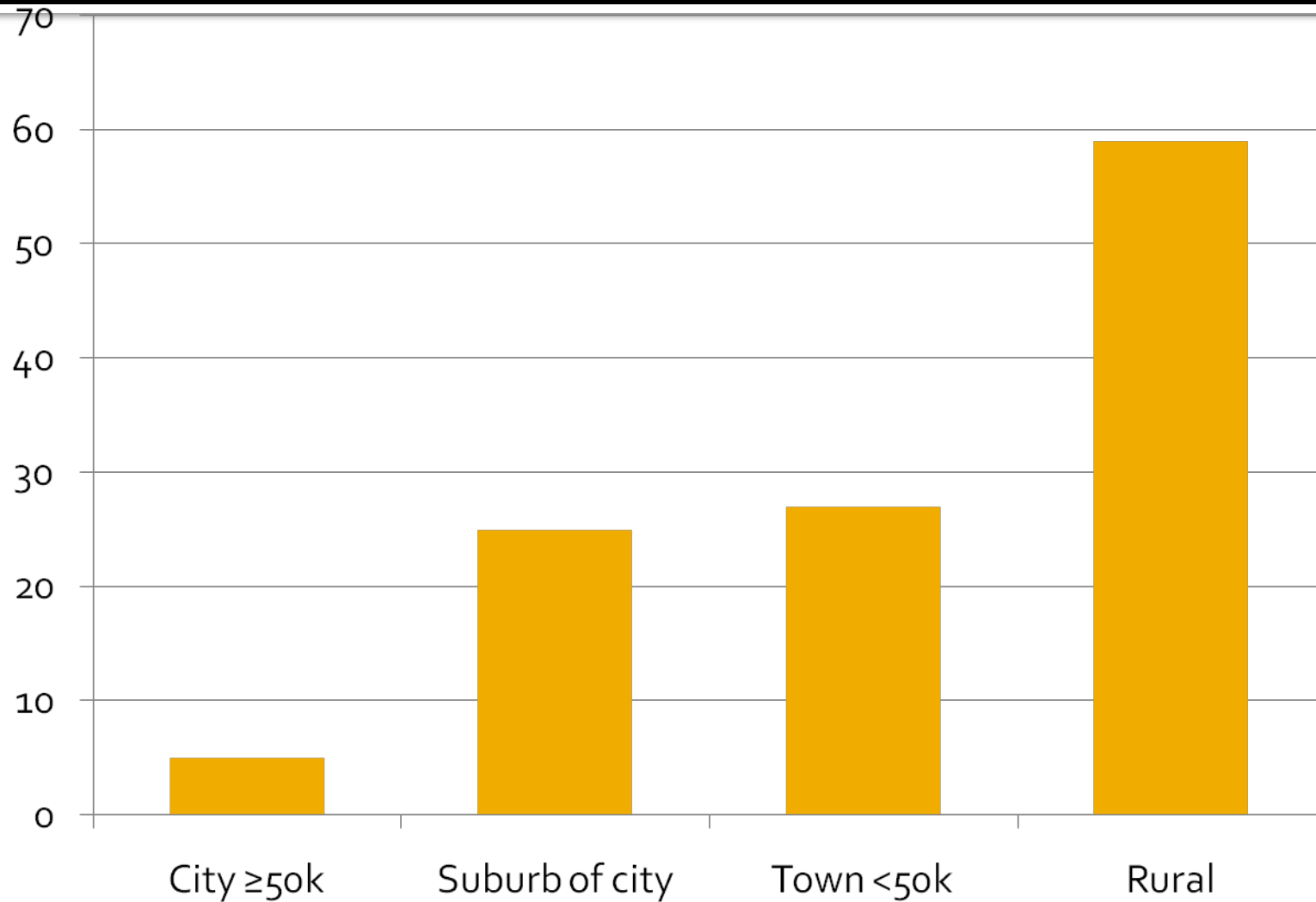
Gender



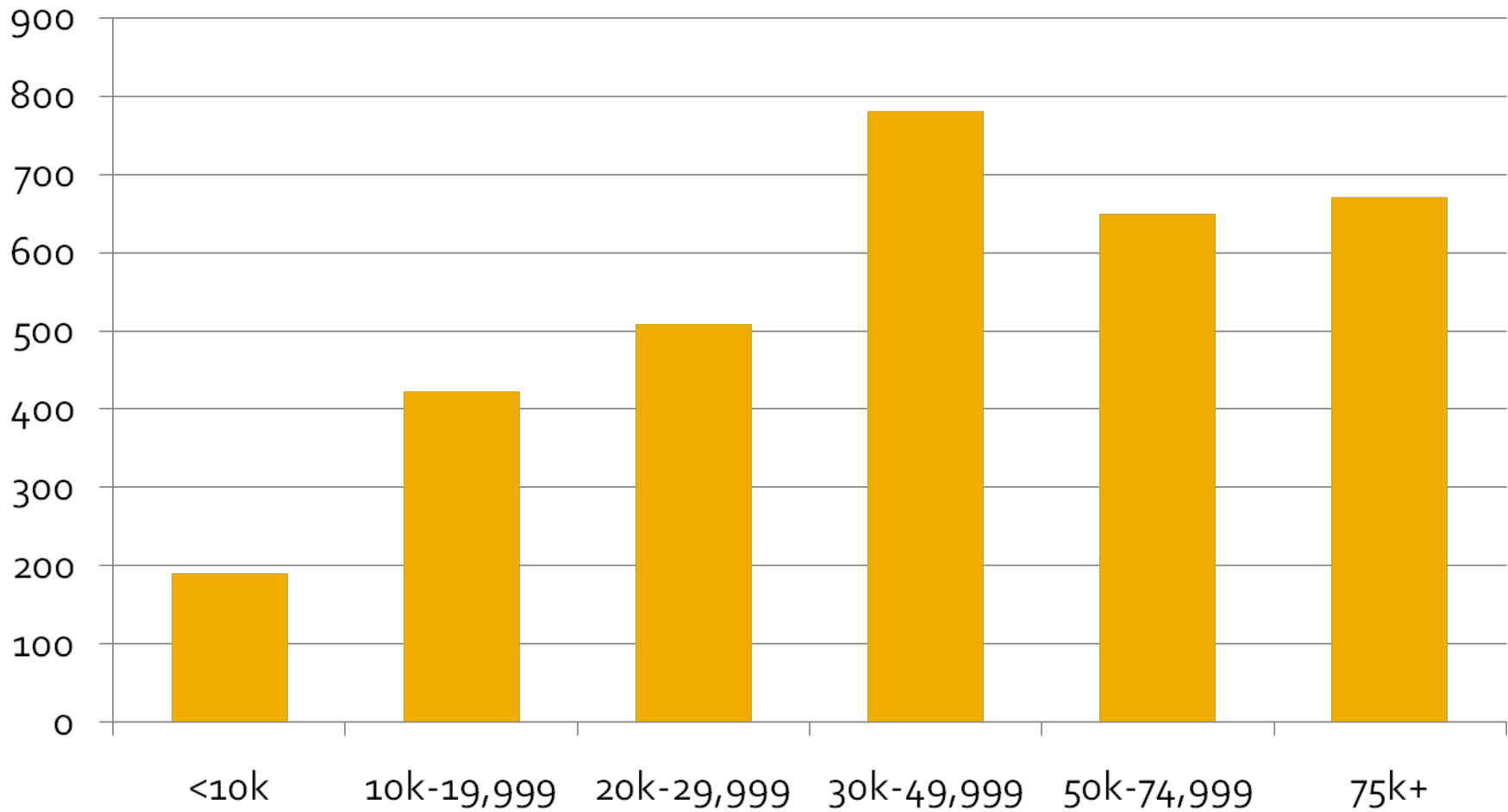
Age



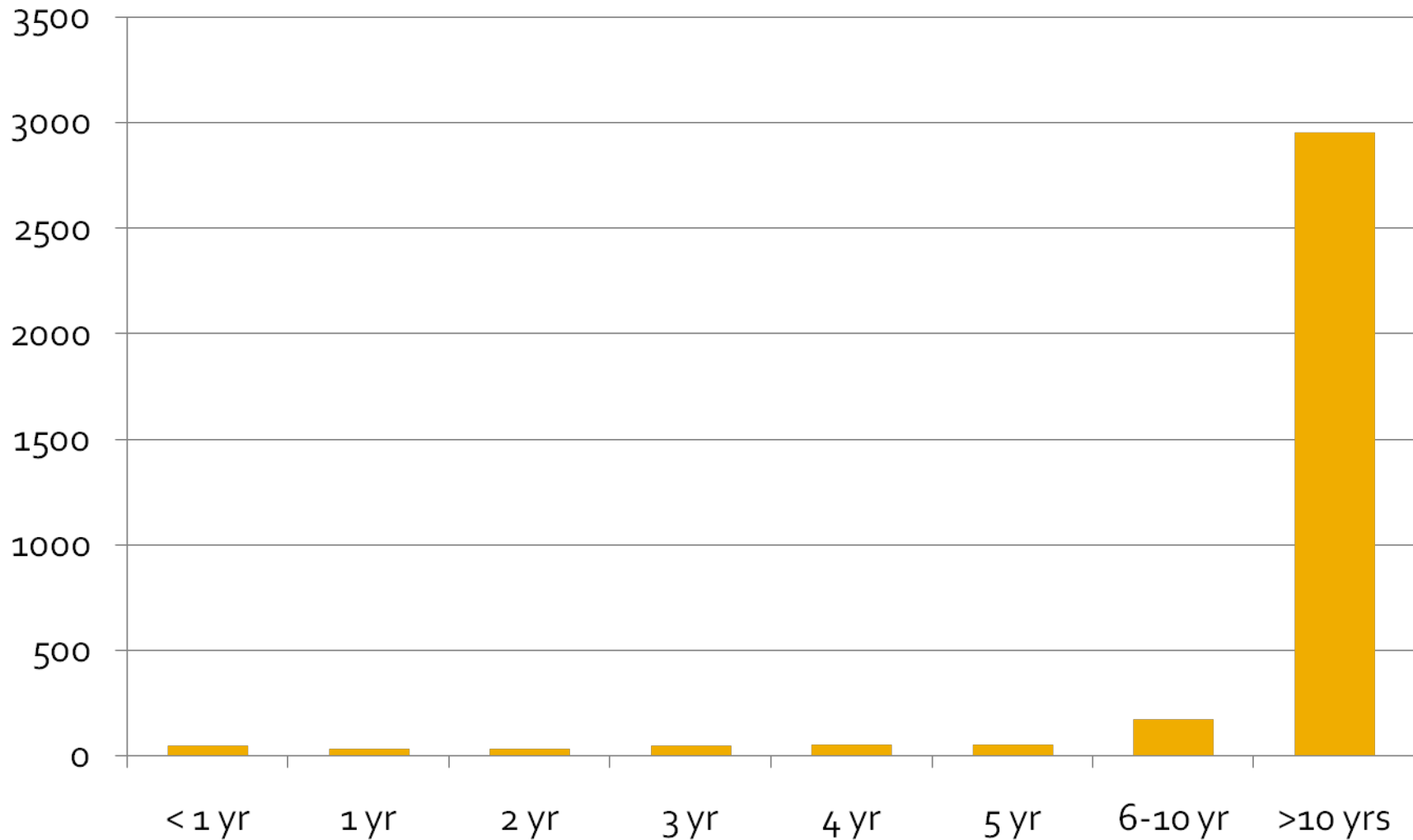
Location of Church



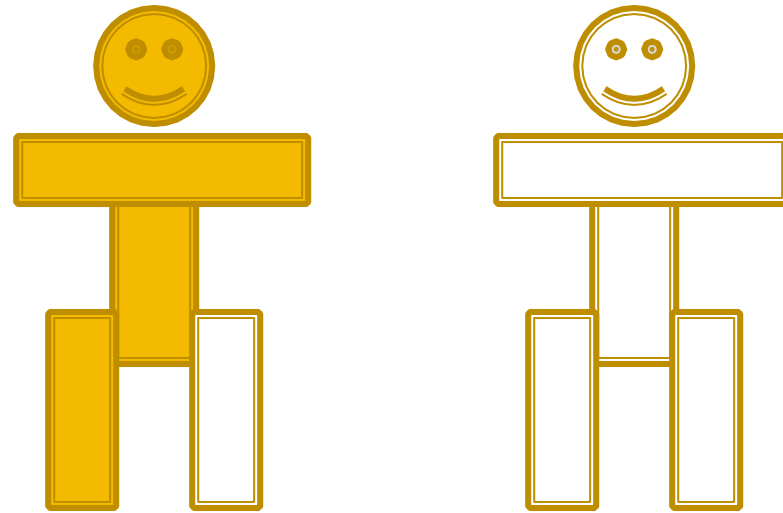
Income



Length of Time in Denomination

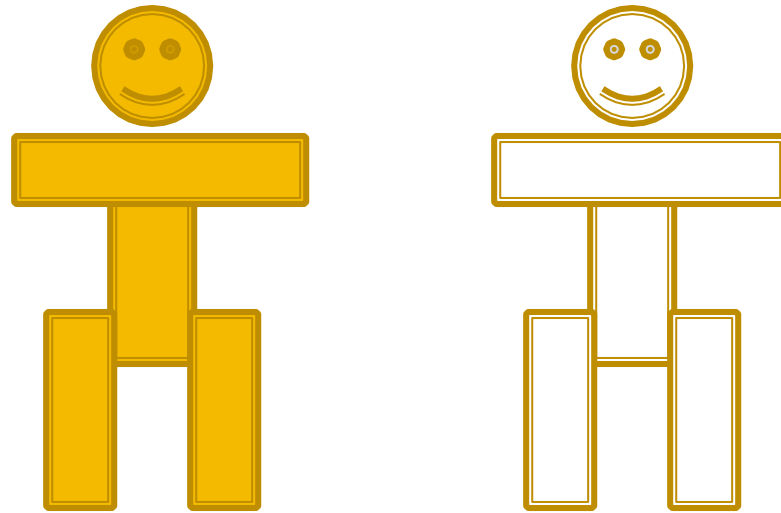


Members Who Volunteer in Their Communities



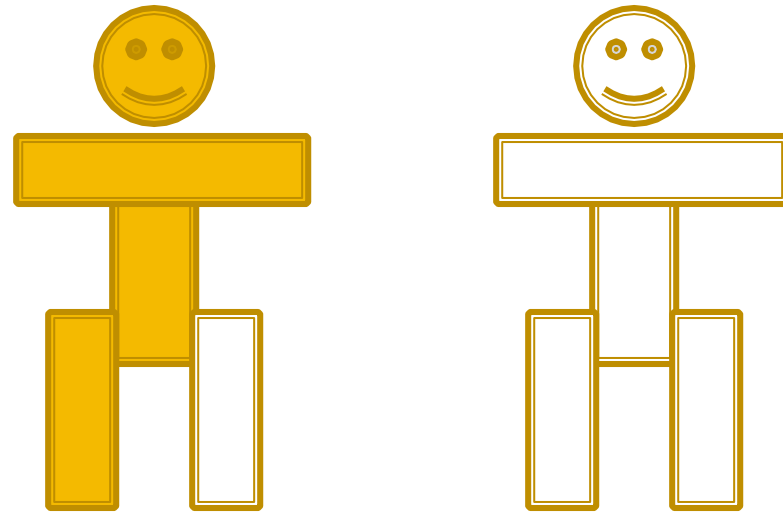
46%

Members Who Spontaneously Connect With Their Neighbors



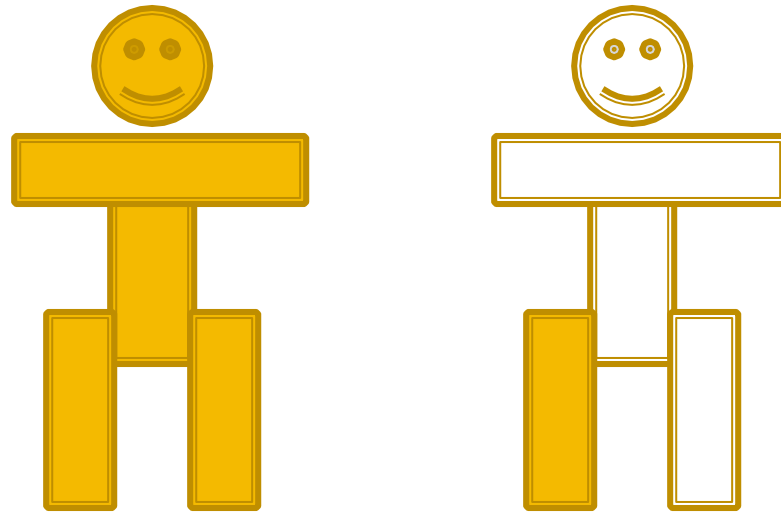
50%

Members Who Give \$ to Their Church



45%

Members Who Give Time to Their Church



55%

Conclusion #1

- Congregations whose members were more connected to their communities scored higher on levels of spiritual vitality.
 - No further testing changed this.

Age ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.16$)

Position in church ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.26$)

Commute time ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.21$)

Length of membership ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.22$)

Congregational growth ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.24$)

Congregational giving levels ($R^2_{\text{changed}}=0.20$)

Conclusion #2

- \uparrow Connectedness = \uparrow Growth
when:
 - members have longer commute times,
 - volunteer less for the church, or
 - have less spiritual vitality.

Conclusion #3

- ↑ Connectedness = ↑ Giving of time and \$
when:
 - members have not been in the denomination as long, or
 - when there is less congregational spiritual vitality.

Recommendations for Practice

- Results indicate a relationship between connectedness and health of the congregation.
 - Church would do well to consider a paradigm shift theologically and organizationally to less separatism more holistic evangelism.



Recommendations for Practice, con't.

- Appoint a committee of theologians and practitioners to study the concept of compassionate connections in biblical and extra-biblical literature.



Recommendations for Practice, con't.

- Provide education for leaders and members at all levels to live lifestyles of increased community connectedness.



Recommendations for Practice, con't.

- Balance formal evangelism with intentional lifestyles of mingling and compassionate connecting with the community, especially in the Pacific Northwest.



Recommendations for Practice, con't.

- Plan for demographic impacts
 - General and church populations are aging
 - Aging members are influencing the growth and giving levels of churches.



Recommendations for Further Study

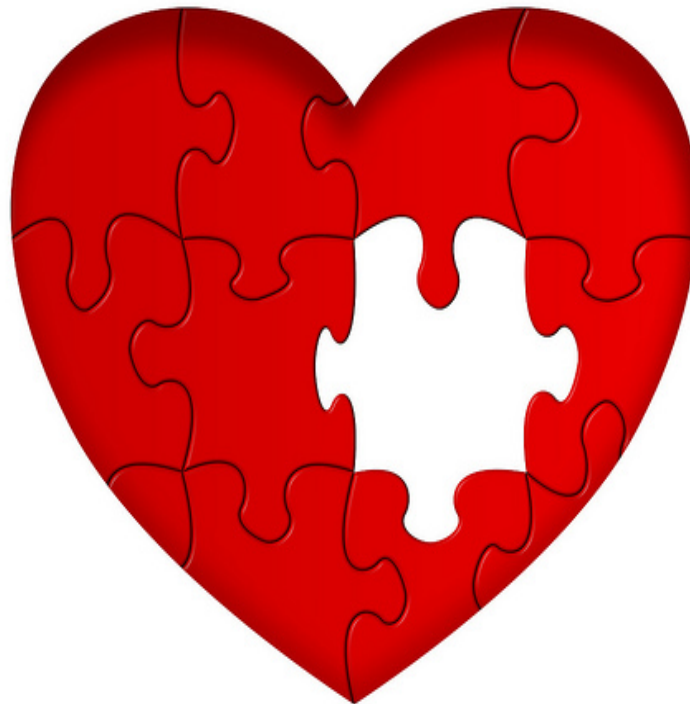
- Initial study is a springboard for further exploration.
 - May raise more questions than it answers
 - Consider possible curvilinear relationships
 - Control for age variables
 - Explore connectedness and membership retention

Summary

- The Great Commission commands church growth, but statistics show growth is flat in worldwide Christianity and in the Oregon Conference, in spite of a history of formal evangelistic emphases. Growth is considered by many to be a sign of congregational vitality.
- One way of increasing congregational spiritual vitality is to encourage more connecting between members and their communities.

A Hole in our Gospel

“And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.



The second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself”

(Mark 12:30, 31).

¹New Living Translation

The Complete Gospel



- “Preach the gospel always, when necessary use words.”

(St. Francis of Assisi)

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