



What is a Flourishing Congregation? Leader Perceptions, Definitions, and Experiences

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Received: 7 March 2018 / Accepted: 1 November 2018 / Published online: 10 November 2018
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Abstract

How do Canadian congregational and denominational leaders in Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant settings perceive and define what constitutes a flourishing congregation? Drawing on interview and focus group data with over one hundred leaders across Canada, we bring to description the perceptions, narratives, and experiences that church and denominational leaders hold about flourishing congregations. We highlight three central findings: (a) there is a divide between those who believe that flourishing entails numeric growth and those who do not; (b) depending on the Christian tradition in question, there are several partially overlapping and conflicting pictures of what constitutes a flourishing congregation, evident in three overarching domains and several subsequent dimensions—organizational ethos (clear self-identity, leadership, innovation, and structure and process), internal factors (discipleship, hospitable community, engaged laity, and diversity), and outward variables (evangelism, neighborhood involvement, and partnership); and (c) supernatural discourse figures into how leaders discuss flourishing congregations over and against secular or human-controlled narratives. We draw on cultural sociology, notably discussions on group boundaries (between Christian traditions, within Christian traditions, and between Christian and non-religious organizations), to describe and explain the similar and dissimilar cultural narratives that Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant leaders hold about flourishing congregations. We then encourage social scientists to pay greater attention to how leaders themselves perceive and define a flourishing congregation, including the narratives and boundaries that contribute to leader constructions of reality.

Keywords Congregations · Parishes · Canada · Sociology of religion · Practical theology · Positive organizational studies

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Introduction

While a lot of research on Christianity in Canada focuses on secularization and religious decline (Bibby 1993; Bowen 2004; Thiessen 2015; Clarke and MacDonald 2017; Reimer 2017), little research exists on signs of congregational life and vitality. With respect to studies on congregations in general—of which there are few in Canada until recently (Reimer 2012; Bowen 2013; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015; Bibby and Reid 2016; Haskell et al. 2016; Flatt et al. 2018)—several scholars deal with congregational health and growth, yet few researchers examine how church and denominational leaders perceive and define what constitutes a flourishing congregation. In this exploratory study, we draw on interviews and focus groups with Canadian congregational and denominational leaders in self-defined flourishing Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant contexts to investigate how they define a flourishing congregation. We think this endeavor is worthwhile for bringing to description the perceptions, narratives, and experiences that church and denominational leaders hold about flourishing congregations; advancing scholarly research and analysis into how we might enhance measurements of congregational flourishing; and aiding denominational and congregational leaders to better understand how their peers define flourishing.

Our analysis yields three findings. First, there is a divide between those who believe that flourishing entails numeric growth and those who do not. Second, depending on the Christian tradition in question, there are several partially overlapping and conflicting pictures of what constitutes a flourishing congregation. At a base level, leaders across traditions collectively associate three overarching domains and several subsequent dimensions with flourishing congregations: organizational ethos (clear self-identity, leadership, innovation, and structure and process), internal factors (discipleship, hospitable community, engaged laity, and diversity), and outward variables (evangelism, neighborhood involvement, and partnership). However, the level of importance that members of different traditions attach to these domains and dimensions as well as how these concepts are operationalized vary. Third, supernatural discourse figures into how leaders discuss flourishing congregations over and against secular or human-controlled narratives.

Literature Review

Several attempts exist to measure church health and vitality, ranging from “church growth” to “church health” to the “missional church.” Church growth research (Wagner 1976; McGavran 1990) focused on quantitative measures associated with growing churches (membership, baptism, attendance, or financial figures). Church health assessments included numerical and qualitative dimensions linked with church growth, with the belief that qualitative aspects of church health naturally lead to quantitative growth (Schwarz 1998; Scazzero 2010). More recently

missional church endeavors focused solely on the qualitative impacts on those beyond the walls of the local congregation (Guder 1998; Frost 2006; Hirsch 2006; Van Gelder 2007; Roxburgh and Boren 2009). Often opposed to adapting principles of marketing, programming, bigger buildings, larger budgets, more staffing, and numerical growth, those in this camp have focused on churches that serve, care for, and transform the community at large.

Social scientific research into church health or vitality tend to focus on several indicators of numeric growth or decline, and “winners” and “losers” in the religious economy (e.g., in rational choice theory, see Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Bainbridge 1996 [1987]; Finke 1997; Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2005). Studies have revealed that two main factors, institutional and contextual, influence congregational growth and decline. According to Hoge and Roozen (1979:39), “Contextual factors are external to the church. They are in the community, the society, and the culture in which a church exists. A church has little control over them. Institutional factors are internal to the church and are aspects of its life and functioning over which it has some control.”¹ Recent research with church leaders and congregants reveal the belief that congregations grow because of institutional variables that they control, whereas congregations decline due to contextual factors that are beyond their control (McMullin 2013; Flatt et al. 2018). Flatt et al. (2018) note that as people overwhelmingly offer human-oriented explanations to explain church growth or decline, some clergy and congregants also point toward supernatural accounts (e.g., prayer or the Holy Spirit).

Our interests here are with how church and denominational leaders across theological contexts define and operationalize a flourishing congregation, and how sociology helps us to explain those definitions and perceptions. We take an emic approach to describe and investigate definitions and perceptions of flourishing from within denominational and congregational contexts, allowing our definition to evolve as data is gathered and analyzed from insiders (Pike 1967). This approach is especially advisable when studying congregations across the theological spectrum. As such, we do not anticipate a single shared definition or perception of what constitutes a flourishing congregation. We expect points of convergence and divergence.

Research in cultural sociology on group boundaries is a helpful theoretical frame to anchor our work (Alexander and Smith 2001; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003;

¹ There is an exhaustive literature in congregational studies that deals with these topics. On *institutional factors*, see: Kelley (1972), Hopewell (1987), Dudley et al. (1991), Bibby (1993, 2004), Dudley and Johnson (1993), Roozen (1993), Roozen and Hadaway (1993), Wind and Lewis (1994), Iannaccone et al. (1995), Ammerman et al. (1998), Barna (1999), Macchia (1999), Wilkes (2001a, b), Woolever and Bruce (2004), Ammerman (2005), Bickers (2005), Carroll (2006), Bruce et al. (2006), Scheitle and Finke (2008), Reimer (2012), Bowen (2013) and Chaves and Anderson (2014). For *contextual factors*, see: Kelley (1972), Stark and Bainbridge (1985), Hopewell (1987), Dudley and Johnson (1993), Parson and Leas (1993), Roozen and Hadaway (1993), Wind and Lewis (1994), Ammerman (1997), Ammerman et al. (1998), Stark and Finke (2000), Finke and Stark (2005), Scheitle (2007), Scheitle and Dougherty (2008) and Woolever and Bruce (2008). Overlapping institutional and contextual variables is *organizational theory*, including the *sociology of religious organizations*. For this literature, see Stark and Bainbridge (1985), Saarinen (1986), Dudley and Johnson (1993), Parson and Leas (1993), Roozen and Hadaway (1993), Stark and Finke (2000), Wilkes (2001a, b), Bickers (2005) and Scheitle and Dougherty (2008).

Sewell Jr. 2005; Pachucki et al. 2007; Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011). Social groups have multiple interacting cultural realities, narratives, and boundaries that they socially construct and maintain as “objectively” true (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Cultural sociologists are interested in how groups perceive themselves and others, how groups establish and maintain cultural narratives and boundaries to demarcate “us” from “them,” and the ways that group boundaries shift or overlap with other groups, depending on social context. For example, what narratives, groups, and boundaries do groups normalize as “good” to be part of “us,” or problematize as “bad” or deviant, and what do such narratives tell us about group identity (Elia-soph and Lichterman 2003)? Ghaziani and Baldassarri (2011:180–183) draw attention to different perspectives on cultural narrative coherence or incoherence within and between social groups. They argue that “thin coherence,” where homogeneous and heterogeneous cultural elements and narratives simultaneously exist within and between social groups, is a useful way to talk about social groups that have multiple group boundaries.

We operate with the starting premise that definitions and perceptions of a flourishing congregation are informed by varied cultural narratives and norms within and between distinct subgroup contexts (e.g., within religious traditions, between religious groups, and between religious and non-religious organizations). Our task then is to explore what are those church and denominational leader “realities” about flourishing congregations, including the cultural narratives and boundaries that contribute to their constructions of these realities? What narratives and plausibility structures do church and denominational leaders draw upon for sense-making, where their perceptions of a flourishing congregation appear as an objective, external, plausible, and taken for granted aspect to their reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966:57; Scheitle and Dougherty 2008:989)?

Methods

Drawing on personal contacts from our team, referrals, and lists documenting some of Canada’s largest congregations,² our sampling involved approaching over 400 Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant church and denominational leaders across Canada with this request: *Would you say your congregation is flourishing or could you refer us to congregations you would say are flourishing?* We intentionally did not prescribe a definition of flourishing. Rather, we left it up to leaders to self-define flourishing for inclusion in this study, setting the stage for them to then tell us what they had in mind.

This process yielded 109 face-to-face interviews (a few interviews occurred online) and nine focus groups with sixty-six individuals (most of whom we also interviewed) between April 2016 and October 2017. For logistical reasons we conducted interviews in five Canadian regions: Vancouver (x18), Calgary (x19), Winnipeg (x13), Ontario (Hamilton, Kitchener, Ottawa, Toronto—x51), and Halifax

² Size of congregation was not a precondition for being involved in this research.

(x8). While our data collection was urban-based, some participants minister in rural contexts and offered perspectives through that lens. If we concentrated more of our research in rural contexts, it is possible that some of our findings may be slightly different. However, if or exactly how different is difficult to know from our data.

Around 40% of Canadians identify as Catholic, 16% with a mainline Protestant tradition, and roughly 10% in conservative Protestant denominations (Clarke and Macdonald 2017:7). Our aim was to include equal numbers of participants from each of these three traditions, mindful that our exploratory qualitative-based research was not intended to be a representative sample. Twenty-three Catholics, thirty-seven mainline Protestants (including denominations such as the United Church of Canada, Anglican, Presbyterian), forty-seven conservative Protestants (including denominations such as Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal, and Church of the Nazarene), two leaders in parachurch organizations, and five academics whose research centers on Christian congregations agreed to be part of this study. Given our relatively small sample size overall (customary in explorative qualitative-based studies like this project), notably within select denominations, we orient most of our data presentation and analysis to the three overarching Christian traditions. Approximately two-thirds of our sample were local church leaders, and nearly 30% were in denominational roles of various kinds. Among our Catholic participants, 85% were priests in a local parish. Around 75% of mainline Protestants were ministers in a congregation, and 60% were pastors in conservative Protestant traditions. Reflective of the gendered narratives and theologies present in many of the groups included in this study, our sample is predominantly (not exclusively) male, especially in Catholic and conservative Protestant contexts.

During the video and audio recorded focus groups we asked participants a series of questions related to what they think of when they hear the phrase “flourishing congregation.” Following their responses, we provided them with a list of findings from previous research on growing or healthy congregations, and asked them to engage those findings. We additionally asked what impact, if any, they think ministering in a Canadian context has on congregational life. In our audio recorded one-on-one interviews, we probed these topics further, and also explored the leader’s professional background, the congregation’s history and context, reflections on when their congregation is at its best, dreams for that congregation in 5 years, plus we heard stories that epitomize, for the interviewee, indicators of flourishing in their setting.

Consistent with the emic-focus to our research, we anchored our data analysis in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2004), allowing themes to emerge from participants. Two to four members of our research team were present in each data collection location. Each day we met as a research team to debrief key insights, questions, and analyses gleaned from interviews and focus groups that day. We then transcribed all interviews and focus groups verbatim. As a research team we utilized the team function of NVivo, a qualitative software package, to jointly organize, thematically code, and analyze our data. In the following process we handled all interviews and focus groups the same, regardless of denominational context or roles that individuals held within different organizations. In our “open coding” (Strauss and Corbin 1998) phase each team member read through the transcripts

and identified prevailing topics (i.e., “nodes” in NVivo) in line with the current literature. We also built on grounded theory to code and re-code transcripts based on emerging themes not currently accounted for in the literature. Throughout this coding process our research team met to discuss and refine these themes. “Analytic memos” were particularly useful to link our data with the literature, hypothesize about relationships between data, and compare cases based on religious tradition or region of the country. This collective process culminated in a final phase of “focused coding” (Charmaz 2004) where we centered our coding on the themes detailed at the outset of the study along with new themes that arose from our interviews and focus groups.

Findings

Our criteria for including certain themes and not others in this section are as follows: themes identified as important traits of a flourishing congregation by multiple members of at least two of the three religious traditions (often times discussed in all three theological settings) in every region of our study. These themes primarily surfaced in response to our open-ended question—“what comes to mind when you hear the phrase flourishing congregation?”—and to a lesser extent, to probes later in the interview to prior findings in the literature on growing and healthy congregations. We did not ask participants to rank order items as they discussed them, therefore the following are not intended as a hierarchical set of variables from most to least important. Moreover, since our central objective was to get at how people defined the traits of a flourishing congregation, we did not directly invite leaders to comment on what they believed were the causes or results of the to-be-defined concept (flourishing) in question. Still, in the process of trying to define a flourishing congregation leaders grappled with the “root” (cause) and “fruit” (results) of flourishing. Where pertinent we draw attention to the cause/effect distinctions that leaders made along the way, though in several instances leaders talked about traits as both a cause and effect of flourishing.

Flourishing and Numeric Growth

The size of a congregation came up early, often, and passionately among those in our study. Some, commonly in Catholic and conservative Protestant settings where numeric success was experienced, fervently asserted that the fruit of a congregation that flourishes are evident in numerical growth in attendance, membership, financial giving, baptisms, conversions, and so forth. This perspective is in line with the “church growth” literature from the 1970s to 1980s. Others, mainly from mainline Protestant traditions or those in smaller or rural congregations, disagreed.

Starting with those who equate flourishing with quantitative growth, a leader of a conservative Protestant congregation in Ontario reflected, “We believe that qualitative growth ultimately must show itself in quantitative growth.” A Catholic priest in Calgary said: “The first thing you would think of in a flourishing congregation

would be the number, the attendees, the flourishing, we always think quantity ... you would need a bigger space, you would have more services to offer, the following would be larger and growing, there would be more programs that are truly helpful in empowering these people into Christian faith.”

Not everyone we interviewed agreed. As one person said, “You can be growing numerically but people’s lives are not being changed ... that is not flourishing.” A Catholic leader in Ontario commented during a focus group, “Are we concerned about building a flourishing congregation for the praise and glory of God or for the praise and glory of man? And most of the measurements we have, and most of the discussion is for the praise and glory of man; our own success, our own definition, our own tradition, our own way ... What we can observe. We measure financial, we measure butts in pews, we measure number of people baptized, we measure most of the metrics we use are human. And I find much of what we’re doing is human.” A mainline Protestant leader in Halifax stated: “I think we have to decouple flourishing from numbers ... The reality for the Maritimes is rural depopulation and that’s true in other places as well. And it’s possible for there to be flourishing congregations where there simply isn’t the base for there to be a rapid growth in numbers ... if we’re only counting numbers we may be missing something.”

Akin to the “missional church” literature of the 2000s, others suggested that transformed lives and communities is a better barometer. One church leader signaled, “I would say it’s not numeric. It’s about people attending to what matters most, people being engaged, people being hoping, people owning their own faith, people celebrating that, people working to make the world a better place.” A denominational leader in Ontario revealed: “I’m not convinced that [numbers are] as key anymore.” Instead he pointed to “when people in the wider community see Christians changing because they believe that God has influenced their lives or if they see these Christians going out and giving up their time and their money and effort to make a change in the community.”

Flourishing Congregations Construct

Amidst the debate over numbers, we do not operate with the assumption that leaders from different theological and regional contexts think or talk about a flourishing congregation in the same way. In this section we present those areas of overlap as well as variation between Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant leaders. The construct in Table 1 captures the areas of general commonality, which serves as our basis for unpacking difference along the way.

By organizational ethos we mean the “hardware” (strategy and structure) and “software” (style, systems, staff, skills, and shared values) of organizations, captured, for example, in McKinsey’s 7-S framework (Peters and Waterman Jr. 1982:8–12). By internal we refer to initiatives, demographics, and realities that primarily pertain to those within a congregation. These factors are in contrast to outward variables, or activities that link those within a congregation to those outside the congregation. Although we categorize these domains for descriptive and analytical purposes, we

Table 1 Flourishing congregations construct

Organizational ethos	Internal	Outward
Clear self-identity	Discipleship	Evangelism
Leadership	Hospitable community	Neighborhood involvement
Innovation	Engaged laity	Partnerships
Structure and process	Diversity	

are not suggesting that these variables operate independent of one another. As will be seen, the following components interact in multidirectional and complex ways.

Organizational Ethos

The first organizational element was *clear self-identity*: congregations are clear on who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going. Flourishing congregations honor the particularities of their local context, they do not aim to be like the church down the road, and they are clear on their central mission. This conservative Protestant leader in Calgary spoke of clear self-identity as an important cause of flourishing: “It’s really having a very tight, clear sense of what the church that you’re creating is, not trying to be all things to all people ... figuring out what is your niche, who are you going after, how are you going to connect with those people.” A Catholic priest in Calgary noted, “Congregations who say yes to everything and who can’t say no because they are so afraid of hurting emotions, are usually the ones who suffer because they have no self-identity. They just want to be everything to everyone ... Christ did not say yes to everything.” At the same time, this denominational leader reminded others in a focus group, “I’ve met congregations on the verge of closure that have a clear self-identity.” His point was that a clear self-identity alone is not a sufficient cause of flourishing. Most of the remaining elements of the flourishing congregations construct capture what leaders maintained was important to anchor congregational identity.

Second, *leadership* was identified as an essential contributor to a flourishing congregation. Congregations survive and thrive with strategic leadership and by generating congregational ownership over the group’s identity, vision, and mission via leadership development. A conservative Protestant leader in Ontario stated, “Strategic leadership ... the majority of churches don’t know how to do it ... The churches that are succeeding, all of them, have strategic leaders who know how to line up the dots.” One aspect to strategic leadership includes leadership development. An Anglican Bishop took this approach to leadership development: “There’s this high desire for the Bishop to make decisions for congregations. I don’t wanna do that ... I wanna hand our decisions to people.” A Catholic Diocese leader sought to dispel misconceptions that many have about Catholic parishes, given Catholic polity and hierarchical structure: “The stereotype would suggest that the parish priest does everything ... it [is] lay persons that [are] given

power over these certain offices ... the flourishing congregations are usually the ones that know how to designate, and designate well.” A conservative Protestant pastor in Winnipeg shared an experience of missing a committee meeting the night of our focus group. The committee members replied, “‘Oh that’s okay we don’t want you there anyways.’ And which is exactly what I’ve been hoping for.” A mainline Protestant denominational leader in Halifax highlighted the need to train and develop leaders as a strategy for congregational and denominational sustainability in the face of decline: “We have a number of parishes that are unable to afford fulltime clergy leadership. And even some of the larger parishes that have had multiple staff are declining in number of staff ... we recognized the need to be more intentional about identifying lay leaders and empowering and releasing them.” For these leaders it seemed that leadership could be seen as both a cause and effect of congregational flourishing.

Third, in reflecting on their own congregational experiences, Protestant leaders singled out *innovation* as an integral cause to their flourishing (this topic was never raised by Catholic leaders). Congregations flourish when they take risks, experiment, and think and act entrepreneurially. The countless innovative ideas that we heard across the country matter less to us here than, as one pastor put it, the congregation’s “willingness to change. Letting things grow. There’s no growth without change.” During one focus group in Ontario, a participant stated, “It’s okay to try something and have it not work.”

In mainline Protestant sectors we noted that this openness to innovation was sometimes motivated out of desperation as they confront declining numbers (particularly in rural areas); they believe there is nothing to lose by trying something new. A church leader in Calgary noted, “From the mainline perspective ... too many congregations ... their strategic question is how do we cope with the decline, rather than how do we evolve. The congregations that are thinking imaginatively but beginning to think about how they have to experiment or explore, stretch, and that it’s more than just the status quo.”

Interestingly, the following conservative Protestant denominational leader in Calgary identified human and financial resources as a possible barrier to innovation and flourishing: “We could be taking way more risks. We’ve got resources ... you might criticize people who are living from pay cheque to pay cheque, but that’s a risky lifestyle we would say ... risk is the opposite of security ... you don’t have to be risky when you’re secure.” On the topic of barriers to innovation, this Ontario leader spoke of the limits of denominations: “Denominational structure can inhibit a flourishing congregation ... I have noticed that sometimes, some churches who are bound by denomination, they are in shackles to it. And they cannot spread their wings ... Our denomination has finally begun to give us a little more flexibility, which has been great ... but yet I know there are times when structure and denomination squeezes us.”

Fourth, organizational *structures and processes* should be in place to help congregations flourish, from attracting and retaining new members, to helping people grow in their spiritual life, to effective governance and organizational systems. This leader connected several of the domains in our emerging construct:

A clear and effective model of ministry. Everyone's not just clear on who we are, where we're going conceptually, but how this works. How our discipleship process works? How we reach people for Christ? How did people get integrated into our church? How do we launch people to live missionally? How does it work? What steps do you take? There's a very clear 'how' between churches that are either not flourishing or aspiring to be flourishing. I encounter more churches that wish, that want to be flourishing but don't know how, than churches that are. And I don't think that the difference is motivational. The difference isn't that some churches want to be flourishing more than others. It's that some churches have figured out and engaged their people and how. And others haven't.

Of course, there are vast differences in denominational structures, processes, and politics that impact congregational life. If we had more space we would go into these particular distinctions. Suffice to say for our present purposes, the particular examples of structures and processes for flourishing are less critical to our aims than the underlying principle by those in our study that clear and effective organizational structures and processes are found in flourishing congregations.

Internal

Leaders were most eager to center their reflections on four internal and three outward dimensions; elements that, in various combinations, leaders tied to their core identity as a congregation. The first internal dimension was *discipleship*, discussed particularly among conservative Protestants, and to a lesser extent among Catholics and mainline Protestants, as a sign of flourishing. Some spoke of "making disciples." A conservative Protestant leader in Ontario said, "One of the priorities of Jesus is to make disciples ... to produce people who have a relationship with Jesus who themselves live out over time the character and priorities of Jesus. Which means they actually make another disciple who does the same thing." A mainline Protestant denominational leader in Halifax added:

Discipleship is living out holistically the Christian identity and life, of not only Sunday worship, but service, but giving in time and talent and treasure, about practicing reading the bible and a life of prayer, being involved in spiritual disciplines like fasting or whatever that might be, retreats ... we have a rule of life, and those kinds of things that we kind of encourage folks to. And Sabbath time and all those kinds of things, so living out that full life ... evangelism ... that full life as a disciple.

Part of fostering these habits include creating an environment for people to meaningfully experience God. Catholic leaders, like the following priest in Calgary, stressed the importance of a well thought out and planned liturgy, culminating in the Eucharist, to facilitate people's experience of God:

How can we create an atmosphere where we can provide a God-moment encounter for people walking through the front door? So whether it's as soon

as they grab that front door and they walk in, there's got to be a feeling there in the air from the person they first meet to get a smile, to perhaps it's the way that the worship happens or if it's a special event and it's the music and it's the message. So it all comes back to where can we reach them where they're at; so that they are touched by the Spirit; and then, how do we recognize what the next thing is that they need so that they can start to conform, be drawn to the Lord? ... When someone has a God moment, lives change ... I think that that's still an important thing to try and facilitate the God moment.

The end of this quotation pointed us toward another element of discipleship: when lives are transformed and people live differently in their day-to-day activities. One Anglican leader captured the goal of discipleship and transformed lives this way: "Lives changed; changed lives, for me. It's not about being friendly. I can go to the rotary club, find friendly people ... the litmus test for me is, is your life changed? Is it growing? Are you grounded? Is there maturity? Is there sanctification?" A Catholic leader in Ontario said, "Disciples ... in the living out of their lives, whether it's in the context of their family, their work, or their school, they see the way that they live, the way that they engage in a relationship is an expression of their relationship with the person of Jesus. And that they're living that relationship so that they have a sense of their own – that they are disciples with a call to make Christ present in the world."

A second internal feature was *hospitable communities*. Flourishing congregations are those who offer a "home" to those inside and outside of their church, where people are known by others in the congregation and can experience a safe and loving atmosphere and community. As one leader said, "If it's not hospitable, people don't want to join, people don't want to be a part of it, people don't want to contribute." Both Catholics and mainline Protestants highlighted a friendly greeter as people entered and left church services, along with the need to showcase hospitality toward the marginalized in society. For some then, a hospitable community is a valuable catalyst for congregational flourishing.

For others a hospitable community is evidence that a congregation is flourishing. A Catholic leader in Ontario noted, "When you talk about a vibrant community, I think people feel welcome here. I think they feel a sense of ownership of the place. I think they feel that it's a parish where, who they are is valued, and their opinions are valued." A mainline Protestant pastor in Calgary commented, "We certainly welcomed a lot of the others ... that just don't fit anywhere." A conservative Protestant leader in Calgary highlighted, "We actually embraced and welcome people no matter where they were in life ... we just practiced this radical hospitality or belonging first with the conviction that that would probably fast track belief, then believe that us walking alongside ... they started behaving themselves. So that's what we did. It was unbelievable. I can't tell you how many people within their second to third week of coming to the church, with no church background, I was baptizing them."

A third feature, believed to be a logical outcome of hospitable communities and ultimately a sign of a flourishing congregation, was *engaged laity*—when congregants are regularly involved in the life of their local congregation, though how leaders gauge and measure engagement varied. Catholic leaders discussed attending

mass, participating in weekly small groups or programs, and volunteering. A priest in Vancouver declared, “You get people that ... want to do more than just show up on Sunday.” Another priest assessed engagement in his parish this way: “A manifestation of a sense of belonging is their engagement in the community life, first, either through a formal ministry. Secondly, their frequent attendance that whenever they are here, you really see them and you can sense a sense of pride in them that they love this parish, that they really want to be counted as people who belong here.”

Conservative Protestants echoed these areas, and added behaviors such as tithing and prayer. When asked to explain people’s attachment to his congregation, a pastor in Ontario responded:

I think Sunday mornings is obviously one of the easiest ones ... I think when people get involved and volunteer, that’s when it starts to feel more their own ... And that’s in my experience what I’m looking for in people, is not just are you coming to hear me speak or some music or whatever, do you feel like you are a co-owner in this community and you’re invested in it and giving back ... I think giving financially, giving up your time, your gifts, your passions whatever, that’s I think where I see the most engagement and where people really start to own it.

A Calgary leader singled out prayer: “We are praying a little more than we have, we are praying a little more intentionally ... We are just trying to find ways to be centered in God so that we can hear his voice, follow his promptings and his leading.” Another leader commented on his congregation, saying “I don’t need to convince you guys that prayer is important ... without that, nothing moves.”

In mainline Protestant contexts we additionally heard of people caring for others in the congregation. This pastor in Calgary mentioned, “We leave it to the small groups ... it’s a lot of just caring for each other, getting to know each other, praying for each other ... entering into people’s lives and sharing, crying together, and supporting each other. And so that’s where a lot of the pastoral care is happening.”

Fourth, congregational *diversity* arose as a perceived indicator that a congregation was flourishing. By diversity participants singled out some or all of the following: race, social class, age, gender, and sexual orientation, from those in the pews to those in leadership. Catholics focused primarily on ethnic diversity, though some noted other forms of diversity too. A leader in Calgary talked about ethnic variation: “maybe up to a quarter to a third of the congregation are non-Caucasian folks. A lot of Filipinos, Asian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Taiwanese people.” A leader in Winnipeg broadened the discussion:

Diversity is real [when] all members of that spectrum ... can find a home or can find an involvement. The poor and the rich, the gay and the straight ... Catholic means universal ... you’ll find every nation under the sun present and worshipping ... it’s the only place really that the poor and the rich economically can sit beside each other. The healthy and the not so healthy beside each other, the young and the old beside each other, the educated and the uneducated beside each other. I think that’s a sign of flourishing. When any one of those feels excluded, I don’t think it’s a flourishing congregation anymore.

Conservative Protestants echoed these sentiments, typically leading with ethnic diversity, followed by generational and socioeconomic diversity, with some singling out sexual orientation. A leader in Calgary reflected, “If you don’t have a fairly rich diversity within your church, it should reflect the demographic diversity of the community. If you don’t have that diversity either social, economic diversity, or ethnic diversity, or both, I don’t think you can actually say this is a flourishing congregation on biblical grounds. I think you can have a large congregation, but if you don’t have that diversity, I’m not sure you’re reflecting the kingdom.” On the topic of sexual orientation, an Ontario leader spoke of how he approached his church following the Orlando shooting at a gay nightclub in June 2016: “I spoke directly to all those who are LGBT in our church. And I said, if you think that’s an anomaly. Don’t. Right? No, they are members here. And I said, I’m your pastor too. And just really affirm you bear the image of God. You are – Jesus loves you unconditionally.” Conservative Protestants also highlighted the need for leadership to reflect the diversity of the congregation. This Calgary pastor commented, “I think a flourishing congregation ... you don’t see one age group leading the church; you see multiple age groups leading the church. You see multiple ethnicities leading the church.”

Mainline Protestants (United Church of Canada and Anglican in particular) spoke most strongly on diversity and the LGTBQ community. A pastor in Vancouver talked about the following initiative:

We actually hosted a conversation ... a few weeks ago where we specifically were trying to look at what does it mean to be an ally or be gay, lesbian, transgender ... So we invited folks who were members of the LGBTQ community, we invited a couple of our folks who have come out of the evangelical tradition who are kind of hetero-normative couples ... it was just a circle of storytelling ... folks who were members of the LGBTQ community and folks that were just there as allies spoke to the worthiness of that ... conversation.

The following church leader critiqued conservative Protestant leaders who say they are open to the LGBTQ community, but who limit full involvement in that congregation’s activities: “We became an affirming church, and then we hired a staff person ... So [other churches] can say they’re gay-friendly, they won’t do gay marriages for example, whereas the United Church is gay-friendly that way ... so it’s important to us that we have full openness.”

Diversity extended to include space for questions, dialogue, doubt, and even disagreement. This mainline Protestant leader in Calgary spoke about their congregation in this way: “In our community, who would be flourishing, would be curiosity, openness, questions, non-prescriptive theology, more descriptive ... people are welcome to question and they come aware that that’s biblical and essential to a flourishing faith ... flourishing is, there’s a certain element of doubt that is curiosity that is like Thomas, and is willing to question.” A mainline Protestant denominational leader in Halifax extended this narrative further: “To be transparent and have candor and even in the midst of disagreements to not have that kind of nicey-nice and suck it up and stew later. But we can put it on the table because we’re adults and healthy and we can have a conversation even if we disagree ... that’s key to a flourishing congregation.”

This reflection points to one of the realities of organizational life where diverse people and perspectives exist—conflict. Leaders maintained that healthy conflict resolution is integral to congregational flourishing. Here we see a focus group exchange between the just mentioned Anglican denominational leader and another United Church of Canada leader:

[*Anglican*] When conflict arises, because inevitably it will, the congregation can handle it, can deal with it a respectful and mature manner. Does not devolve into horrible cliques or factions. Does not try to kill the leadership or kill the messenger for the presence of the problem. Can see the conflict as an opportunity for clarifying self-identity, increasing commitment in leadership, increasing growth and orienting towards the future ... can actually see the things that arise in community life which we inevitably do as opportunities rather than threats ... if internally you've got a congregation that is terrified of conflict and terrified of failure and terrified of risk, terrified of taking creative risks and possibly messing something up, then these will be superficial signs.

[*United*] If I think about the flourishing congregations that I carry in my head and the stories I'm carrying in my head right now, they have all done something good in relation to conflict ... They've just relaxed about conflict ... and said, 'You know, sometimes we're going to have to ask people to change seats on the bus,' so leadership issues. And sometimes they'll get pissed off and leave the bus and that's okay ... I think one of the things that is characteristic of so many of our not flourishing congregations is we're frozen by the fear of the conflict.

Outward

Those in our study strongly pronounced that congregations who primarily focus inwardly are not flourishing; flourishing congregations must be outward focused in at least one of the following areas. The first sphere is *evangelism*. Conservative Protestants were particularly zealous to discuss this topic, along with some Catholics, and fewer mainline Protestants. A denominational leader in Ontario stressed, "We see people getting saved and coming to know the Lord ... if evangelism is not the first priority, it quickly becomes no priority." A different leader in Ontario linked evangelism to numbers: "If you go to a church of 100 and you reach 10 people that's significant. And if you go to church of 1000 and you reach 50 people, you should not be celebrating. You should be crying." For this leader, evangelism alone is not a cause of flourishing; numeric results must be present as evidence of flourishing. Another leader in Ontario connected evangelism to how people respond to a good restaurant: "When you're that in love, you become a natural evangelist ... with the Indian restaurant down the road. You instantly start to evangelize for that incredible butter chicken, you'll tell everybody because you're just smitten ... there's a sense that the overflow of love is evangelism, it's proclamation, it's 'I can't wait to tell you.'" This pastor in Ontario revealed: "I've made friends with people in the gym and in that friendship, eventually I tell people who I am. Invite them to our church

and now there are at least four different people attending our church who I met twice in our gym.”

In a Catholic context discussions swirled around “new Evangelization,” which mainly refers to trying to (re)evangelize those who identify as Catholic but have fallen away from the faith. This leader in Winnipeg framed the value for evangelism this way: “So you’re evangelizing people that are already in the church ... Then you go outside ... the building of the church to do the first evangelization and talk to people that have not heard the good news, or have heard it and haven’t received it. So it’s working with the people inside the church to get them ready and trained up to go out ... Basically what is boils down to is are you excited about telling people about Jesus?” It is difficult to tell for certain whether these leaders see evangelism as a contributor to flourishing, evidence of flourishing, or both.

A handful of mainline Protestant leaders conveyed ideas similar to those already noted, with some specifically distinguishing their conception of evangelism from how they perceive evangelicals approaching evangelism: “If I mentioned ‘let’s reach out and get involved with our neighbors,’ what a lot of my people heard was ‘let’s get a Billy Graham floppy and shove it down their throat, you know a bible big enough to choke a donkey. That’s what he means.’ It wasn’t at all what I meant. What I mean was ‘why don’t we meet at the local pub and just talk?’ It took forever to try to say that we’re not going to walk down manipulative, shallow ways of relating to people.”

A second component to looking outward pertained to *neighborhood involvement*. A Catholic leader in Winnipeg declared, “Some people say we’re the only organization that exists for the benefit of people that are not members yet.” A conservative Protestant leader in Calgary shared, “I think a church that has a community impact, that’s community-minded, that seeks the benefit of the city – that, to me, is a sign of a flourishing congregation.” A mainline Protestant leader in Winnipeg echoed these views: “If there was no going out and gathering, then I don’t think it would be church. It would be a social club.” As with some of the previous dimensions discussed, these leaders appear to believe that neighborhood involvement can be interpreted as both a cause and effect of congregational flourishing.

Invoking theological concepts like “being the hands and feet of Jesus” or “incarnational presence,” leaders shared numerous examples of ways they were involved in their neighborhoods. Regardless of the specific outreach activities that connected to particular denominational interests (e.g., Catholic parishes and the Catholic school system), a common question that a number of people raised during our interviews and focus groups was, “Would our community notice if we were no longer here?” The sense was “yes” they would, and moreover, this was a healthy sign that a congregation is flourishing.

The third dimension was *partnerships*. We heard a range of stories from leaders whose congregations participated in one or more of the following in the previous year: partnered with other congregations in their denomination, congregations from another Christian denomination, congregations in other faith groups, and/or with various secular agencies. Partnerships mentioned included an annual joint-service (e.g. Good Friday service), ongoing youth ministry or outreach initiatives, inter-faith dialogue events, or social service provision for marginalized populations.

During one focus group a participant stated, “I am seeing or sensing the softening of denominational walls and maybe a willingness to relinquish them to do stuff together more.” A mainline Protestant leader in Ontario characterized a flourishing congregation this way: “I think it’s the ability to see God at work in other organizations, partners, groups, that are not congregations, but are potential partners, affiliates, confederates ... We’re flourishing because, we’re actively seeking partners. Because we can imagine that God is active in what they’re doing.” Another leader in Winnipeg observed, “Rather than trying to say we have to do all this work ministry in the community, this neighborhood, we find ways to support people who are actually doing work and ministry in their lives. We can’t reinvent the wheel or drive a whole neighborhood renewal thing, but we got people who are actually working, doing neighborhood renewal in that neighborhood.” This conservative Protestant leader in Ontario believes partnerships are the future for congregations: “The way of the future is really through partnerships or collaborations. Churches that tend to support and work together, the better.” Again, partnerships are seen by some as necessary for flourishing and by others as a marker of flourishing.

Supernatural Discourse

As leaders painted a picture of what they think a flourishing congregation looks like, they also offered supernatural discourse to distinguish religious organizations from secular ones, and to help explain why they think flourishing occurs in their congregations. For example, when Ontario focus group participants described elements of organizational ethos, a denominational leader noted that “You can apply this to Google or IBM ... it’s not oriented in theologically strong enough language.” One church leader in Winnipeg talked about how he could see clear self-identity “at Hewlett Packard just as much as anywhere else. So I think one of the distinctions of a flourishing church would be that the necessity of Christ-centeredness woven through everything that’s being done.” A Catholic leader in Calgary observed, “The only thing that distinguishes these themes from studying a business or a hospital is ... spiritual life.” He went on to highlight the difference between flourishing organizations in general from flourishing congregations: “What’s missing in here is Jesus; who are we, clear self-identity, Jesus-centered.” This Ontario leader discussed that “as soon as we talk about flourishing then, the touchpoint is how does this work out the character and priorities of Jesus, in this culture, in this time, in this place.”

Part of a Jesus-focused flourishing congregation entails being obedient to what people believe God is calling their congregation to be and do. A mainline Protestant leader in Ontario remarked that “our value doesn’t come from what other people think of us, it comes from who God is and who God calls us to be.” This denominational leader in Vancouver called for a greater attentiveness to God’s leading for discerning risky endeavors: “The openness or willingness to consider, is God asking us to do something different, are people asking us to do something different, are they being led by God to encourage us in this way?” A church leader in Ontario reflected on his congregation:

To me, my church is flourishing but I feel like, are we doing the thing or things that God is calling us to do? ... As a community, what are we being called to do, how are we being called to serve, what is God saying to us? And so that's where the flourishing will come from, because if you're not getting that, nothing else will matter. If God's saying, everyone in your congregation sell your houses, you sell the church, move to Hamilton, buy houses and start a church there. You can do anything you want here but if you refuse to listen to that voice, you won't truly flourish ... if I can step back and look at my church and say we have felt God calling us to do this thing and we have done it, I would say that's a flourishing congregation. And I think sometimes it may not result in new growth ... that's what God is calling us to do and we're going to do it, I think they would be a thriving church.

Upon reflecting on their own experiences, conservative Protestant and Catholic leaders especially pointed to the role of the Holy Spirit as a catalyst for congregational flourishing. A Catholic leader in Winnipeg believed that “a flourishing parish needs to have expectations of the Holy Spirit to work in a way that is outside their scope of understanding.” This Calgary focus group participant similarly pointed out, “I would also see [flourishing] as evidence that the Holy Spirit is actually working through the local congregation, that this isn't just a mass sum of human endeavor to accomplish a goal that they have established.” In one of our focus groups, a denominational leader started this exchange: “Churches that really flourish are churches where you sense the pastor has the ability to hear God's voice ... there's an evidence that you are really being Spirit-led, not institutionally, denominational, leadership led.” A local pastor interjected: “It's this responsiveness to the Spirit of God ... this is something we're trying to cultivate, that discernment piece. Otherwise it's just Robert's Rules of Order ... procedure and process as opposed to, what is God up to? Are we discerning that piece and responsive to that?” A conservative Protestant denominational leader reflected on one church in his purview: “No one gave this church the time of day but here was a dying church that the Holy Spirit brought back to life and now they're planting a church. And it was through the Holy Spirit meeting them on that pathway experience ... And it's the Holy Spirit that causes that awakening to occur.”

Discussion

How do congregational and denominational leaders in Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant settings perceive and define what constitutes a flourishing congregation? Our findings on numerical growth and decline, the flourishing congregations construct, and supernatural discourse revealed several points of agreement and disagreement among congregational and denominational leaders—what Ghaziani and Baldassarri (2011:180–183) identify as “thin coherence.” We return to cultural sociology and discussions about group boundaries and cultural narratives to focus our discussion and analysis of these partially corresponding and differing images of flourishing congregations. Namely, we develop three group boundaries

and accompanying cultural narratives that come to the fore in our data, sometimes in overlapping ways: between Christian traditions, within Christian traditions, and between Christian and non-religious organizations.

Beginning with similar cultural narratives, Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant leaders appear to share the following views on the causes and/or signs of a flourishing congregation: clear self-identity, leadership, structure and process, hospitable community, neighborhood involvement, partnerships, and supernatural discourse. Several of the quotations presented for these themes revealed leaders who drew group boundaries with congregations within and beyond their tradition. They did so by valorizing the traits above as “good” and characteristic of congregations like “ours” that are flourishing, while critiquing congregations who did not possess these traits as “bad” and not flourishing. Admittedly, it could be argued that these areas are sufficiently generic at both an organizational as well as theological level, to help account for the overlapping perceptions across Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant contexts. As an example, leaders might agree that clear self-identity is important, but what exactly a congregation’s identity should be rooted in may be up for discussion. The devil is in the details of course, which leads us to our primary interest: the differences in cultural narratives within and between traditions, as well as the boundaries that congregational and denominational leaders draw between Christian and non-religious organizations.

Innovation, discipleship, engaged laity, diversity, evangelism, and the emphasis on numbers. These are the areas where Catholics, mainline, and conservative Protestants differently prioritized and operationalized elements of a flourishing congregation. These variations can be attributed to areas such as theology, polity, organizational structure, and demographic realities. We surmise that these distinctions serve as important boundary markers to set “our” tradition apart from “their” tradition. For example, Protestants valued innovation whereas Catholics did not, which is not surprising given the hierarchical structure and polity found in Catholicism that may discourage innovative practices. Mainline Protestants stood out for framing their need for innovation against a backdrop of numerical decline in local congregations, with little to lose in the process. Discipleship as well as evangelism emerged across all three traditions, but especially among conservative Protestants who are known for their theologically distinctive subculture around evangelism, making disciples, and an active personal faith among members (Reimer 2003; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Interestingly, the earlier mainline Protestant leader quotation on evangelism, seeking to dispel conceptions of evangelism that seemed too evangelical, was a prime example of how some leaders seek to draw and maintain group boundaries surrounding what flourishing does and does not look like. Moving on to engaged laity, although members of each tradition commented on this dimension, groups measured this variable differently, in line with the practices and values germane to their theological heritage (e.g., attending services, tithing, prayer, caring for others). Amidst these contrasting views, nowhere were differences more noticeable along theological lines than on the topic of diversity. For instance, the mainline Protestant emphasis on the LGBTQ community makes sense given their liberal-leaning theology and practice on this subject versus Catholics and conservative Protestants (who emphasized ethnic or intergenerational diversity instead) (Flatt 2013; Clarke

and MacDonald 2017). The one mainline Protestant leader went so far as to normalize “our” group narrative for fully welcoming and embracing those in the LGBTQ community (by performing same-sex marriages), over “their” (other congregations) cultural narrative that stops short of performing same-sex marriages. And of course, in this discussion of differences between traditions, we cannot negate that groups are also internally heterogeneous in their perceptions of congregational flourishing. As an example, some mainline Protestants stressed evangelism, while other Catholic and conservative Protestant leaders singled out sexual orientation in their narratives on diversity.

Cultural narratives differ further within and between traditions when considering the debate over flourishing and numbers. These boundaries are drawn between “church growth” narratives (those that emphasize numeric growth) and “missional movement” ones (those who do not stress numeric growth). We noted that Catholic and conservative Protestant leaders are more likely to stress church growth narratives, in part a function of their greater numerical successes compared to many mainline Protestant contexts. Yet we also saw that the aversion to numbers as a marker of flourishing are commonplace in smaller and rural congregations. Congregations in different traditions are obviously found in both of the settings just noted, thus differences in theological tradition alone do not explain the different cultural narratives about size and flourishing. Nevertheless, different theological narratives were invoked to help explain group boundaries around numbers and flourishing. For those who favor numeric growth, individuals and congregations must advance numerically in their faith, from equipping and empowering new leaders, to disciples developing other disciples, to seeking new converts, to growing churches. As posited in the “church growth” movement, these numerical advances can be interpreted as evidence that one is honoring God by advancing the Kingdom. Conversely, the emphasis on lives transformed is in step with the “missional movement,” which stresses a Christian theology of personal and social transformation versus numeric growth in churches, as well as supernatural-inspired versus human-made measurements of organizational success. Leaders who advanced this latter argument held a stigma toward congregations who interpreted numeric growth as a sign of flourishing if or when numbers masked transformed lives as the normalized ideal. It was clear to us that individuals on either side of this debate were drawing a clear theological line in the sand to demarcate “our” way of viewing flourishing from “theirs.”

This debate about numerical growth goes deeper than theology. For those on the “church growth” side, they tend to embrace a larger organizational subcultural narrative at work, which stresses numeric growth: successful organizations of any kind grow numerically, and stagnation or decline are problematic for an organization who wishes to be sustainable and thrive in the future. As expected from previous literature (McMullin 2013; Flatt et al. 2018), data collected from leaders in self-defined flourishing contexts point toward institutional descriptors—areas that congregations control—as vital to bring about numeric growth. Psychologically, we imagine that it is easier to embrace this perspective in some urban-based Catholic and conservative Protestant congregations where numbers are less of a concern compared with many mainline Protestant congregations (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015; Bibby and Reid 2016; Clarke and Macdonald 2017), and where some seem to believe their numeric

success is due to their efforts (as opposed to favorable demographic conditions, such as immigration or population growth).

While the cultural narrative of numeric growth might be true from an organizational standpoint, this perspective is difficult to sustain for congregations who are located in environments where demographic shifts are not in their favor; where numeric growth is virtually impossible (e.g., declining populations in the Maritimes). Taken to its logical conclusion then, church growth proponents would seemingly deny that congregations in demographically-challenged settings could flourish. Some we interviewed clearly resisted such inferences. Once more in line with previous literature (McMullin 2013; Flatt et al. 2018), those involved in congregations that are not growing numerically (but who still perceive their congregations to flourish) point toward contextual (external) narratives to help account for their realities—they are not growing numerically because people are dying or moving away. Psychologically here as well, it makes sense that smaller congregations, especially in mainline Protestant and rural environments, would lean toward this narrative about flourishing. Crudely put, it is slightly easier to sleep at night if leaders of numerically stable or shrinking congregations embrace a different conception of flourishing.

One final group boundary marker stands out to us, between Christian and non-religious organizations. Leaders across Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant contexts were adamant that we not conflate general descriptions of organizational flourishing (e.g., leadership) with traits specific to congregational flourishing, such as *Jesus-centered leadership*. Moreover, leaders alerted us to their narratives about the supernatural in congregational flourishing, that without the Holy Spirit's activity, prayer, or listening to and being obedient to what they believe God is calling their congregation to, congregations do not flourish (see Flatt et al. 2018). Congregational and denominational leaders who invoke supernatural discourse and draw these boundaries with non-religious organizations make good sense. These leaders are trained to think and frame their cultural narratives in theological terms. Supernatural discourse also helps to martial and legitimate human efforts and behaviors that groups need to sustain themselves (e.g., attend religious services, volunteer, tithe, pray), while at the same time deflecting congregational success or failure away from human effort (i.e., “we flourish because of prayer and the Holy Spirit”). To reduce congregational flourishing to institutional (what congregations control) or contextual factors (demographic or ecological variables) diminishes the distinct supernatural dimension that legitimates and sustains religious groups as “sacred companies” (Demerath III et al. 1998). In short, these narratives about the supernatural help to establish and reinforce group identity and boundaries that congregations are not like non-religious organizations; there is something qualitatively different about religious organizations who flourish, in part, because of supernatural activity in the life of the organization.

By acknowledging the convergence and divergence in religious leader perceptions and definitions of a flourishing congregation, we lay bare the thin coherence that cuts across cultural narratives and boundaries. While we do not think scholars ought to suddenly define and measure congregational vitality differently, we do find merit in Carnesecca's (2016) cautionary words: “If the categories we use create

fundamental breaks between our object of study and the people who practice it, then those categories need to be reconsidered – not necessarily discarded, but refined” (pp. 233–234). In contrast to the polar extremes of church growth and the missional church, or the quantitative church growth and decline focus in the social sciences, we contend that the perceptions and definitions presented here make a helpful contribution to how social scientists might study this topic moving forward. Building on grounded theory, we see the inductive and emic focus of our work as a potential catalyst for future etic-based studies. Studies might evaluate how closely the perceptions and definitions of church leaders align in other congregational and denominational contexts—reinforcing, refining, or altogether challenging our findings. We think the potential result is a richer and nuanced description and set of measurements of flourishing congregations, as defined by those within the very traditions we seek to better understand.

Conclusion

Tying these ideas together, our core claims in this exploratory study are that congregational and denominational leaders perceive and define a flourishing congregation along the following three narratives: debates over the link between flourishing and numerical growth; organizational ethos, internal factors, and outward variables; and supernatural discourse and explanations for flourishing. As leaders advance these definitions and perceptions, they draw on select cultural narratives to establish and reinforce a number of group boundaries within their own traditions, relative to other traditions, and between Christian and non-religious organizations. Regardless of what one thinks of these perceptions and definitional components to a flourishing congregation, perceptions shape reality (Thomas and Thomas 1928), and as Flatt et al. (2018) remind us, congregational realities shape congregational behaviors. This well-known sociological link between perceptions, reality, and behaviors partially undergirds our attempt to bring to description the perceptions that Canadian church and denominational leaders have when defining a flourishing congregation. In the process we believe we have contributed an emic-based approach that scholars can build upon for researching and analyzing congregational flourishing in diverse Christian environments, going beyond simple church growth and decline language and measurements. Congregational and denominational practitioners may find added value in this approach as they acquire greater awareness into how other leaders define flourishing, hopefully seeing more of themselves in the data that is gathered and analyzed by social scientists.

Moving forward, several questions and opportunities arise to extend this research. To what extent do the findings of this study with leaders compare and contrast with attenders’ definitions, perceptions, and experiences, and how might the flourishing congregations construct presented earlier evolve and develop with such information? If we had a larger sample with quantitative data to further test the insights from this project, what correlations might we encounter regarding religious tradition, region, or size of congregation? What is the precise rank order importance that members from distinct traditions would attach to different markers of flourishing?

From the flourishing congregations construct, how do these variables interact with one another, and are certain correlations stronger than others? The next phase of our research includes a national congregational survey where we intend to explore these questions.

Building on cultural sociology, what are the mechanisms that religious leaders use to socialize, justify, legitimate, and mobilize group members around a leader's understanding of what constitutes a flourishing congregation (also see Scheitle and Dougherty 2008)? What rituals reinforce group boundaries, group bonds, and speech norms (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003)? In what ways might such efforts be endorsed in the “front stage” or challenged in the “back stage” of congregational life, and what do such processes and experiences reveal about leadership and congregational culture? Moreover, what are the contextual and environmental factors (e.g., neighborhood demographics, immigration, or societal affinity toward or away from religion) that intersect with perceptions and experiences of flourishing? We plan to eventually conduct in-depth case studies with congregations across Canada, where we intend to tackle these questions.

Acknowledgements This research was supported by Ambrose University, Cardus, Christian and Missionary Alliance Western Canadian District, Christian and Missionary Alliance Midwest Canadian District, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Grant No. 435-2017-0930), Turning Point Consulting, University of Saskatchewan, World Vision Canada, and Willow Creek Canada. More information about these partnerships can be located at www.flourishingcongregations.org.

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