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Auditing Congregational Health: Exploring Members' Well-Being in the Church and Commitment to the Congregation

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Abstract: The field of congregational health research is missing a relational approach to the member–congregation connection. We developed and tested a questionnaire that evaluates the perception of church health factors in statements that stay close to the feelings and attitudes of the members. We applied the instrument to map feelings of well-being and commitment with 513 members of a large, Dutch, Protestant congregation. This study thus explores relational concepts, such as members feeling at home in the congregation, their turnover intention, the atmosphere within the community, and whether members feel seen and heard within the community. Seven factors emerge from the analysis, and all of them show significant empirical correlation with members' overall satisfaction and commitment levels. The instrument also makes it possible to discern between the evaluations of sleeping members, involved members, and insiders (frequent attenders), which is a discernment that existing instruments lack.

Keywords: congregational life; audit assessment research; congregational health; well-being

1. Introduction

For several decades now, the involvement of congregational members has drastically declined in northwest European countries. In the 1980s and 1990s, figures on declining membership and attendance rates were repeatedly published in the media and often exercised a shock effect. While this raised a growing concern within many congregations, they failed to adequately respond. However, over the last twenty years, we have seen an active response to the decline in traditional–conservative, evangelical, and more liberal congregations.

Congregations have started a new missional discourse. We observe a stronger interest in missionary outreach, learning from each other, discipleship training, and experimenting with fresh expressions and pioneering. In evangelical congregations that display growth in membership numbers, we see an emphasis on the participation of all members in small groups, and on worship services and sermons that offer empowerment, encouragement, and spiritual growth (Vermeer 2015, pp. 13, 18; Gallagher and Newton 2009). These seem to be promising strategies for strengthening commitment to the congregation. Indeed, congregations are now increasingly interested in understanding the specific factors that influence church health, vitality, and even growth. Many congregations are looking for ways to adapt to the needs and preferences of their members, without losing the essence of what it means to be a community of Christ.

With the rediscovery of mission and community formation, the theme of vital church life or congregational health is now on the agenda more than ever. Yet, how can congregational health be 'measured' or assessed? The existing tools and audit instruments, such as Natural Church Development (NCD), Faith Communities Today (FCT), and National

Church Life Survey (NCLS), are increasingly used in a variety of different cultural contexts. Yet, a relational approach to the membership–congregation connection appears to be lacking. Interestingly, this type of approach is well developed in the field of organizational communication. It is this promising approach that we have further developed for the purpose of assessing congregational health and that we have applied and tested in one large congregation. It is this approach to which we now turn.

2. Church Health Characteristics and Assessment Tools

It is hard to adequately analyze and describe what congregational health or vital church life are. The conceptualization and measurement of church health and vitality are diverse, and they have gradually developed over the years. At first, the focus was on the numerical growth of church attenders, but this approach was considered too narrow to adequately describe what church health encompasses. Nowadays, a more systemic approach is used that seeks to measure multiple qualities of congregational life from the perspective of church attenders (Powell et al. 2019). This approach considers various aspects, such as the way members view the goals and leadership of their congregation, perceptions of group life, members' sense of belonging, small group involvement, whether sermons are considered appealing, the impact of the congregation on community, and opportunities for spiritual growth. Congregational factors, such as these, have received increased attention from theologians, sociologists, and church counselors attempting to improve church health, with some researchers focusing on one single specific factor (Gallagher and Newton 2009; Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Vermeer 2015; Vermeer and Scheepers 2017).

This focus on one or more diverse systemic factors is in accordance with developments in the field of organizational communication. Initially, the focus of organizational studies seeking to improve the effectiveness of organizations was on productivity and financial performance. Nowadays, it is instead directed towards the more psychological attachments of employees towards their organization, resulting in the development of certain concepts, such as organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991; Meyer and Herscovitch 2001), identification (Mael and Ashforth 1992), engagement (Mishra et al. 2014), and involvement (Thomas et al. 2009). Concepts, such as these, represent a more relational view on organizational health, which aims to optimize the relationship between the needs and preferences of employees on the one hand and the interest and goals of the organization on the other. Ideally, this relationship can be characterized by reciprocal engagement: the organization offers recognition and support to its employees on various important topics, and employees are then committed to their organization's goals and values and want to contribute to them.

Within an organizational context, user-centered research is frequently conducted on concepts that foster organizational health. Organizations use the experiences of employees to optimize organizational processes and foster employee motivation. The most important way to evaluate the merits and restrictions of an organization's communication system is to conduct a communication audit (Hargie and Tourish 2009). While the simplicity of the term 'audit' may suggest otherwise, it is actually a complex process comprising several research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, the Delphi technique, network analysis (see e.g., Zwijze-Koning and de Jong 2015). The most commonly used audit approach is the survey (Zwijze-Koning and de Jong 2007).

Within a congregational context, the survey-guided development of church health is not completely unknown. Several instruments have been developed to adequately measure congregational life. Based on research in the diocese of Durham, UK, Robert Warren (2004) discusses seven crucial factors that, together, facilitate the process of revitalizing a church. This process of revitalization is (1) energized by faith, instead of just trying to survive, (2) centers around developing an outward-looking focus, (3) seeks spiritual guidance, (4) faces the costs of change, (5) operates as a community, (6) does only a few things and does them well, and (7) makes room for all. Together with information about these seven supporting factors, Warren presents a score sheet upon which church members

and leaders can assign a score of 1–10 for how well the church is doing on each of these seven factors.

One of the most frequently used instruments for auditing church health is the Natural Church Development (NCD) approach by Christian Schwarz (2006).[1] The NCD approach is highly developed and comes from an organizational development, psychological, and even agricultural background. In the measurement instrument, eight factors are presented that are seen as crucial for the development of a healthy and vital church. They vary from (1) empowering leadership to (4) functional structures, (5) inspiring worship, and (7) need-oriented evangelism. These factors are measured through eight quantitative scales that each contain different sets of questions, and they are measured on a five- or three–six-point scale. Health is expressed in terms of numerical growth: churches that step into the development process are instructed to monitor the attendance levels of visitors in worship services. Growth is defined as an increase in these attendance levels and is measured over a period of five years. While the NCD is clearly highly developed and frequently used, the instrument has several drawbacks. First, the instrument itself is protected knowledge, and, as such, the exact questioning and measurement on scales remain unclear. In addition, the questions that are made known address the eight factors using rather difficult terminology: it can be argued that ordinary church members might not have mastery of such terminology. Finally, the sampling of respondents is questionable: thirty members and one pastor receive the questionnaire, but to what extent are these key figures in the congregation, and how are the feelings of nominal members, or even absentees, considered? Finding out how such members view the congregation does not seem part of the NCD approach.

One of the more promising ways of auditing church health is the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) approach (Pepper et al. 2015; Powell and Robbins 2015; Erwich 2012).[2] The NCLS aims to support church leaders with research data to realize the growth and health of a congregation. In total, there are nine factors, which are measured by various questions, some of which are answered on Likert scales, while others ask for frequencies. There are three underlying dimensions: (1) internal church life (growing in faith, worship evaluation, and a growing sense of belonging), (2) moving forward as an organization (awareness of clear vision, agreement with vision, inspiring leadership), and (3) connecting with the community (actions of social support are questioned, faith testimonies, and the integration of newcomers into the community). Within the NCLS, visitors of worship services are asked to fill out the questionnaire on a Sunday, which is announced in advance. As promising as this instrument may seem, there are several disadvantages: first, only current visitors of the worship services on Sunday are questioned. It is likely that only very involved community members will fill out the questionnaire. It remains unclear how members on the fringes of the community view the congregation, or how they evaluate church characteristics. Also, no connections are made to more overall levels of satisfaction and commitment. Finally, church health is measured by assessing numerical growth: churches are instructed to collect data on (1) the total number of newcomers in the community, (2) the number of visitors per year, and (3) the extent to which the church is able to hold on to young adults (15–18 years old).

While it is enriching to study these existing audit approaches on church health and the accompanying factors, a relational approach to church health remains underdeveloped. The existing instruments frequently use abstract and difficult concepts (for example, gift-oriented ministry and need-oriented evangelism), and growth is still generally assessed in terms of numbers. Additionally, no relationships are explored regarding members' overall levels of satisfaction or commitment to the congregation. Bearing this in mind, we initiated a research project within a large Dutch Reformed congregation that aimed to uncover the preferences and dislikes of all members of the congregation between 30 and 50 years old. We wanted to develop church health concepts that would stay close to the heart-felt attitudes and opinions that church members held towards their congregations. In

this way, we hoped to develop a comprehensive audit instrument that would be able to assess current congregational practices from an individual member perspective.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Setting and Respondents

Our study was conducted in 2017 at a large Protestant congregation with 6000 registered members and around 2000 members actively engaged in the community. The congregation is situated in a semi-rural area within a small-town village in the Netherlands. Sunday services were held three times a day at four different locations (and still are). While these are impressive numbers, the records of this congregation show a rapid decline in Sunday church attendance: over a period of 10 years, 80 people per year refrained from attending worship services. In addition, a total number of 60 people per year canceled their membership to the congregation entirely. In response to this, staff members and lay leaders of the congregation initiated many policies and initiatives to stop the decline and to create a stronger sense of community. So far, their efforts had not had any noticeable results, with records still showing declining numbers. At the time of this study, this congregation was thus dealing with many organizational and communicative challenges, and they were specifically seeking ways to get members between 30 and 50 years old more engaged in church life.

3.2. Data Collection

Together with the church council, we decided to send a questionnaire to all members of the church community between 30 and 50 years old. The questionnaire (and an introduction letter) asked for the preferences and dislikes of members towards church life and also sought to evaluate their levels of satisfaction towards current ecclesial practices. From the administrative office, we learned that there were 1451 members between 30 and 50 years old in the records of the congregation, and we agreed to send a printed questionnaire to all of them. However, it turned out to be impossible for the elders of one section of the congregation to help in the distribution of the questionnaires, which led to a total number of 959 questionnaires being distributed.

3.3. Questionnaire Construction and Measures

In order to generate items for the questionnaire, we first conducted eight exploratory interviews with members of the congregation. We started the interviews with several questions about each respondent's background, age, and involvement in the congregation. We then asked respondents about their general expectations regarding congregational life. What did they need most from the congregation? In this way, respondents could first come up with the topics that were most important to them. We then probed for an evaluation of more specific characteristics of congregational life. All interviews were transcribed in detail to derive statements for the questionnaire.

From the interviews, we constructed a questionnaire that consisted of five components. First, data on demographics were collected, such as respondents' ages, gender, years of membership, and their level of church attendance on Sundays. Second, the questionnaire asked for respondents' overall levels of satisfaction towards (1) congregational life as a whole, (2) the functioning of their own congregational section, (3) the functioning of the church council, and (4) the services they would visit on Sundays. Respondents could respond to these items on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The third part of the questionnaire was the core of the instrument: in total, 42 statements were presented covering many different subjects, such as respondents' levels of commitment to the congregation, their level of engagement, the congregational climate, the atmosphere in the community, an evaluation of Sunday services, and the extent to which children and adolescents were welcomed in the community. Then, a section of statements was presented that asked about the clarity of the mission and vision of the congregation, and the extent to which there was open and clear communication from the church council and official head

council. Respondents could indicate their level of agreement to all of these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Some examples of these items are: "There is a good atmosphere in our congregation", "I feel at home in this congregation", and "When I talk to others about my congregation, I feel proud of my congregation". Fourth, a small section followed, which asked about the extent to which the respondents' commitment to the congregation had changed in the past 5 years. This was measured on a 5-point scale of 1 (strongly declined) to 5 (strongly increased). Finally, two open questions were asked to give respondents the chance to elaborate on their previous answers. These two questions were: "Can you indicate the type of subject a worship service should address in order for you to be interested in it?" and "In what way has your faith changed in the past 5 years and what caused this?"

3.4. Response and Description of Respondents

In total, 513 questionnaires were recovered by students and elders of the congregation. This represents a response rate of 53%. There were no significant differences in the response rates between the three sections of the congregation to which the survey was distributed. The mean age of the respondents was 41 years ($SD = 6.5$), with a total of 242 male respondents and 264 female respondents. In total, 27% of the respondents indicated that they never attended worship services on Sunday: they were categorized as 'sleeping members'. In addition, 40% of the respondents indicated that they attended worship services a few times each year or even once per month: they were categorized as 'involved members'. Finally, 33% of the respondents indicated that they attended worship services every Sunday or even twice on Sundays. They were labelled 'insiders'. Because the response group consisted of both strongly involved members and less engaged members, the respondents can be said to represent the entire community, including its extremes.

All members were free to give their response to the questionnaire in a way they felt fit. No pressure was put on them to formulate desirable answers. Some members even expressed their relief to the main researcher that they could give their opinion on these matters, a matter that they considered to be very important for the congregation. Throughout the data collection, the main researcher was available by phone to all respondents to answer any questions about the survey. She also warranted that all ethical standards for data collection in this congregation were met. Afterwards, respondents were informed about the results of this study in two main meetings that were organized in the community and through an information bulletin that was spread throughout the whole congregation.

4. Results

4.1. Deriving Congregational Health Factors

To reduce the forty-two items of the questionnaire into domain descriptions that fit a congregation, we performed an exploratory factor analysis and found seven factors that seem to describe congregational life well (see Appendix A). The internal reliability of all factors was sufficiently high and reached alpha levels varying from 0.776 to 0.937 (see Table 1). Most factors consisted of five items or more, but some of the factors contained only two items or even one item. The factor 'attractive missional activities' (two items) captures a relatively new theme, and more items need to be developed to adequately cover that domain. The factor analyses further showed that the quality of information exchange in the congregation, and the subsequent level of information adequacy of members, is a separate issue that needs to be evaluated. At this time, it is insufficiently addressed by the research instrument and measured by only item.

Table 1. Factor labels, alphas, and number of items * per factor (N = 513).

Factor Label	Alpha	Number of Items
Congregational Commitment	0.894	5
Relevant Congregational Meetings	0.937	10
Community Climate	0.776	4
Transparency of Communication	0.861	5
Information Adequacy	-	1
Attractiveness of the Congregation	0.852	5
Attractive Missional Activities	0.816	2

* All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

The seven factors all address important congregational issues in statements that stay close to the feelings and attitudes of individual members. Psychological attachments are explored, such as members' commitment to the congregation and the sense of community that members experience. Other factors focus on what happens on Sunday mornings in the congregation, and the extent to which members are inspired by what happens there on that specific day. More functional, internal church life issues are also addressed. These factors seek to measure the transparency of the church council's communication, and the perceived level of information adequacy that members experience regarding important matters that are implemented in the congregation (such as upcoming policy changes). The final two factors address issues around the attractiveness of the congregation for members and outsiders. The factor 'attractiveness of the congregation' addresses various issues, such as the amount of pride members feel when they talk to others about their congregation and the extent to which they feel they are an important part of the congregation. The factor 'attractive missional activities' addresses issues around the attractiveness of the congregation to outsiders and whether the community does enough to engage newcomers.

For a detailed overview of the exact statements that comprised each factor, see Table 2. We will now discuss each factor in more detail.

Table 2. Examples of statements that were reckoned among the factors.

Factor Label	Examples of Statements in the Factor *
	Congregational Engagement Characteristics
Congregational Commitment	I feel at home in this congregation I feel this is the right congregation for me I like going to services of this congregation I look forward to going to church services of this congregation I think I will be with this congregation for the next five years
	Internal Church Life Characteristics
Relevant Congregational Meetings	The worship services of this congregation usually inspire me Sermons during a service usually deal with interesting subjects The services of this congregation usually deal with questions that are relevant to me When I go to services of this congregation, I usually learn a lot about God/the Bible During church services we usually sing songs that appeal to me By going to worship services of this congregation, my faith grows By going to worship services of this congregation I get a clear picture of who Jesus is Sermons during services of this congregation provide answers to questions I'm dealing with I would take a friend who does not believe to our church The worship services are often about life questions that concern me

Table 2. *Cont.*

Factor Label	Examples of Statements in the Factor *
Community Climate	In our congregation there is a good atmosphere In this congregation there is a lot of tension between people ** In our congregation there is not a whole lot of whining about each other and church matters *** Within our congregation we look out for each other I feel I am being taken seriously by this congregation
	Organizational Characteristics
Transparency of Communication	The overall church council listens to its members and is open to new ideas concerning congregational life In our congregation the official church councils provide enough room for changes within the community Communication from the overall church council is clear and concise Communication from my own sectional church council is clear and concise Within my own church section, there is enough room for changes to our community way of life
Information Adequacy	I feel sufficiently informed about important congregational matters
	Attractiveness Characteristics
Attractiveness of the Congregation	I feel as if I am an important part of this congregation Within this congregation it feels as if I am part of a large family The way this congregation functions motivates and stimulates me to give my best efforts I have sufficient say in congregational decisions When I talk to others about my congregation, I feel pride towards the community
Attractive Missional Activities	Our congregation is sufficiently involved in attracting outsiders with the gospel Our congregation conveys the gospel clearly and attractively to outsiders I like inviting other people to the worship services of our congregation ***

* All statements were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree); ** in the analysis, this item was reversed; *** this item was eventually removed to attain a higher alpha reliability.

4.2. Congregational Commitment

At the center of most church health evaluations are engagement characteristics, including heart-felt emotions, such as the extent to which members like the congregation, feel at home in it, and like going to its services on Sundays. These evaluations are complemented by members' turnover intention: the extent to which members intend to leave the congregation within the next 5 years. Together, these items are labeled 'Congregational Commitment'. The statements capture what may be considered a qualitative definition of church health: in an ideal church, members feel at home in the congregation, like going to its services on Sundays, and have no intention of leaving the congregation within the next 5 years. In all, members feel that this congregation is the right congregation for them.

4.3. Relevant Congregational Meetings

The second health factor that may be discerned focuses on internal congregational life issues. Several items are grouped together that deal with Sunday services and the extent to which members find them inspiring, learn from what is being said there, and think the sermons address issues they find interesting. This factor is thus labeled 'Relevant Congregational Meetings' and deals with the congregation's perception of worship services

at their congregation. Of all the factors that are discerned, this factor contains the largest number of items: ten in total.

4.4. Community Climate

While the former factor deals with specific activities on Sunday mornings, and the state of mind in which people are left as a result of these services, several other items deal with the psychological state that emerges from more widespread congregational efforts to involve members in the community. For example, items within this factor address the extent to which members experience a good atmosphere within the congregation, and whether members look out for each other within the community. The amount of tension between people is also addressed, as well as whether people whine/complain about each other and about church matters. A final item addresses members' state of mind by asking members whether they feel the congregation is taking them seriously. This factor touches on issues that make members feel 'seen' in their community and looked after by others. The factor is labeled 'Community Climate'.

4.5. Transparency of Communication

Several items on the questionnaire deal with the more organizational characteristics of a congregation. The factor 'Transparency of Communication' addresses several issues regarding the functioning of the congregation's communication system. For example, it assesses the extent to which the church council listens to its members, as well as its openness to new ideas and innovations. The items within this factor also explicitly address communication issues, such as the extent to which communication from the church council is clear and concise.

4.6. Information Adequacy

Within organizational contexts, the topic of information adequacy is almost always addressed in audit research. In this church audit research, the extent to which members feel informed about important matters is also touched upon. This factor is labeled 'Information Adequacy.' The factor considers the extent to which members feel sufficiently informed about important congregational matters. Unfortunately, no other items addressed this topic, despite it being an important part of auditing church health and assessing the involvement of church members. Future audit research should include more items on this topic, which may be seen as an important part of the functional communication system of the congregation.

4.7. Attractiveness of the Congregation

The final two factors deal with the extent to which the congregation is attractive for its members and for newcomers. Several items in the survey deal with the extent to which members feel as if they are part of a large family in the congregation, and whether they feel pride towards the community whilst talking to other people about the congregation. This factor is labeled 'Attractiveness of the Congregation', and it has to do with both attractiveness to outsiders and internal attractiveness. It also probes whether members feel they are an important part of the congregation, and whether the functioning of the congregation motivates members to give their best efforts to church activities and to, e.g., loving their neighbors. Lastly, it also asks members whether they feel that they have a sufficient say in congregational decisions, because that is a large indicator of feeling as though one is an important member of the congregation.

4.8. Attractive Missional Activities

The final factor is labeled 'Attractive Missional Activities,' and it deals with the extent to which the congregation is sufficiently involved in attracting outsiders and the extent to which it communicates the gospel in a clear and attractive way to outsiders. Openness and attractiveness to newcomers is important for the growth of the congregation, but

in this research, it is only measured by two items. Future research should address this topic with more items, but, for now, it is sufficient to conclude that the involvement of the congregation in organizing attractive missional activities, and in presenting itself in a clear and attractive way to outsiders, is an important part of healthy congregational practices.

5. Determining Factors That Foster Congregational Commitment

Within the field of organizational communication, factors of commitment and engagement are the central focus of analysis. Organizations strive for committed and engaged members. In this regard, the factor of congregational commitment stands out in our research as a dependent variable that we would want to explain. It is this factor that congregations should strive to foster. If they mean to do so, they could seek to ensure that members feel at home in the congregation and feel that this is the right congregation for them. They would want members to look forward to weekly Sunday services and get a feeling of emotional well-being when they are there. Finally, churches will want members to commit in the long term to the congregation: members should have no intention of leaving within the next five years. To analyze which factors influence this congregational commitment the most, we calculated the correlations between this factor and the other six factors (see Table 3).

Table 3. Means and correlations for the factors (N = 513) *.

Factor	Mean	Correlation to Commitment
1. Congregational Commitment	3.55	-
2. Relevant Congregational Meetings	3.25	0.781 **
3. Attractiveness of the Congregation	3.02	0.627 **
4. Community Climate	3.45	0.551 **
5. Transparency of Communication	3.22	0.518 **
6. Attractive Missional Activities	3.00	0.368 **
7. Information Adequacy	3.47	0.357 **

* Correlation analysis: Pearson (bivariate); ** significant at 0.01.

All of the audited factors show moderate to strong correlations with the level of commitment of members (*M* = 3.55). The first four factors show considerably strong correlates. Apparently, members' commitment levels are greatly influenced by whether the congregation is able to organize relevant congregational meetings for members (*M* = 3.25; *r* = 0.781, *p* = 0.01). If members experience growth in their faith due to the services, and if they feel that issues that are addressed are important to them, then their commitment to the congregation will be positively influenced.

There is also a strong correlation between the commitment of members and the attractiveness of the congregation (*M* = 3.02; *r* = 0.627, *p* = 0.01). When members feel as if they are an important part of the congregation, and if they believe that they are part of a large family, their commitment will strengthen.

The congregational climate/atmosphere in the community also influences members' levels of commitment (*M* = 3.45; *r* = 0.551, *p* = 0.01). It may be argued that when there is a lot of tension between members and moaning about each other, the sense of community diminishes, and commitment is lost. If members look out for each other, and a positive, informal atmosphere is created, members will feel more at home in the community, and their commitment levels will change.

6. Relationships to Members' Satisfaction and Change in Commitment

Prior to the items that addressed the seven factors presented above, we asked respondents to report their overall satisfaction levels towards several aspects of the congregation. These concerned members' satisfaction regarding congregational life as a whole, the functioning of the church council, and the services members attended on Sundays. In the analysis, we combined these aspects and created a new variable that was labeled

'Overall Satisfaction.' Moreover, at the end of the survey, we explicitly asked for respondents' changes in commitment over the last five years. This item was labeled 'Change in Commitment.'

From a theoretical perspective, we would expect all seven factors to show significant correlation to both the overall satisfaction level and members' change in commitment over the past five years. We analyzed the factors to see whether the discerned factors showed any such correlation to the overall satisfaction and commitment levels (see Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations with overall satisfaction and change in commitment (<5 years).

Factor Label **	Overall Satisfaction (r)	Change in Commitment (r)
Congregational Commitment	0.579 *	0.514 *
Relevant Congregational Meetings	0.612 *	0.432 *
Community Climate	0.521 *	0.257 *
Transparency of Communication	0.563 *	0.277 *
Attractiveness of the Congregation	0.472 *	0.435 *
Attractive Missional Activities	0.446 *	0.147 *

* all correlations significant at $p < 0.001$. ** Information Adequacy was not taken into account here (1 item).

All factors showed strong correlations with members' overall levels of satisfaction and change in commitment over the past 5 years. Members' satisfaction seemed to be particularly associated with the extent to which Sunday morning meetings were considered interesting, inspiring, and relevant to visitors ($r = 0.612$ *). Members' commitment levels were also highly influenced by this, as well as by the attractiveness of the congregation as a whole ($r = 0.435$ *).

7. Deriving the Opinions of Sleeping Members, Involved Members, and Insiders

Finally, we analyzed whether there was any differentiation between the opinions of the different types of members and the seven relational health factors (see Table 5). In the survey, we asked for the frequency with which members visited worship services on Sundays. Several respondents indicated that they almost never went to worship services; they were labeled 'sleeping members' (N = 134). Other respondents indicated that they attended worship services a few times per year (up to once a month); these members were labeled 'involved members' (N = 203). Finally, other respondents indicated that they attended the worship services every Sunday or even twice each Sunday. These members could be seen as regular attenders and were labelled 'inside members' (N = 165).

Table 5. Comparisons of overall means * per category of membership.

Factor Label	Sleeping Members	Involved Members	Inside Members
Congregational Commitment	3.04 **	3.45	3.99
Internal Church Life Characteristics:			
Relevant Congregational Meetings	2.59 **	3.14	3.55
Community Climate	3.27	3.46	3.55
Organizational Characteristics:			
Transparency of Communication	3.07	3.18	3.37
Information Adequacy	3.26	3.45	3.63
Attractiveness Characteristics:			
Attractiveness of the Congregation	2.67 **	2.92	3.37
Attractive Missional Activities	2.94	3.01	3.03

* One-way ANOVA analysis; ** significant differences $p < 0.000$.

This analysis shows that sleeping members are different from other types of members in that they are much less committed to the congregation ($M = 3.04$). While insiders qualify their level of commitment with an average of 3.9 ($M = 3.99$), sleeping members significantly differ in their psychological state of mind towards the congregation (ANOVA), $F(2, 462) = 70.783$, $p < 0.000$.

Sleeping members also differ from insiders in their opinions about the relevance of the congregational meetings they attend (even if only 2–3 times a year). Sleeping members evaluate the congregational meetings as uninspiring, giving them a very low score of 2.5 ($M = 2.59$), whereas insiders rate these services significantly higher ($M = 3.55$) (ANOVA), $F(2, 386) = 41.601$, $p < 0.000$.

Sleeping members barely consider the congregation attractive ($M = 2.67$), whereas insiders seem to find the congregation appealing and feel as if they are amongst family members in the congregation ($M = 3.37$). There are significant differences in opinion between these types of members (ANOVA), $F(2, 449) = 40.377$, $p < 0.000$.

8. Subjects for Worship Services and Faith-Changing Instances

Finally, we asked two open questions that enabled respondents to elaborate on issues that were addressed in the survey. The first question was: "Can you indicate the type of subject a worship service should address in order for you to be interested in it?" In total, 250 respondents answered this question. Most of them asked for subjects that address everyday life issues; contemporary subjects should be addressed in which Biblical principles are translated to daily life situations (92). A respondent said: 'I always hope that my passion for the gospel will be rekindled through the services and also that I will learn more about how the gospel should shape my daily life.' Another one said: 'As far as I am concerned, it must be about subjects that you can immediately tackle in your daily life.' 'Sermons during a church service should be more about following Jesus in daily life.' Other subjects that were mentioned included youth and children making a choice for Jesus (33), the Holy Spirit (24), and learning services about Biblical issues (21).

The final question of the survey was "In what way has your faith changed over the past 5 years and what caused this?" In total, 246 respondents answered this question. Of these respondents, 121 indicated that they had grown in their faith over the past five years. We analyzed the reasons respondents gave for growth in their faith and found 67 reasons from outside the church and 46 reasons from within the church. Outside reasons included changes in personal circumstances, going to a nearby church, visiting large Christian events, such as Opwekking (Revival)/New Wine, personal devotional activities, and reading relevant books/literature. Reasons from within the church that were mentioned were church services, small group activities, doing church work, or receiving a house call/pastoral visit.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

Healthy churches should aim to optimize the relationship between the needs and preferences of members on the one hand and the interests and goals of the congregation on the other. They should strive for engaged membership by performing user-centered research to optimize processes and build congregational involvement. While there are existing instruments for mapping congregational health characteristics, in this study, we developed and tested a comprehensive audit instrument that stays close to members' own feelings and attitudes towards the congregation and that maps their feelings of well-being and commitment. We derived seven factors that describe meaningful parts of congregational life. All of the factors showed clear and strong relations to members' satisfaction and commitment levels.

To what extent do our factors correspond with other church health factors that are distinguished in the field? Our findings support those of Gallagher and Newton (2009), in that congregations that provide possibilities for spiritual growth cultivate congregational commitment. Focusing on how churchgoers in four different congregations defined spiri-

tual growth, they found that congregations may use several 'tools' that enable members to grow spiritually. For example, such tools might include frequent and varied worship services, small groups, and weekly meals. Our results corroborate these findings, but our survey items add 'nuance' to this rather vague notion of 'spiritual growth through varied worship services' with items that stay closer to people's experiences. For example, these items address various experiences, such as worship services inspire me, they deal with questions that are relevant to me, they are about life questions that concern me, sermons deal with interesting subjects, and I learn a lot. All of these items correlate positively with commitment, and our study thus confirms the importance of providing opportunities for members' spiritual growth. Thus, growing in faith appears to be a core feature of the health of a congregation (Hibbert and Hibbert 2016, p. 249). From the open questions in our study, we further learned that this spiritual growth may be realized by worship services that focus on how the gospel shapes congregants' views on everyday life issues.

In a single-factor inquiry, Dougherty and Whitehead demonstrated that regardless of the size of the congregation, participation in small groups and cultivating a sense of familiarity are sources of vitality in congregations (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011, p. 92). In fact, small group involvement correlated significantly positively with individuals' commitment (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011, pp. 102, 106). The same result is found in research on Dutch megachurches. According to Vermeer, based on fine-grained empirical research, one of the main reasons for the success of large evangelical congregations is a high saliency of belief and, indeed, the time spent in small groups: "Hours spent per week on church groups and orthodoxy can be considered important indicators of religious commitment among evangelicals" (Vermeer and Scheepers 2017, 11f.). In small groups, affective bonds are forged, and it is here that the core beliefs of the congregation are transferred and communicated. Speaking about the cultivation of affective bonds, Stroope found robust corroboration for the hypothesis that "the more an individual's friendships come from his or her congregation, the more an individual will participate in religious activities" (Stroope 2012, p. 282). Increased social embeddedness is positively related to increased devotional activities (Stroope 2012, p. 288). Similarly, Gallagher and Newton state that congregations should stimulate the development of relationships with others of "like mind" (Gallagher and Newton 2009, p. 253). Along the same lines, Hibbert and Hibbert found that interviewees stress the experience of 'being united' (Hibbert and Hibbert 2016, p. 250). In our study, affective bonds within the congregation are captured by experience-near items, such as 'feeling at home', 'looking after each other', 'feeling part of a large family', and 'feeling an important part of this congregation'. Thankfully, our results point in the same direction as the aforementioned research.

In approaching congregations from a more relational point of view, members' sense of belonging to their church (Powell et al. 2019) represents an extremely meaningful aspect of church life. This distinction of belonging is something congregations should strive to create for their members. Our audit study adds to this in that it shows that at the heart of all church health is the congregational commitment of its members: feeling at home in the community, feeling that this is the right congregation for oneself, gladly going to the congregation's services, and having no intention of leaving the congregation in the next five years (having a low turnover intention). This type of commitment may be seen as a more qualitative definition of church health because it encompasses both psychological/emotional aspects of the member–congregation relationship as well as behavioral components. It is this type of congregational commitment that may be seen as a desirable outcome measure for churches that strive towards healthier congregational practices.

10. Future Research

This study was a first attempt to develop a research instrument that maps current attitudes and beliefs regarding congregational characteristics amongst all members of a community. The instrument shows potential for mapping the evaluations of church

members, but it is far from finished. Future research should aim to further develop the instrument.

Structured interviews with theologians and organizational scientists may lead to a much wider array of factors that comprise the ideal church/organization. In this way, future research will strengthen the theoretical and theological underpinnings of the instrument. Furthermore, additional rounds of interviews with insiders, sleeping members, and even outsiders should be held. These may cast light on which factors are deemed important from a more practical, everyday life perspective. These evaluations from everyday life may also function as input for item formulations for the development of a more final draft of the instrument.

Finally, the instrument should be tested with different types of congregations, such as those that differ by denomination (for instance, a Catholic parish, a Protestant community, and an Evangelical community) or size. This will help ascertain and establish the reliability and validity of the instrument. It will also provide opportunities to evaluate the extent to which the use of the instrument leads to changes in ecclesial practices.

Appendix A. Factor Analysis

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis; Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; rotation converged in 11 iterations; factor loadings below <0.30 suppressed.

Table A1. Factor analysis for all items questionnaire *.

	Congregational Commitment (CC)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
CC1	I feel this is the right congregation for me	0.381				**0.619**		
CC2	I feel at home in this congregation	0.322				**0.649**		
CC3	I like going to services of this congregation	0.664				**0.514**		
CC4	I look forward to going to church services of this congregation	0.659				**0.544**		
CC5	I think I will be with this congregation for the next five years	0.443				**0.571**		
	Relevant Congregational Meetings (RCM)							
RCM1	The worship services of this congregation usually inspire me	**0.793**						
RCM2	Sermons during a service usually deal with interesting subjects	**0.787**						
RCM3	The services of this congregation usually deal with questions that are relevant to me	**0.773**						
RCM4	When I go to services of this congregation, I usually learn a lot about God/the Bible	**0.699**				0.332		

Table A1. *Cont.*

	Congregational Commitment (CC)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
RCM5	During church services we usually sing songs that appeal to me	**0.589**						
RCM6	By going to worship services of this congregation, my faith grows	**0.740**				0.324		
RCM7	By going to church services of this congregation I get a clear picture of who Jesus is	**0.692**				0.302		
RCM8	Sermons during services of this congregation provide answers to questions I am dealing with	**0.753**						
RCM9	I would take a friend who does not believe to our church	**0.645**		0.324				
RCM10	The church services are often about life questions that concern me	**0.709**		0.303				
	Community Climate (CCL)							
CCl1	In our congregation there is a good atmosphere				0.307	0.423	**0.551**	
CCl2	In this congregation there is a lot of tension between people						**0.711**	
CCl3	In our congregation there is not a whole lot of whining about each other/church matters						**0.745**	
CCl4	Within our congregation we look out for each other			0.353	0.504		**0.485**	
CCl5	I feel I am being taken seriously by this congregation				0.308	0.348	**0.471**	
	Transparancy of Communication (TC)							
TC1	The overall church council listens to its members and is open to new ideas concerning congregational life		**0.753**					
TC2	In our congregation the official church councils provide enough room for changes within the community		**0.689**					
TC3	Communication from the overall church council is clear and concise		**0.709**					
TC4	Communication from my own sectional church council is clear and concise		**0.654**					
TC5	Within my own church section, there is enough room for changes to our community way of life		**0.654**					
	Information Adequacy (IA)							
IA1	I feel sufficiently informed about important congregational matters							**0.639**
	Attractiveness of Congregation (AC)							
AC1	I feel as if I am an important part of this congregation				**0.694**			

Table A1. *Cont.*

	Congregational Commitment (CC)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
AC2	Within this congregation it feels as if I am part of a large family			0.358	**0.674**			
AC3	The way this congregation functions motivates and stimulates me to put in my best efforts	0.335			**0.651**			
AC4	I have sufficient say in important congregational decisions	0.370			**0.565**			
AC5	When I talk to others about my congregation, I feel pride towards the community	0.308		0.380	**0.518**			
	Attractive Missional Activities (AMA)							
AMA1	Our congregation is sufficiently involved in attracting outsiders with the gospel			**0.741**				
AMA2	Our congregation conveys the gospel clearly and attractively to outsiders	0.300		**0.644**				
AMA3	I like inviting other people to the church services of our congregation			**0.543**				

* Additional items that were left out of further analysis due to inconclusive findings (factor loadings on multiple factors): 'Within our congregation we know each other well'; 'I'm always approached hospitably in this congregation'; 'I trust this congregation'; 'Many of my friends go to the same church as I do'; 'In the church services, enough room is given to the work of the Holy Spirit'; 'There is enough attention for adolescents within this community'; 'It is clear to me what this congregation stands for (clear mission and vision)'; 'I agree with the policy direction of this congregation.'

Notes

[1]   For current usage, see: http://www.ncd-international.org. (accessed on 1 September 2023).

[2]   For current usage, see: http://www.ncls.org.au. (accessed on 1 September 2023).

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